

# Metaphysics, Its Critique, and Post-Metaphysical Theology

## *An Introductory Essay*

HARTMUT VON SASS and ERIC E. HALL

*METAPHYSICS HAS RECENTLY MADE a comeback.* It is not at all clear whether this is good news, bad news, or something in between. One reason for this uncertainty lies in the still open question of what returns with metaphysics: what commitments, presuppositions, worldviews, and actions? No doubt, some might hold that this description is already misleading since metaphysics has never been absent, only confusedly and ruinously neglected—metaphysics has acted as a *via abscondita* from which we have taken but a short hiatus. Others might react with deep concern, fearing that all achievements of past battles against this “totalizing” power are turning out to be a fading interim—that metaphysics has won the competition in overtime by way of a fluke.<sup>1</sup>

In other words, some inevitably celebrate the return of a “robust” way of thinking; others find themselves in fear and trembling when looking at the intellectual developments of recent years and their results to come. However, a third option remains that might stand within the orientation of “philosophical coolness,”<sup>2</sup> namely, there are those who want to clarify

1. Some speculated that the game had been won and wrote their obituaries for metaphysics too early; see Theodor W. Adorno, who famously says (with critical subtext, however) that we might feel even solidarity with metaphysics in the moment of its fall (*Negative Dialektik* [Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1973], 400).

2. See Dewi Z. Phillips, *Philosophy's Cool Place* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999), esp. chapters 1, 5 and 8; Ingolf U. Dalferth and Hartmut von Sass, eds., *The*

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metaphysical pitfalls while contemplating what metaphysics, post-Kant, could possibly look like today. They neither celebrate nor tremble before the term but bring a historical recollection of prominent issues combined with a grammatical elucidation and constructive critique of a highly disputed concept.

Indeed, one may have very good reasons for desiring membership in this latter group because it is far from being obvious what exactly is at stake when one discusses (the return of) metaphysics. Is the problem a concrete, singular metaphysical problem or set of problems to be solved such as mind-body dualism, the strict meaning of truth, or the value of transcendental argumentation? Or is the problem found in some underlying metaphysical ingredient, some sort of hermeneutical baking yeast whose influence underlies all of these aforementioned areas in such a way that they have become important topics of discussion in the first place? Or is the problem of metaphysics—in reaction to both previous questions—the label itself, that it is highly unsatisfying because what makes a problem *metaphysical* is not necessarily clear. Too often, the recognition of such a problem turns “metaphysics” into nothing more than a pejorative term; but uncritically so, and without either an explicit understanding of any so-called dangers lurking behind the term or why one believes them to be there in the first place. So, the question remains: where exactly does one find these these dangerous scenarios associated with metaphysics?

This question becomes even more urgent given the fact that there are numerous cases in which the label is used in completely contradictory ways. For instance, it has become a standard position of anti-metaphysical thinking to repudiate the view that we could potentially gain direct and unmediated access to something like *Reality*. This popular view was devastatingly scrutinized and criticized as something like “metaphysical realism” and, therefore, has been substituted for a wide variety of philosophical and theological approaches that attempt to characterize our constructive access to reality or even realities (with small ‘r’) as mediated by symbolic system, interpretation and, most prominently, by language.<sup>3</sup> The critique, of course, is that found in the linguistic turn. However, this linguistic turn is, itself, getting a bit dusty and seems to lead increasingly to just the opposite view: what was considered to be the ultimate farewell to a kind of

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*Contemplative Spirit: Dewi Z. Phillips on Religion and the Limits of Philosophy* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2010).

3. See Hilary Putnam, *The Many Faces of Realism*, The Paul Carus Lectures (LaSalle, IL: Open Court, 1987); see also John Haldane, “Realism with a Metaphysical Skull,” in *Hilary Putnam: Pragmatism and Realism*, ed. James Conant and Urszula M. Zeglen (New York: Routledge, 2002), 97–104.

old-fashioned realism is now itself dogmatically metaphysical, albeit with critical purposes. Indeed, Maurice Merleau-Ponty holds, along these lines, that there is “something metaphysical from the moment in which we cease to live within the evidence of objects.”<sup>4</sup> Similarly, Hans-Ulrich Gumbrecht, a German scholar teaching at Stanford, critically states that (post-) modern thinking has lost its sense for what he calls “presence.”<sup>5</sup> This term serves as the antipode to all kinds of “metaphysical” mediations, which amounts to a “world [not] well lost”;<sup>6</sup> rather, it initiates a crucial lack of contact with what surrounds us. It seems, however, that we cannot have it both ways: either one posits mediation or retains presence. Thus, what is taken to be metaphysical in a problematic sense has changed to the point that it denotes both uncritical realism and its linguistic opposite.<sup>7</sup>

To become concrete, the problem of metaphysics seems to emerge within three dynamic conversations: debates concerning how to evaluate the (return of) metaphysics; disputes over the location of metaphysical problems; discussions regarding the heterogeneous and (even partly) contradictory uses of “metaphysics” as a term. Seen from these perspectives, one might ask whether it still makes sense to create a book concerned with “post-metaphysics” in the first place. Is there any clarification that any singular book could bring? However, the concern with “post-metaphysical thought,” in which the subtitle of our volume claims to be interested, could roughly be described as tentative reaction to the apathetic and stolid situation just outlined. The volume, hermeneutically speaking, still participates in the metaphysical tradition. After all, the terms of metaphysics may simply the terms of discourse in the west, for better or worse. As such, this volume is not plainly *anti*-metaphysical in the sense that anything pertaining to metaphysics must, a priori, indicate a devilishness. Neither is it metaphysical in the sense of affirming whatever metaphysics might signify (the questioning of which already delineates a move beyond a naïve metaphysics). The book is purportedly “post-” metaphysical, which leads to the task of clarifying what exactly the “post” in “post-metaphysical” could mean.

4. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, “Das Metaphysische im Menschen” (1947), in idem, *Das Auge und der Geist: Philosophische Essays*, ed. Christian Bermes (Hamburg: Meiner, 2003), 47–69, 62. Husserl’s “principle of principles” might be in the background here.

5. See Hans-Ulrich Gumbrecht, *Diesseits der Hermeneutik: Die Produktion von Präsenz* (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 2004), esp. 69.

6. Cf. Richard Rorty, “The World Well Lost,” *Journal of Philosophy* 69 (1972) 19, 649–65.

7. According to Hans-Georg Gadamer, it is Heidegger’s understanding that philosophical concepts possess the power to ground both a position and its counterposition: “Der eine Weg Martin Heideggers” (1986), in idem, *Gesammelte Werke, Band III: Neuere Philosophie I* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1999), 417–30, 427.

To compound this issue, however, the Introduction will need to answer such a question from the standpoint of Christian theology, which is no easy task. Indeed, at first, post-metaphysical theology might appear as a contradiction in itself since theology and metaphysics have banded together in partnership for so long that they now seem inseparable? Such a sentiment, no doubt, depends on what one means by either metaphysics (as described above) or theology. More precisely, then, to understand what post-metaphysical theology could stand for—to what exactly it reacts and what conclusions it draws from such—it is necessary to clarify three major issues. First, it will be helpful to give a short synopsis concerning what the above-mentioned return of metaphysics presupposes, especially in relationship to recent theological trends (I). Second, it will be equally helpful to, at least, touch on the basic models for relating theology and metaphysics, which will combine nicely with opening up the problem of a theological critique of metaphysics (II). Third, the notion of post-metaphysical thinking needs qualification; in particular, it needs qualification as an extension of a theological position that is working critically through its metaphysical inheritance, which may include both clarifications and confusions (III).

### **I. The Re-Emergence of Metaphysics: An Ambivalent Feature of Contemporary Theology**

As already suggested, one of the most prominent and ambivalent developments in recent theological thinking is the (re-) emergence of metaphysics. As also stated, this initial observation could mean, and actually entails, some very different ideas. First of all, this reversion to metaphysics today includes some similar patterns as found in theology's history. In fact, one might remind oneself of the fact that these interrelated disciplines have gone through oscillating periods wherein theology tends to be critical of metaphysical systems, after which it moves back to a metaphysical approaches, etc. . . . Traditionally, for instance, reformation theology has been considered anti-metaphysical, namely, as critique against the Aristotelian understanding of ontology and the philosophical notion of God.<sup>8</sup> Similarly, classical pietism in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries reacted to Lutheran Orthodoxy, which licensed metaphysics as tool to clarify the confessional writings. Moreover, much theology after the Enlightenment presented itself as separating its main issues—religion and religious consciousness—from metaphysics (Schleiermacher), if not attempting unrestrictedly to refute

8. See Friedrich Gogarten, *Die Wirklichkeit des Glaubens: Zum Problem des Subjektivismus in der Theologie* (Stuttgart: Vorwerk, 1957), 22.

metaphysics as a source of theological grounding.<sup>9</sup> These allusions might be sufficient to speak of something like “metaphysical tides”: that the history of theology is caught between the ebb and flow of post-metaphysical and metaphysical tides. We are now in precisely this latter situation, at least if one is willing to draw the parallels between the recent movements and their predecessors. Accordingly, five such metaphysically oriented and contemporary movements will here be illuminated.

### (1) Neo-Classical Theism

While proponents of such a view may reject such a label, it probably comprises the most direct form of thinking that both attempts and prolongs metaphysical thinking. Three decisive aspects undergird this program: a restrictive idea of philosophical and theological *styles* of argumentation, an orientation to the natural and empirical *sciences*, and a theological *objectivism* concerning the idea of God, which comes to serve as the best explanatory tool for the existence and orderedness of the world. One well-known contributor to this form of theism is the Oxford philosopher of religion, Richard Swinburne, who presents this program within a probabilistic framework. God is not proved deductively (in fact, Swinburne rejects ontological arguments), but he argues for the *probability* that God exists abductively, namely, God’s existence as the best and most simple explanation of the universe.<sup>10</sup> This picture has oft expressed problematic implications for the doctrine of God: is the Christian faith, for instance, based on a probable God or a pre-defined cosmological vision?<sup>11</sup> How does one deal with the problem of evil? While Swinburne himself tends to ignore the first questions, he attempts to meet the problem of evil through theodicy, which becomes highly problematic when confronted with concrete instances of evil.

Whereas Swinburne has been in the field since the late sixties, a new group presents itself as comprising what is coming to be known as “Analytic Theology,” which seems to take interests similar to Swinburne’s theism as something like common sense assumptions. However, this group, situated

9. See Matthias Neugebauer’s article in this volume; cf. also for these developments Walter Sparr, “Ontologische Metaphysik versus metaphysische Religion. Inwiefern erfordert die theologische Analyse von Religion metaphysisches Denken?,” in *Metaphysik und Religion. Die Wiederentdeckung eines Zusammenhangs*, ed. Hermann Deuser (Gütersloh: Gütersloher, 2007), 9–59, esp. 23–39.

10. See Richard Swinburne, *The Existence of God* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1979), 107–15.

11. See Dewi Z. Phillips, *Recovering Religious Concepts: Closing Epistemic Divides* (London: MacMillan, 2000), esp. 6, 20, 63.

institutionally in Notre Dame, Innsbruck, and München,<sup>12</sup> puts more stress on methodological issues than plainly theo-philosophical issues. Analytic theology functions as a label to fight against the argumentative confusions and methodological carelessness in these fields, especially found in the world of so-called “continental” theologians. Insofar as “systematic theology has its own integrity,”<sup>13</sup> an analytic approach is a procedure for doing theology, not a replacement of an established subject.<sup>14</sup> The issues and problems, however, are no different than the classical theistic approaches that Swineburn represents.

## (2) Theism and Modality

A different theistic, but equally known, approach is presented by the Reformed epistemologists, known most prominently through Alvin Plantinga. Whereas Swinburne might reject the label of doing “metaphysics” because of his empirical orientation, Plantinga’s neo-Calvinist thinking is admittedly metaphysical in reinterpreting classical rationalism.<sup>15</sup> This theo-philosophical approach is best shown in Plantinga’s version of the ontological argument in which he relies heavily on Leibniz’s possible-worlds scenario.<sup>16</sup> Its basic structure runs as follows: if a world is possible in which a theistic God exists (among other possible worlds and the single realized one), and if God is a necessary Being (as the ontological argument says), then God exist necessarily in all possible worlds. Since there is a real world, (a theistic) God really exists.

Different versions of this disputed argument exist since there are divergent options of how to understand (the status of) “possibility.” The German theologian Friedrich Hermann, for instance, focuses not so much on the potential plurality of possible worlds, but on possibility’s self-realization:

12. See: <http://philreligion.nd.edu/research-initiatives/analytic-theology/>.

13. William Abraham, “Systematic Theology as Analytic Theology,” in *Analytic Theology: New Essays in the Philosophy of Theology*, ed. Oliver D. Crisp and Michael C. Rea (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 54–69, 69.

14. Michael C. Rea, “Introduction,” in *Analytic Theology: New Essays in the Philosophy of Theology*, ed. Oliver D. Crisp and Michael C. Rea (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 1–30, esp. 5–6, 21–22.

15. This is clarified in Alvin Plantinga’s *The Nature of Necessity* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1982), esp. chapters IV and IX.

16. Cf. Alvin Plantinga, “The Ontological Argument” (1974), in *The Analytic Theist: An Alvin Plantinga Reader*, ed. James F. Sennett (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 50–71; see Dirk Evers, *Gott und mögliche Welten: Studien zur Logik theologischer Aussagen über das Mögliche* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2006), 216–17, 229–32.

within every possibility inheres an internal inclination to become real in accordance with its grade of goodness; the higher this grade, the stronger its power of self-realization. Since God is perfectly good, God's inner drive to self-realization is absolute. Hence, God absolutely exists.

Either way, what is important is to grasp the specific modal spirit in which Plantinga, his followers (and, to take a more recent German example, Hermanni) engage in theological and philosophical argumentation.<sup>17</sup> Despite a decisive distance from the empirical orientation of Swinburne and others, modal theism faces very similar issues when it comes to the problem of the comprehensibility of the theistic God or, more prominently (and again), to the problem of evil. This last problem led to Plantinga's "free will defense," which is based on the assumption that human freedom is such a great gift that God accepted the possibility of evil for which humans—as free actors—are alone responsible.<sup>18</sup> This debate is, given the theistic agenda just outlined (that God, for instance, is both all-good and all-powerful), an essential requirement, but a highly and understandably contentious one, especially given the powerful and critical voice of someone such as Dewi Z. Phillips.<sup>19</sup> Argumentative challenges launched by the likes of Philips against such metaphysical propositions—"it is easy for us, as intellectuals, to add to the evil in the world by the ways in which we discuss it"—cannot be regarded as satisfyingly solved.<sup>20</sup>

### (3) Process Theology

This line of thinking, inaugurated most importantly by Alfred N. Whitehead's *Process and Reality* (1929),<sup>21</sup> comprises a strong reaction to the ongoing dualism in philosophy and theology exemplified by approaches (1) and (2) above. In contrast to subjectivism and neo-idealism, on the one hand, and materialism and early naturalism, on the other, Whitehead developed

17. See Friedrich Hermanni, "Warum ist überhaupt etwas? Überlegungen zum kosmologischen und ontologischen Argument," *Zeitschrift für philosophische Forschung* 65:1 (2011), 28–47, esp. 41–44.

18. See Alvin Plantinga, "The Free Will Defence," in *Philosophy in America*, ed. Max Black (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1965), 204–20.

19. See Dewi Z. Phillips, *The Problem of Evil and The Problem of God* (London: SCM, 2004), ch. 4.

20. *Ibid.*, 274.

21. Delivered as Gifford Lectures in 1927–28 with the subtitle "An Essay in Cosmology." At the same time, we have other thinkers whose direction of thinking is relative to Whitehead's; see such different approaches as by Charles Sanders Pierce, Teilhard de Chardin, and (the almost forgotten) German theologian Karl Heim.



a speculative, monistic approach based on an altogether different ontology. Instead of structuring ontology by starting with atomistic substances, Whitehead gives priority to the relations and processes between beings, calling these beings events within such processes. Theologically speaking, it is interesting as well as highly problematic that God and world are elements of this single universal process in which God functions as its immanent principle, creating all things, including Godself, within this very movement. Accordingly, Whitehead and process theologians are confronted with the basic difficulty of distinguishing between God and world, with giving an account of essential Christian concepts, such as *creatio ex nihilo* (which is excluded by Whitehead), and with the latent problem of using “God” univocally, meaning through the term a cosmic power in (but not beyond) all things.<sup>22</sup>

Whitehead provoked a wide range of approaches and combinations through his thought, from a deepening of his ontology through hermeneutic interests,<sup>23</sup> to cosmological theologies<sup>24</sup> such as panentheism and theological theories of emergence,<sup>25</sup> to semiotic readings of cosmological processes.<sup>26</sup> Apart from the more specific problem of whether these amalgams are successful and consistent with process thinking, the old problem of God’s transcendence remains an open challenge. Whitehead himself claimed that God transcends (and creates) the world in order to allow, also, for the opposite—and, thus, theologically suspect—view that the world transcends (and creates) God.<sup>27</sup> This might be unproblematic for process thinkers, and even a source of pride, but it potentially counts against them in the traditional

22. Cf. for a critical evaluation David Tracy, *Blessed Rage for Order: The New Pluralism in Theology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), chapter 7: “The Question of God: Metaphysics Revisited”; and Randy Ramal, “Is There such a Thing as ‘Good Metaphysics?’,” in idem ed., *Metaphysics, Analysis, and the Grammar God. Process and Analytic Voices in Dialogue* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2010), 215–34, esp. 231–34.

23. Schubert M. Ogden, “The Task of Philosophical Theology,” in *The Future of Philosophical Theology*, ed. Robert A. Evans (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1971), 55–85.

24. See Daniel A. Dombrowski, *A Platonic Philosophy of Religion: A Process Perspective* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2005), ch. 3 and 4.

25. See Philip Clayton and Paul Davies, *The Re-Emergence of Emergence: The Emergentist Hypothesis from Science to Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

26. This is a version most prominently developed by Hermann Deuser (*Gottesintinkt: Semiotische Religionstheorie und Pragmatismus* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2004), 104–17) who reads Charles S. Peirce’s semiotic triade as cosmological process, not only as referential structure of signs; see Thomas Wabel’s article in this volume.

27. Alfred N. Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, corr. ed. (New York: Free Press, 1978), 348.



theo-philosophical world, which tends to value in one way or another the transcendence of God.

#### (4) Onto-Theology, God, and Being

Although there is a strong critique against onto-theology—especially from continental thinkers and followers of Heidegger such as Jacques Derrida—it still has some explicit proponents who might be said to represent yet another form of this reemerging metaphysics. Traditionally, onto-theology is the view that God is the highest being, an *ens necessarium et perfectissimum* that causes the universe, but is a cause in God's self of God's self—the *causa sui* and unmoved mover. There are different, partly incompatible, versions for defending and elaborating this thesis. Most recently, the German, Catholic philosopher Lorenz B. Puntel proposed a new and creative attempt to think theologically within the framework of onto-theology (although he would rampantly reject this description). His argument for a necessary *causa sui*—"an absolutely necessary dimension of being," in his words<sup>28</sup>—takes an indirect line and runs as follows. Suppose that everything is contingent; then it is possible that nothing would exist; however, this thought is impossible and, thus, the "absolute nothing" is a pseudo-concept; therefore, it is impossible that everything is contingent which implies that something is necessary; this "something" is called God.<sup>29</sup>

Heidegger's critique of onto-theological thinking is still well known. Its focus lies on the gap between the deductive abstraction called *ens necessarium* and the religious practice in which such an abstraction does not play any significant role. Nobody addresses his or her prayer to an *ens necessarium*; nobody adores the conceptual ground of Being. How to bridge that gap? Authors like Puntel have two options: either to build up their conceptualizations of a metaphysical God successively in order to present a more vivid and worship-worthy God (which leads to the question why one did not begin with the result hope for in that move) or to claim that the God of religious practice is, compared to the onto-theological *ens*, a sort of *adiaphoron*, a neglectable supplement. For many writers, both options remain far from convincing.<sup>30</sup>

28. Lorenz B. Puntel, *Sein und Gott: Ein systematischer Ansatz in Auseinandersetzung mit M. Heidegger, É. Lévinas und J.-L. Marion* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2010), 220.

29. See *ibid.*, 232–36.

30. For a further discussion, see Hartmut von Sass, "Review: Lorenz B. Puntel, *Sein und Gott*," *Theologische Literaturzeitung* 136 (2011) 4, 429–32; Merold Westphal, "Overcoming Onto-Theology," in *idem*, *Overcoming Onto-Theology: Toward a Postmodern*

## (5) God Beyond Being—Thinking the Event

Another prominent line of critique has emerged against onto-theology that may itself be broadening what is considered to belong to this very meta-physical tradition. It has grown, through Heidegger's pupils, in conjunction with the onto-theological tradition. As implied, this position comes not so much to rest, here, on the foundational elements in onto-theological thinking but rather on the hermeneutic framework that constitutes it in the first place. Onto-theology's "being" is here regarded as a formal cage in which everything has to be thought and conceptualized. "Beyond being" comes to signify, then, a sort of theo-philosophical outbreak, a rupture with prominent and important lines of theology and philosophy, setting the quasi-transcendental standards in which our thinking (allegedly) has its place.

Accordingly, certain forms of hermeneutics and phenomenology are under attack by this line of thought. For instance, on the hermeneutical side, the hermeneutical cage is constructed by pre-understanding and the hermeneutic circle. As such, persons' ways-of-life—those arenas into which they were thrown and bred—have a constitutive effect on the concepts, categories, and ideas through which such persons will think through their pre-given interpretations of the world. Presumably, "beyond-being" metaphysicians attempt to go beyond this traditionalist framework in order to capture the absolutely new—something that remains unconditioned by our linguistic or epistemic capacities by opening up something unmediated, completely surprising (as Levinas' "other") that exceeds the interpreter and its horizon (as Jean-Luc Marion's "saturated phenomena"),<sup>31</sup> or something that is *really* "present" (in Gumbrecht's sense; see above).

Theology is very familiar with this line of thinking. Indeed, the battle between traditional phenomenologists and post-phenomenologists is reminiscent of the debate between hermeneutical thinkers (underlining the necessity of human pre-understanding, at least in the question of God) and Barth (refusing every attempt to revive natural theology in defending God's absoluteness). The simple question arises in which sense (if any) one has to comprehend this unconditionedness and absoluteness. Is not such a comprehension still within a hermeneutic framework, in light of those

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*Christian Faith* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2001), 1–28.

31. Cf. Jean-Luc Marion, "The Saturated Phenomenon," in idem, *The Visible and the Revealed* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), 18–48, esp. 25. There is also a "post-metaphysical" meaning in what Marion calls "the donation of saturated phenomena"; see Thomas Alferi, "*Worüber hinaus Größeres nicht 'gegeben' werden kann . . .*": *Phänomenologie und Offenbarung nach Jean-Luc Marion* (Freiburg im Br.: Alber, 2007), esp. 286–96 ("donation"—postmetaphysisch).

pre-understandings that illuminate such in the first place? Is it sufficient, as Caputo, via Derrida, suggests, to speculate about the impossible, thereby opening up a certain *immanent* novelty, new possibility within the world that is? It is true, one might respond with Derrida, that events exceed by conceptual necessity the hermeneutical and phenomenological framework, but this statement may only be an expression of these concepts complete impossibility—their incapacity to be thought.<sup>32</sup> Or, perhaps, as John Milbank suggests, they are grounded in a Word already incarnationally spoken.<sup>33</sup>

Either way, the above five approaches to thinking give strong evidence for the thesis that we are experiencing a re-emergence of metaphysical thinking in theology and beyond, although it is still an open question what the so-called metaphysical core element of these positions exactly is. The task at hand, then, is to delve deeper into the question of what qualifies these positions as metaphysical, namely, what (if anything) is metaphysics? Of special concern is metaphysics' relationship to the history of theology and philosophy of religion, including some of the reasons, possibilities, and strategies philosophers of religion and theologians have employed for overcoming (if possible) metaphysics.

## II. The Traditional Alliance between Theology and Metaphysics: Resources for a Theological Critique

### II.1. What is Metaphysics?

Criticizing metaphysics presupposes a sufficient understanding of metaphysics. Since such an understanding meets obstacles due to the highly heterogeneous concept of metaphysics embraced by its proponents as well as refuted by its critics, every criticism struggles with the fact that metaphysics only exists in its variations. Hence, one can find very few attempts to define “metaphysics” or “metaphysical problems;” this itself becomes a problem when talking about metaphysics' critique: if one has no definition, what is there to critique? One feature, however, emerges often enough to note that metaphysics tends to deal with “ultimate questions” or “concerns,” something that touches the most fundamental questions of our existential

32. See Jacques Derrida, “A Certain Impossible Possibility of Saying the Event,” in *The Late Derrida*, eds., William J. T. Mitchell and Arnold I. Davidson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007).

33. John Milbank, “The Linguistic Turn as Theological Turn,” in idem, *The Word Made Strange* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997), 84–122.

and epistemic ways of existing in our worlds.<sup>34</sup> “Metaphysics denotes,” the German theologian Hermann Deuser representatively holds, “what is of most general interest,”<sup>35</sup> (albeit Deuser unfortunately neglects elaborating what exactly is meant by that thesis).

In a recently published book with the laconic title *Metaphysics: Essays on Last Questions*, Friedrich Hermann tries to fill that gap by opening his work with the following definition of metaphysics:

Metaphysics is the attempt to answer final questions through the use of reason. These questions concern the world as a whole, its cause and the place of human beings in it. Such questions are unavoidable but also unanswerable by any single science. Surely the answers given by metaphysics do not stand the test of critique in many cases. Equally unconvincing, however, are older and more recent programs alike that bid farewell to metaphysics in general. Such programs rest on presuppositions that are themselves metaphysical in nature. In the end, reason's question is not whether it could engage in metaphysics, but only in which sense.<sup>36</sup>

Hermann takes this compact elucidation as a sufficient and self-evident understanding of “metaphysics.” Unfortunately, there are no further passages in his book deepening these rudimentary thoughts.<sup>37</sup>

34. See also Thomas Nagel, *Mortal Questions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

35. Hermann Deuser, “Vorwort,” in *Metaphysik und Religion: Die Wiederentdeckung eines Zusammenhangs* (Gütersloh: Gütersloher, 2007), 7–8, 8.

36. Friedrich Hermann, *Metaphysik. Versuche über letzte Fragen* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2011), 1 (the book's first sentences); our translation. The German original text reads: “Metaphysik ist der Versuch, letzte Fragen mit Hilfe der Vernunft zu beantworten. Solche Fragen betreffen die Welt als ganze, den Grund der Welt und den Platz des Menschen in der Welt. Sie stellen sich unvermeidlich ein, können aber durch die Einzelwissenschaften nicht beantwortet werden. Gewiss halten die Antworten, welche die Metaphysik gegeben hat, in vielen Fällen einer kritischen Prüfung nicht stand. Ebenso wenig überzeugend sind jedoch ältere und neuere Programme, welche die Metaphysik grundsätzlich verabschieden wollen. Denn sie beruhen stets auf Voraussetzungen, die ihrerseits von metaphysischer Art sind. Der Vernunft stellt sich am Ende deshalb nicht die Frage, ob sie überhaupt Metaphysik betreiben will, sondern nur, in welcher Weise.” It is worth noting that this book is the first publication of a series edited by the German publisher Mohr Siebeck that is explicitly dedicated to metaphysical questions; this series is called *Collegium Metaphysicum*.

37. For a critical discussion of Hermann's definition, see Hartmut von Sass, “Allerletzte Fragen: Zur Kritik metaphysischer Theologie und ihrer gegenwärtigen Renaissance (zu Fr. Hermann, Metaphysik),” *Theologische Rundschau* 78:1 (2013), 99–117.

Nevertheless, this “definition” is helpful in that it reminds one of the highly ambitious program running through all approaches that belong to what is presented here as return of metaphysics. To capture the impact of this return more precisely, one should return to an early distinction between two basic ways of determining “metaphysics.” As illuminated in Section I, the first way is to define metaphysics by specifying *certain contents and particular issues* that constitute metaphysics. The result is, then, to treat metaphysics as a branch within the philosophical canon (like epistemology, philosophy of mind, or ethics, etc.) and, accordingly, to present a list of so-called traditional problems (such as the ontological argument, determinism and free will, mind-body dualism) as intrinsic features whose exact answers remain highly disputed.

The question remains, however, as to why these problems rather than others come to be defined metaphysically as opposed to, say, epistemologically, ethically, or aesthetically—after all, any epistemological move already depends on the *reality* of the problem at hand and so too does any ethical problem. From a metaphysical way of thinking, there is no getting away from metaphysics! This uncertainty of domain, thus, already alludes to the deeper level of the problem, which indicates a second manner of defining metaphysics, namely, to describe it as a *particular way of thinking* or “metaphysical mode of viewing.”<sup>38</sup> Metaphysics, here, does not denote a certain area within philosophy and theology or a collection of particular problems but, rather, a specific mode of approaching possible issues in philosophy and theology. Then, metaphysics is not so much a method, but, more vaguely, a style of intellectual engagement. This *modal way* is, arguably, the more profound, allowing one to access the heart of metaphysics and its possible critique. It is also the means by which the above-mentioned metaphysical positions are considered such.

## II.2. A Sketch of the Ingredients of Modal Metaphysics

One could illuminate different elements as belonging to this metaphysical way of thinking. The following basics seem to be within the focus of a metaphysical mode of thinking and could be found in varying degrees and forms in any of the metaphysical positions defined above.

38. Ernst Fuchs, *Jesus: Wort und Tat* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1971), 134: “metaphysische Sehweise.”

(1) *System as Ideal and Goal*

Metaphysics has the inclination to build philosophical systems as all-embracing and coherent frameworks in which every issue has its place. In a certain sense, this philosophical ideal, which is perhaps best “realized” in Hegel’s idealism, supposedly mirrors the way it sees the world. Accordingly, the world is regarded as one coherent system that, in the end, excludes all forms of *perspectivism* or *pragmatic considerations* in explaining or even describing its relations. Perspectives must take their place within the Absolute.

(2) *Thinking in Totalities*

The systematic opens several further significant issues. The first one is that this system is all embracing. It does not direct itself to sub-structures or particular elements; or, to put it more cautiously, it engages in questions only insofar as they contribute to thinking in systematic totalities. In Puntel’s words (which he borrows from Heidegger), metaphysics’ object is “Being in its full sense and as a whole.”<sup>39</sup> Metaphysics, then, excludes any form of *particularism*.

(3) *The Singularity of Truth*

Metaphysics is searching not only for an all-embracing system, but also for that one, single, true system that defines all other possibilities. It seems *de facto* true that (almost) every philosopher is interested in truth, but it remains far from evident that this truth exists only in the singular. Because of the proclaimed *singularity of reason*, metaphysicians typically also defend a homogenous view of reason, a fact that leads, among other things, to a particular form of realism: one that demands adherence to the manner in which the reality of beings is illuminated in its scheme, i.e. justification. Such realism stands in contrast to different models of truth that ground themselves in conceptual frameworks such as Putnam’s “internal realism”<sup>40</sup> or Günter Abel’s “philosophy of interpretation.”<sup>41</sup> Rather, metaphysical realism seems to exclude every form of *contextualism*.

39. See Puntel, *Sein und Gott*, 3 and 394.

40. Cf. Ilman Dilman, *Wittgenstein’s Copernican Revolution: The Question of Linguistic Idealism* (New York: Palgrave-Macmillan, 2002), ch. 8.

41. Cf. Günter Abel, *Interpretationswelten. Gegenwartsphilosophie jenseits von Essentialismus und Relativismus* (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1995), esp. chapters 18 and 23.

#### (4) Metaphysical Hierarchy

The absoluteness of truth is typically anchored in a metaphysical ground, which itself is constituted by any number of divergent candidates called by any number of names. The moral version is focused on the absolute Good, as used in Platonic systems; the onto-theological version is centered on a perfect Being whose perfection implies its necessity and its unconditionedness (*ens necessarium et perfectissimum*). These absolute anchors are metaphysics' answer to the search for something that is not touched by any change; something that exists in timeless stability. The result is a metaphysical hierarchy between an anchor and what is anchored (God/world—*res cogitans/res extensa*—substance/relation; *ontological level*), and the end result is mode of thinking bound to dualities and subordination<sup>42</sup> (mind/body—reality/appearance—necessity/contingency). This approach excludes a philosophical *multi-centrism*.

#### (5) Metaphysics and Foundationalism

Metaphysics is not only interested in finding an ultimate anchor, but also in using it for foundational purposes. Hence, metaphysics is both the localization of something absolutely stable and the attempt to transfer this stability into the realm defined by contingency. One might outline this mode of thinking as governed by a “metaphysical necessity,”<sup>43</sup> something that is not deniable or open for alternatives. Accordingly, foundationalism—a widespread feature on its own as found in transcendentalism, apriorism, evidentialism, etc.<sup>44</sup>—privileges deductive proofs and thoughts formulated in the mode of necessity. This is contrasted to hypothetical thinking or thinking in the mode of possibility.<sup>45</sup> Thus, metaphysics prefers explanation and neglects *description*.<sup>46</sup>

42. This is a thesis put forward by Jacques Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1982), 330.

43. See both introductions in Cora Diamond's *The Realistic Spirit* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1991).

44. It is (also for a critique of foundational thinking) important to note that one can decipher different versions of foundationalism; see again Michael C. Rea, “Introduction,” 12–13 (esp. concerning the difference between “doxastic” and “source” foundationalism).

45. Insofar as Ludwig Wittgenstein turns the priorities upside down (as he does emphatically in his *Philosophical Investigations [PI]*, §§89–132) he is an anti-metaphysical thinker.

46. A famous exception is found in Peter Strawson's “descriptive metaphysics,” which is contrasted with its revisionary counterpart. It is not prescriptive because it



(6) *Metaphysics and Objectification*

In its concentration on explanatory ends, metaphysical foundationalism has two closely linked inclinations: to presuppose something like Descartes' subject-object scheme—where the truth of the world stands independent to the truth of oneself—and to describe our relation to ourselves and the world as a potentially detached one.<sup>47</sup> Both aspects are highly misleading, as Heidegger repeated often. In light of both the above tendencies, standpoints that start from personal involvement and committed engagement in the world do not play a significant role in metaphysics. In this sense, metaphysics excludes the perspective-bound *internalism* of philosophy by ignoring the interpreters' "being-in-the-world."

## (7) A "Final Vocabulary"

Insofar as a metaphysical system is, as we have seen, presented in a certain language, and insofar as this system should be ideally the one and single true rational system built upon a metaphysical and unifying anchor,<sup>48</sup> its language should also contain an adequate linguistic grasp of the world's reality. Therefore, Lyotard speaks of the philosophical "meta-narrative": an all-embracing story of human development;<sup>49</sup> Richard Rorty speaks of metaphysics' "final vocabulary," indicating that it is not interested in finding new and interesting expressions for ourselves but in mirroring our world

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does not change things (and it lets everything be as it is, as Wittgenstein said [*PI* §124; see also §98]). But it is also descriptive because it makes explicit what is entailed conceptually in our everyday practice; see *Individuals: An Essay in Descriptive Metaphysics* (London: Methuen, 1959), esp. 47–51. This book is often considered to mark the turning point back to metaphysics within analytic philosophy. In this regard, Robert B. Brandom's equally famous *Making it Explicit: Reasoning, Representing, and Discursive Commitment* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994) is also a specimen of Strawson's "descriptive metaphysics."

47. Cf. Martin Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit*, 18th ed. (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 2001), §§15, 18, 29; idem, "Die onto-theo-logische Verfassung der Metaphysik" (1956/57), in idem, *Identität und Differenz*, GA 11 (Frankfurt a.M.: Klostermann, 2006), 51–79, 59–60, 69–70.

48. Metaphysics presents as a ground either more *material candidates* (God, the Good, Being) or more *procedural elements* (one reason, one rationality); the second line of thinking is already an inner-metaphysical reaction to the pitfalls of the former tradition; see Jürgen Habermas, "Motive nachmetaphysischen Denkens," in idem, *Nach-metaphysisches Denken: Philosophische Aufsätze*, 3rd ed. (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1989), 35–60, esp. 42–52.

49. Jean-François Lyotard, *La Condition postmoderne: Rapport sur le savoir* (Paris: Minuit, 1979), 12.

correctly.<sup>50</sup> Great narratives and final vocabularies exclude a *linguistic pluralism* of expression and self-description.

These seven elements capture the most prominent ingredients that traditionally constitute metaphysics. We have intentionally put these ideas in a rather non-technical and vague manner because we do not claim that these seven elements are either the necessary or, together, sufficient conditions for labeling something “metaphysical.” On the contrary, it is quite possible that a theoretical system is regarded as a metaphysical contribution without being committed to, say, (4) and (6). What is, actually, claimed is that it appears to be confused or, at least, highly implausible to use the disputed label of metaphysics without referring essentially to *some* of these seven elements.

### II.3. Two Possible Ways of Criticizing Metaphysics

The recent return of metaphysics to theology consists in re-stimulating at least *some* of the intuitions just outlined—with, arguably, special weight on (1), (2) and (5). However, criticizing *the* metaphysical enterprise amounts to undermining *all* of the aforementioned ingredients. (Thus, there is an interesting asymmetry between pro- and anti-metaphysicians on this point.) In this regard, we shall now concentrate on what it could more incisively mean to critique metaphysics, distinguishing, on the one hand, between a direct and traditional form of critique and, on the other hand, elucidating a more recent form of critique that is rhetorically ambitious but technically more restrained than the traditional.

#### (1) *Direct Critique of Metaphysics*

This form of criticizing metaphysics takes its opponent’s philosophical project seriously. It does not neglect or even ignore metaphysical projects, but it repudiates them by either trying to undermine their presuppositions or to elucidate problematic consequences. This manner of critique can be realized in very different ways, five of which are here exemplified.

(1.1) Epistemic criticism: The most common form of criticism claims that metaphysics transcends our epistemic capacities and results in confused theses and empty concepts. There is an *anti-speculative* version of this critique as in Hume’s famous *Dialogues*. This approach ends in the words of

50. See Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 112–15, 120; idem, *Philosophy as Cultural Politics*, Philosophical Papers 4 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 170.

its dominant figure, Philo, who calls for “consigning” books of metaphysics and theology to the flames if they are not bound to extended things or direct experience.<sup>51</sup>

A more sophisticated elaboration of Hume’s epistemic critique is Kant’s *transcendental* framework. For Kant, in his *The Critique of Pure Reason*, metaphysics explains the possibility of *a priori* synthetic judgments (B 19—with reference to Hume) by formulating the non-empirical conditions of our knowledge. Empirical input and transcendental conditions are combined here as reaction to the rationalist and empiricist shortcomings in the pre-Kantian era. In criticizing the old schools of metaphysics, however, Kant inaugurated a new type of metaphysics: instead of a “dogmatic” metaphysic, he implements a transcendental replacement, a science concerning first principles and a “metaphysics of metaphysics” (B 869 and 871). Insofar as Kant’s new metaphysics is a “reflection of functional principles,” as Ulrich Barth claims,<sup>52</sup> it remains a short distance to Strawson’s aforementioned *descriptive* metaphysics, which focuses on the conceptual implications within our everyday understandings, dealings, and languages.

(1.2) Positivist criticism: In contrast to Kant’s critique of metaphysics, positivism finds no constructive purpose in metaphysics. Metaphysics as a concept is used only with a pejorative connotation to refute something as mere speculation. That is why positivists had strong sympathies with, and a direct, philosophical relationship to, Hume’s anti-speculative attitude. The center of positivist criticism is the installation of criteria that allow for the distinction between sense and nonsense. “Sense” was taken to be—at least in early positivist approaches—coextensive with “natural sciences,” and these sciences’ empirical approach to knowing; beyond such sciences’ propositional formulations is nothing, and one ought to remain silent about such nonsense. Those tasks of philosophy that supposedly workout this “beyond” (theology, ethics, aesthetics, etc.) are meaningless.<sup>53</sup>

51. Cf. David Hume, *Dialogues concerning Natural Religion: And Other Writings*, ed. Dorothy Coleman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), part XII, last sentence; see also Hartmut von Sass, “Jenseits von Hume: Demea. Eine Rehabilitierung in systematischer Absicht,” *Neue Zeitschrift für Systematische Theologie und Religionsphilosophie* 52:4 (2010) 413–39.

52. Ulrich Barth, “Selbstbewußtsein und Seele. Kant, Husserl und die moderne Emotionspsychologie,” in idem, *Gott als Projekt der Vernunft* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2005), 441–61, 460; see also Christopher Insole, “Kant’s Transcendental Idealism, Freedom and the Divine Mind,” *Modern Theology* 27:4 (2011) 608–38.

53. See Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus* 6.53. The German original text reads: “Die richtige Methode der Philosophie wäre eigentlich die: Nichts zu sagen, als was sich sagen läßt, also Sätze der Naturwissenschaft—also etwas, was mit Philosophie nichts zu tun hat—, und dann immer, wenn ein anderer etwas Metaphysisches sagen wollte, ihm

It is well known, that positivism suffers under the weight of its own critique: if the class of meaningful sentences consists of observational sentences and analytic judgments,<sup>54</sup> insofar as the sentences in which the positivist theory of meaning is articulated are neither observational nor analytic, this theory belongs itself to the realm of silence. The *particular veri* of this attempt is to remind oneself that every theory of meaning should reflect one's intuition that there *is* an (instable) border between sense and nonsense, but it should also capture how difficult it remains to draw this line philosophically.

(1.3) Conceptual criticism: This third form is connected to Wittgenstein, and it attempts, also, though by different means, to capture the border between sense and nonsense. Wittgenstein and philosophers following him (such as the ordinary language scholars) circumvent a general theory of meaning that is not self-applicable. Instead, they try to elucidate the criteria of what is meaningful already embedded in our linguistic practices. That is why, for instance, Wittgenstein underlines the descriptive element in his approach, and, equally, John L. Austin works out the commitments and (self-) involving connections essentially combined with our speech acts.<sup>55</sup>

What is important to this philosophy of language (as a substitute for traditional epistemologies [cf. 1.1.]) is not a theoretical framework but the grammar that constitutes language as a rule-governed activity. This is what Wittgenstein calls the transference of the metaphysical use of language to its ordinary usage (cf. *PI* 106)<sup>56</sup>. Here, philosophy becomes not a prescription for the use of that grammar, but a cautious attempt to follow this grammar

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nachzuweisen, daß er gewissen Zeichen in seinen Sätzen keine Bedeutung gegeben hat. Diese Methode wäre für den anderen unbefriedigend—er hätte nicht das Gefühl, daß wir ihn Philosophie lehrten—aber sie wäre die einzig streng richtige.” Joachim Schulte claims, however, that this scenario is nothing but a slapstick and, surely, not Wittgenstein's intention (“Was man nicht sagen kann. Der Sinn des Schweigens bei Wittgenstein,” in *Stille Tropen: Zur Rhetorik und Grammatik des Schweigens*, ed. Hartmut von Sass [Freiburg im Br.: Alber, 2013], 176–95, 192). In any case, this claim is, at least, an allusion that the relation of the early Wittgenstein to metaphysics is a highly complicated one—by far not as unambiguous as Moritz Schlick's or Rudolf Carnap's wholesale refutation of metaphysics.

54. See Alfred J. Ayer, *Language, Truth and Logic* (London: Gollancz, 1936), chapter 6, esp. 172–83.

55. John L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*, The William James Lectures delivered at Harvard University in 1955 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1962), lectures 8–11. See also Donald Evans, *The Logic of Self-Involvement* (London: SCM, 1963), esp. 218–28; and J. Gordan Campbell, “Are All Speech-Acts Self-Involving?” *Religious Studies* 8:2 (1972) 161–64.

56. Cf. Gregory L. Reece, *Irony and Religious Belief* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2002), chapter 6 (“From the Metaphysical to the Ordinary”).

descriptively. Accordingly, metaphysics is not here criticized primarily due to its attempting to make statements that transcend our intellectual capacities; it is criticized for saying confused things due to its permanent conflict with the grammar(s) of traditional linguistic-cultural concepts. Hence, it becomes a quasi-Socratic endeavor to elucidate these confusions, and the well-known label of “therapy” (PI 133)<sup>57</sup> indicates an inclination to remain solely destructive in movement, refraining from presenting something beyond the therapeutic impetus. Description, as such, would by no means exclude criticism, as is often assumed,<sup>58</sup> but it would make constructive philosophical work more difficult.<sup>59</sup>

(1.4) Ethical criticism: Similar to the above form of critique, descriptive philosophy has moral implications. According to Peter Winch, it is a “moral demand” on the philosopher to do justice and pay attention to the particulars.<sup>60</sup> Metaphysical theories are “immoral” in the specific sense that they are only interested in the individual case as specimen of the more (or most) general. The generalizing tendency of metaphysics is philosophically violent in neglecting the individual for theory’s sake.

There is also a much stronger philosophical tradition that places stress on the relation between metaphysics and violence. Here, the *de facto* theological question is how it is possible to believe in an *ens perfectissimum* after Auschwitz.<sup>61</sup> To put it more philosophically: how is it possible to build fine-tuned metaphysical orders when they face devastating moral ruptures, disorientations for which, say, a foundationalistic standpoints cannot provide existentially adequate answers? In particular, Jewish thinkers like Hans Jonas, Emmanuel Levinas, and Jacques Derrida point us to the fact that our modes of thinking have the potential to turn violent in their attempts to capture all things systematically. Insofar as metaphysics belongs to these modes of thinking, and given that metaphysics is an all-embracing enterprise that does not respect the Other—the absolute Alien, difference—but tries to integrate all these irritations into a systematic whole, it tends to commit

57. See also Hilary Putnam, “Rosenzweig and Wittgenstein,” in idem, *Jewish Philosophy as a Guide to Life. Rosenzweig—Buber—Levinas—Wittgenstein* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008), 11–27, 18–19.

58. Peter F. Bloemendaal, *Grammars of Faith: A Critical Evaluation of Dewi Z. Phillips’s Philosophy of Religion* (Leuven: Peeters, 2006), 393–412.

59. See for this problem Stephen Mulhall, “Wittgenstein’s Temple: Three Styles of Philosophical Architecture,” in Dewi Z. Phillips’ *Contemplative Philosophy of Religion: Questions and Responses*, ed. Andy F. Sanders (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 2007), 13–27.

60. See Peter Winch, “Doing Justice or Giving the Devil its Due?,” in *Can Religion Be Explained Away?*, ed. Dewi Z. Phillips (New York: Macmillan, 1996), 56–72.

61. Richard Cohen, *Ethics, Exegesis and Philosophy: Interpretation after Levinas* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 266–82.

violence against that which remains outside of any possible full integration.<sup>62</sup> It is interesting to see that, here, Wittgensteinian descriptive understandings of justice can meet French-Jewish phenomenology; although, the former remains strongly reserved towards metaphysics (especially as related to ethics),<sup>63</sup> whereas Levinas, at least, claims that ethics is the new *prima philosophia* and regains, in that way, a constructive metaphysical attitude.<sup>64</sup>

(1.5) Historical criticism: The last station on our tour through the critiques of metaphysics can be combined with the previous one. However, the problem now pertains not primarily to violent generalizations and the integration of what is outside the metaphysical order, but to the internal shortcomings of metaphysics itself. These could historically be criticized in two ways. There is a more *fundamental* version of the historical critique claiming that metaphysics is, by necessity, not able to acknowledge the emergence of unnecessary and contingent structures.<sup>65</sup> Hence, we need philosophical projects that enable us to recover this contingent facticity in order to “restore life to its original difficulty” and to accept the instability of the “flux.”—Hermeneutics is, for John D. Caputo, just such a project.<sup>66</sup> Metaphysics would, then, ‘make things easy’—by missing life’s existential concerns.

There is also a less principal and, thus, more *pragmatic* reading that is put forward by Heidegger. It says that metaphysics might have had its time and achievements. However, metaphysics as way of thinking no longer provides its previous constitutive possibilities; metaphysics can no longer meet today’s situational problems and ideas, which must be able to “experience the technical period in our thinking”<sup>67</sup>. In other words, metaphysics was not always so confused as it is today, but it is *now*—in a ramified and complicated process unfolding within the history of Being—turning out to

62. See Bernhard Waldenfels, *Einführung in die Phänomenologie* (München: Fink, 1992), 65–66.

63. See, for instance, Hilary Putnam, *Ethics without Ontology* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004), esp. 15–32 (“Ethics without Metaphysics”).

64. See Edith Wyschogrod, *Emmanuel Levinas: The Problem of Ethical Metaphysics* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2000), esp. chapter 4.

65. See Albrecht Wellmer, *Wie Worte Sinn machen. Aufsätze zur Sprachphilosophie* (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 2007), 291.

66. John D. Caputo, *Radical Hermeneutics: Repetition, Deconstruction, and the Hermeneutic Project* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), 1, esp. 36–37, 209, 281.

67. Martin Heidegger, “Spiegel-Gespräch mit Martin Heidegger (23. September 1966),” in idem, *Reden und andere Zeugnisse eines Lebensweges*, GA 16 (Frankfurt a.M.: Klostermann, 2000), 652–83, 675.

be inadequate and weak in its attempts to unfold Being as it emerges today in any helpful, explanatory manner.<sup>68</sup>

With these critiques in mind, it might be an illuminating task to reveal the different and manifold affinities between specific metaphysical ingredients (see again the “list” of these seven aspects above in II.2) and certain kinds of direct criticism with which this Introduction has thus far dealt. It is, however, beyond the scope of this introduction to elaborate *all* these connections. Some initial suggestions will have to suffice.

## (2) Critique and Meta-Critique

The direct critique of metaphysics above is not itself without its critics. Metaphysicians unsurprisingly defended their projects.<sup>69</sup> More interestingly, one can also find voices that, while generally not belonging to the metaphysical camp, surprisingly express concern with the offensive against metaphysics. One reason might lie in the experience that all attempts to get rid of metaphysics have only led deeper into the very metaphysical tradition.<sup>70</sup> What strategies are available, then, to circumvent this philosophical conundrum? To answer this question, we refer to a different line of criticism; it is not a direct one but, rather, a *meta-critique*. It focuses not on metaphysical presuppositions or consequences but on developing a particular attitude towards the tradition of metaphysics. This strategy will, in the end, amount to a range of positions that, perhaps, more properly deserve the label “post-metaphysical.” One can distinguish three prominent versions of this meta-critique.

(2.1) *Pragmatic responses to the idea that metaphysics is our fate*: According to Heidegger, metaphysical projections constitute a fundamental and, therefore, inevitable structure of *Dasein* (a “Grundgeschehen”). Moreover, philosophy is considered to function as the inauguration of

68. This is only one single line within Heidegger’s highly complicated position concerning metaphysics. It is, at least, at odds with Heidegger’s prominent thesis that metaphysics is a fundamental structure of *Dasein* or that metaphysics suffers from “Seinsvergessenheit” from the beginning; see 2.1. below.

69. Within theology, *Radical Orthodoxy* most prominently adheres to such a position, claiming that the totality of what is wrong in the West began with medieval nominalism and its rejection of analogy, especially the thought of Duns Scotus. Accordingly, this movement is metaphysical in the sense of being eagerly anti-modern; see *Radical Orthodoxy: A New Theology*, ed. John Milbank, Catherine Pickstock and Graham Ward (London: Routledge, 1999).

70. Mark Wrathall, “Introduction: Metaphysics and Onto-Theology,” in *Religion after Metaphysics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 1–6, 2.



metaphysics (an “In-Gang-bringen der Metaphysik”).<sup>71</sup> Indeed, Heidegger’s highly emphatic tone itself still participates in the metaphysical tradition, even if it leaves room to treat his diagnosis in some very different ways. Such ways are comprised of a broad spectrum of attitudes all the way from simply accepting Heidegger’s meta-metaphysical thesis to turning it pragmatically into a statement that claims that we have not successfully (necessarily or *de facto*) bid metaphysics its farewell.<sup>72</sup> That is, we still exist within the metaphysical mode of thinking.

One pragmatic reaction consists of working through the metaphysical tradition by changing it from the inside out.<sup>73</sup> For instance, Heidegger argues, that every epoch has its metaphysical core concepts—the Greeks: *physis* and *energeia*; the medieval era: *ens perfectissimum* and *ens creatum*; modernity: representation and knowledge; etc.<sup>74</sup> If this history of metaphysics is true, then revisionary metaphysics would resemble the Rortian ideal of finding new vocabularies to express ourselves in, say, more interesting and more aesthetically pleasing ways. These vocabularies are worked out on an individual basis in terms of what he calls “projects of self-creation.”<sup>75</sup>

In reaction, which one could also be construed as pragmatic in a fatalistic sense, one could combat Rorty’s view by defending Heidegger’s hyperbolic thesis that metaphysics is the fate of Being. Heidegger’s statement means that a metaphysical fate already encapsulates and precedes every possible reaction to metaphysics, even the most critical one, for every position presupposes a view of the whole of Being and its structures. The consequence of this position is that, in it, the pragmatic thesis necessarily undermines itself insofar as it, too, takes up a view of everything. The pragmatic anti-metaphysician might feel a bit uncomfortable with the thesis

71. Martin Heidegger, “Was ist Metaphysik?” (1929), in idem, *Wegmarken*, 3rd ed. (Frankfurt a.M.: Klostermann, 2004), 103–22, 122; idem, *Die Grundbegriffe der Metaphysik. Welt—Endlichkeit—Einsamkeit* (1929/30), GA 29/30 (Frankfurt a.M.: Klostermann, 2010), 12.

72. See Mark Okrent, *Heidegger’s Pragmatism: Understanding, Being, and the Critique of Metaphysics* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1988), chapter 6 (“The Early Heidegger’s Metaphysical Strategy”).

73. See Charles Taylor, “Rorty and Philosophy,” in *Richard Rorty (Contemporary Philosophy in Focus)*, ed. Charles Guignon and David R. Hiley (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 158–80, 168 and 176.

74. Cf. for this Heideggerian claim Sandra Lee Bartky, “Heidegger and the Modes of World-Disclosure,” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 40:2 (1979) 212–36, 215.

75. Richard Rorty, “Education as Socialization,” in idem, *Philosophy as Social Hope* (New York: Penguin, 1999), 118.

and will not show interest in continuing to fight about the thesis precisely because it is convinced that this is of no interesting purpose.

(2.2) *The 'End of Metaphysics'?*: Calling for the end of metaphysics could simply mean that the act of building a metaphysical system is over, namely, that it has lost its meaningfulness. But the return of metaphysics speaks a different language than its critics; it contradicts contemporary theses that metaphysics is now closed for business. On the contrary, the aforementioned return to metaphysics makes very clear that critics have diagnosed metaphysics' closure too early. Its time is not yet done. For instance, Gianni Vattimo's (who is no fan of metaphysics *per se*) sense of "weak thinking" and his reinterpretation of Christian *agape* as this thinking's core element would be misunderstood if taken as coming *after* metaphysics.<sup>76</sup> Vattimo's project constitutes, rather, a "strong" enterprise within a metaphysical era. As such, it should not be taken as a license for ignoring metaphysics.<sup>77</sup> It should be taken as a tool for challenging and changing metaphysical views from the inside out.<sup>78</sup> Vattimo's hermeneutics "is a philosophy of limited reason,"<sup>79</sup> meaning that the "end of metaphysics" does not literally signify its closure but the end of a certain understanding of it.

(2.3) *Overcoming metaphysics*: The attempt, as, again, Heidegger holds, to overcome metaphysics destructively has turned out to be self-defeating.<sup>80</sup> Hence, "overcoming" cannot mean ending metaphysics but should signify a constructive and deconstructive treatment of this tradition. For this reason, Heidegger linguistically distinguishes between "Überwindung" (overcoming) and "Verwindung" (which is a neologism). The latter hints at a more subtle attitude that combines different elements encompassed in the intellectual project of "overcoming": first, to distinguish between confused

76. See Gianni Vattimo, "Die Stärken des schwachen Denkens. Ein Gespräch mit Gianni Vattimo," in *Gianni Vattimo. Einführung*, ed. Martin Weiss, (Vienna: Passagen, 2003), 171–81.

77. Cf. Gianni Vattimo, in Richard Rorty and Gianni Vattimo, *The Future of Religion*, ed. by Santiago Zabala (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 75.

78. Cf. Gianni Vattimo, *Beyond Interpretation: The Meaning of Hermeneutics for Philosophy* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), 24.

79. Günter Figal, "Die Komplexität philosophischer Hermeneutik" in idem, *Der Sinn des Verstehens. Beiträge zur hermeneutischen Philosophie* (Stuttgart: Reclam, 1996), 11–31, 11–12; see also Jean Grondin, "Nihilistic or Metaphysical Consequences of Hermeneutics?," in *Consequences of Hermeneutics: Fifty Years after Gadamer's Truth and Method*, ed. Jeff Malpas and Santiago Zabala (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2010), 190–201, esp. 190–91.

80. Richard Rorty, "Overcoming the Tradition: Heidegger and Dewey," in idem, *Consequences of Pragmatism: Essays 1972–1980* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982), 37–59, 50.

elements within metaphysics (such as onto-theology) and more fruitful areas; and, second, to change priorities wherever necessary from more technical and cognitive questions to more practical and existential ones.<sup>81</sup>

Accordingly, “overcoming” as a mode of working critically through metaphysics changes the meaning of the “end of metaphysics.” As Jean-Luc Marion suggests, the period in which metaphysics comes to its end lasts longer than the period of metaphysics itself.<sup>82</sup> So, we should not think through the end of metaphysics with a quasi-apocalyptic attitude. Too much would have had to disappear, historically, culturally, and logically were the manifold elements of non-metaphysical thought to actually usurp metaphysics’ place. For, “[t]he question of the overcoming of metaphysics could thus require overcoming the question of being itself,” which non-metaphysical questions themselves also rest upon.<sup>83</sup>

#### II.4. Metaphysics, Theology, and Christianity

With some of these basic categories outlined and clarified, we move into the relationship between Christian theology and metaphysical thought. It is a triviality to state that the relation between metaphysics and theology is a highly complicated one. A very traditional reading regards Christianity’s Hellenizing as the starting point where the problems connected to this relation become acute. One could also make the case that Christianity only inherits earlier and “ancient” problems from the classical Greek tradition—a fact that shifts the problem from relating *metaphysics and theology* to another problematic marriage, namely, between *philosophy and metaphysics*. However, this is not the place either to meet this dispute or to retell the intellectual history that combines metaphysics, philosophy, and Christian theology. It should only be noted, that theological opponents of metaphysics, usually hoping for a theology cleansed of metaphysics, often desire a Greek-free theology.<sup>84</sup>

81. See for moves like these Merold Westphal, “Overcoming Onto-Theology” and “Positive Postmodernism as Radical Hermeneutics,” in idem, *Overcoming Onto-Theology*, 1–28 and 128–47.

82. Cf. Jean-Luc Marion, “The ‘End of Metaphysics’ as a Possibility,” in *Religion after Metaphysics*, ed. Mark Wrathall (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 166–89, 166.

83. Ibid., 183.

84. Again, Heidegger belongs to this party; see his “Die philosophischen Grundlagen der mittelalterlichen Mystik” (Lecture from 1918/19), in *Phänomenologie des religiösen Lebens*, GA 60 (Frankfurt a.M.: Klostermann, 1995), 301–37, 326; see also Reiner Thurnher, “Heideggers Distanzierung von der metaphysisch geprägten

More importantly for now, and speaking very broadly, at least four ways have been historically realized for relating metaphysics to theology:

(1) *Metaphysics and Theology as Identical*

What is presupposed here is a specific understanding of theology, namely, as onto-theology. Accordingly, metaphysics, here, comes to be principally characterized by the fourth ingredient in our list above: a hierarchy between an onto-theologically justified *ens perfectissimum* in contrast to all dependent *ens creata*. This duality is transferred into or mirrored by the ontological difference between Being and beings. Relating metaphysics and theology in this way is open to two options. According to the strong option, one has strictly to identify both endeavors with one another; according to the more cautious option, one can regard the (onto-) theological element as a crucial aspect (or branch) of metaphysics, but not the sole constituent.<sup>85</sup> The consequence of such identification is that the fall of metaphysics would be ruinous for theology—and vice versa. In such a fall, both would be replaced by the likes of anthropology or sociology.<sup>86</sup>

(2) *Theology as Dependent upon Metaphysics*

This dependence could be framed in at least three different ways. The first project would actually ground theology's claims and judgments, providing an epistemic and metaphysical "home" for the meaning of its terms in relationship to the real. The second would justify theology as science, apologetically showing its explanatory power or justifiability in relationship to the broad principles of a metaphysic. If theologians hold that without

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Theologie und Gottesvorstellung," in *Die Gottesfrage im Denken Martin Heideggers* eds. Norbert Fischer and Friedrich-Wilhelm von Herrmann (Hamburg: Meiner, 2011), 175–94, 176.

85. Both readings can be found in Heidegger's important essay "Die onto-theologische Verfassung der Metaphysik" (1956/57), in *Identität und Differenz*, GA 11 (Frankfurt a.M.: Klostermann, 2006), 51–79, esp. 63–64 and 76; see also Jean-Luc Marion, "The 'God' of Onto-Theology," in idem, *The Idol and Distance: Five Studies* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2001), 9–19.

86. An illuminating and recent example for this substitution is Ernst Tugendhat's late book *Anthropologie statt Metaphysik* (München: Beck, 2007). For an earlier critique of this shift see Gerhard Ebeling, "Existenz zwischen Gott und Gott: Ein Beitrag zur Frage nach der Existenz Gottes" (1965), in idem, *Wort und Glaube*, vol. II (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1969), 257–86, 278.

metaphysics there is no theology,<sup>87</sup> it would seem that they have to claim one of the three options (or something similar to them). The consequence is the following: should metaphysics fall, so too would theology—but *not* the other way round. The fall of theology need not destroy metaphysical ambitions.

### (3) *Christianity as a Substitute for Metaphysics*

For understanding this option, one should note that it does not speak of a theological substitution for metaphysics by. There is already presupposed a critical difference between theoretical theology and the practice of Christian faith. The same point can be expressed less courteously: there is a difference between mere speculation and vivid religious practice. The focus, then, is not directed to the formulation of true theological doctrines (justified in and based on metaphysical assumptions) but is directed to reflecting on practical ways of engagement and being committed to a certain form of life (an “agapeistic way”<sup>88</sup>, for instance). With such a position, the fall of metaphysics and speculative theology (re-) opens conceptual and practical space for appreciating again more original forms of Christianity. By no means, then, would the descent of speculation be ruinous for such a stance; “agapeistically” committed Christianity might contribute, in fact, to anti-speculative thinking.<sup>89</sup>

### (4) *Metaphysics as a Substitute for Christianity*

The German Neo-idealist Dieter Henrich regards Christianity as the most self-reflective way of living and thinking western culture had for almost 2000

87. This thesis is defended by the American theologian Schubert M. Ogden (“The Understanding of Theology in Ott and Bultmann,” in *The Later Heidegger and Theology*, eds. James M. Robinson and John B. Cobb Jr. (New York: Harper & Row, 1963), 157–73, 167) and by his younger German colleague Ulrich H. J. Körtner (*Der inspirierte Leser: Zentrale Aspekte biblischer Hermeneutik* [Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1994], 38)—to give just two examples.

88. This is a term introduced by Richard B. Braithwaite; see his *An Empiricist's View of the Nature of Religious Belief* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1955), 19 and 21. Apart from Braithwaite's interests, we use it here as a cover term for such divergent approaches such as Dorothee Sölle's political theology or Vattimo's religion of Christian, neighborly love.

89. Sometimes, this anti-speculative project is accompanied by the theological critique that it is bought at the price of replacing “God” as theology's key concept by “religion” (or “religious practice”); see Walter Sparr, “Ontologische Metaphysik versus metaphysische Religion,” 47 and 52.

years.<sup>90</sup> The crucial turning point, according to his reading, appeared with German Idealism, especially Hegel's phenomenology of the absolute spirit. Here, Christian intuitions became secularized under post-Enlightenment conditions and were integrated in a theory of (self-)consciousness as the new expression of a post-Christian—but a still reflexive—way of living and thinking. The implication, here, becomes that metaphysics is the true inheritor of the Christian tradition.

Regarding the now presented positions, none necessarily rule each other out, except (3) and (4). (3) could be regarded as compatible with (2), for instance, but, arguably, not with (1). (2) might be an implication of (1), but not the other way round. Although these options gained an important influence, they can hardly be considered as representative of theology's total relation to metaphysics, which may only be discovered within the hermeneutic framework of any given thinker. They do present a starting point of thinking through some tendencies in the historical relationship between the two partners.

## II.5. On Criticizing Metaphysics Theologically

We now turn to one of the important topics of this volume, namely, ways in which theologians have sought to critique metaphysics. Few theologians would commit themselves to the thesis that theology has nothing to do with, and nothing to expect from, metaphysics. Even theological anti-metaphysicians often enough presupposes only a specific metaphysical feature that turns out to be unacceptable as seen from the theological perspective. Hence, theology's critique of metaphysics is, and must be, more differentiated and far more specific.

A theological critique of metaphysics is often rooted in a genuinely Christian doctrine of God, especially in its Christological and Trinitarian implications.<sup>91</sup> These implications can be at odds with what is tradition-

90. See, among other writings, Dieter Henrich, *Fluchtlinien: Philosophische Essays* (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1982), 99 and 116–22; for another assessment see Jürgen Habermas, "Motive nachmetaphysischen Denkens," in idem, *Nachmetaphysisches Denken*, 35–60, 60, who thinks that—as things stand now—the (semantic) resources of religion are not translatable and, therefore, not replaceable by metaphysics or philosophical thinking. This thesis goes back to the late 1980s. Thus, it is a bit odd that many German theologians celebrated Habermas' speech that he gave due to the German Peace Award in 2001 as a vote presenting his allegedly new appreciation of religious belief in Western society.

91. It is interesting to observe, that proponents of "Analytic Theology" are increasingly engaged in reformulating classical Christian doctrine within their methodological framework; see, for instance, Michael Rea's article on the Trinity in *The Oxford*

ally presupposed in onto-theology, namely, conceptualizing God “theistically” as the deistic summit of a metaphysical hierarchy. Indeed, the *ens perfectissimum* has little to do with the crucified God of, say, Luther—with a God who, despite strong appreciation of transcendence, is deeply connected to human beings. Insofar as the traditional unity of the supernatural and the natural is broken,<sup>92</sup> one has to rethink the relation between God and his creatures independently from metaphysical dualism. In this sense, large swaths of historical and contemporary Christian theology have been critical of metaphysics. The still open and challenging question is whether theology could (or has to) formulate further critical remarks against metaphysics that go beyond the (problematic) identification of classical Greek thinking and metaphysics. Is there any connection between theology’s ambitions and a critical concern towards metaphysics’ characteristic way of thinking, which seems focused on general theories, hierarchy, foundations and justifications? Must theology reject such ways of thinking in order to properly separate itself from metaphysics as such? Or could theology contribute constructively to a more adequate understanding of metaphysics either by deepening the critique or by criticizing the already critical opponent? In other words: what could it possibly mean that, as Eberhard Jüngel famously asks, a theology critical of metaphysics is not to be confused with a theology that is completely free of metaphysics?<sup>93</sup>

Finding new answers to this very old question might imply going beyond two principal reactions that are the most prominent of the last two centuries. On the one hand, and in the wake of Schleiermacher’s *Speeches*, the primary theological reaction consists in *delimiting religion* from two other “provinces”<sup>94</sup>, namely, ethics and metaphysics. Schleiermacher justifies these borders by delineating three “provinces” with different activities and concerns: religion with feeling; ethics with acting; metaphysics with thinking. He binds them in terms of an *underlying* unity among all three areas, a unity procured particularly through the primary receptiveness of

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*Handbook of Philosophical Theology*, eds. Thomas P. Flint and Michael Rea (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

92. And it is actually broken, as the German theologian Friedrich Gogarten argues; see his *Entmythologisierung und Kirche*, 3rd ed. (Stuttgart: Vorwerk, 1953), 44.

93. See Eberhard Jüngel, *Gott als Geheimnis der Welt. Zur Begründung der Theologie des Gekreuzigten im Streit zwischen Theismus und Atheismus*, 3rd ed. (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1978), 64.

94. Friedrich D. E. Schleiermacher, *Über die Religion: Reden an die Gebildeten unter ihren Verächtern* (1799). Mit einem Nachwort von Carl H. Ratschow (Stuttgart: Reclam, 1997), 26.



religious feeling.<sup>95</sup> On the other hand, a second reaction has been a *theological suppression* of the very topic, grounded, as one may suggest, for a long time in the simple fact that metaphysics—although vaguely present—did not play a major role within the most prominent approaches to theology in early church history; the same approach, consequently, surfaces in more recent times in a *deep uncertainty* regarding how to react theologically to what has been presented here as the return of metaphysics.<sup>96</sup> Should we simply leave the situation here as it is? Are both options—provincial limitation and uncertain suppression—appropriate for meeting renewed metaphysical ambitions in the name of theology? Some elucidation of what, more precisely, a theological position sees as confused within a metaphysical framework presents a first step to meeting these theological problems and choosing between critical alternatives.

### (1) *Bi-Level Thinking*

This mode of thinking is, arguably, metaphysics's most characteristic element. There is, the metaphysician holds, the founding theoretical level and the secondary, practical and supplementary level to any mode of existing. Hence, one has, firstly, to save the theological ground by proving God's existence and, then and only then, one can dedicate theological work to practical issues like service and prayer. The ontological argument isolated from the religious practice (which it was not for Anselm) illustrates this line of thinking quite well. Its adherents imagine themselves as proving an abstract concept of God, presupposing indirectly that its success must lead to conversion and its failure must be cause for giving up faith. Of course, this is not the truth of the situation. A vivid and practiced faith has little *primarily* to do with the relation between God as a prove abstraction, even if such reflections may eventually and perhaps fruitfully emerge.<sup>97</sup> Accord-

95. Cf. *ibid.*, 36.—Interestingly, Gerhard Ebeling claims that this delimiting of thinking into “provinces” is already prepared by Luther who had to struggle with the post-Aristotelian Scholasticism; see his “Luther und Schleiermacher” (1984), in *idem*, *Lutherstudien*, vol. III (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1985), 405–27, esp. 409–16.

96. There are, as always, important exceptions: for the nineteenth century one has to recall Wilhelm Herrmann's important critique of metaphysics (cf. “Die Metaphysik in der Theologie” (1876), in *idem*, *Schriften zur Grundlegung der Theologie I*, ed. Peter Fischer-Appelt (München: Kaiser, 1966), 1–80, esp. 20–21 and 48–50) and for the twentieth century see Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Metaphysik und Gottesgedanke* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1988).

97. Cf. Martin Heidegger, “Die onto-theo-logische Verfassung der Metaphysik,” 70–71; see also Merold Westphal, “Overcoming Onto-Theology,” 27.

ingly, a post-metaphysical thinking might not begin with a divine abstraction of something, but with the very practice in which the notion of God is embedded in the first place.

### (2) *Non-Theological Grounds*

It has become quite popular in theology *not* to start with theology, but with a non-theological framework to secure and locate theology as a rationally viable and justifiable project. While the theoretical candidates that provide this framework change, the underlying structure remains identical. Kant's transcendentalism, Hegel's phenomenology, Heidegger's early fundamental ontology, Durkheim's sociology are variations of non-theological and methodological bounds in terms of which one is, so to say, allowed to do theology. Instead of paying attention theologically to faith's own grammar and internal logic, as post-metaphysical thinking should do, it accepts the rules from a different branch taken to be more profound and reliable. This movement *must* be unacceptable if the theological retains anything more than an expressivist or functionalist flavor to it.

### (3) *A Singular Reality*

The metaphysical concept of a single truth idealized as the goal of every intellectual enterprise results in focusing on the *one* reality that is to be mirrored correctly in any other sub-reality that is part and parcel to it. Hence, it is presupposed that religious and theological utterances should adequately describe the one reality in which we live but do so in accordance with that reality's fundamental grammar. Post-metaphysical thinking in theology would insist on the fact that such utterances are not truth claims in their best sense (although they are by no means untrue); rather, they speak metaphorically, opening up more of what surrounds us.<sup>98</sup> This "more" excludes the metaphysical mirror of reality. It represents a sense of new possibilities that might change what we consider to be "real" and actual. There is no reality, after all, without possibilities, and theology has to do with the former only insofar it contemplates the latter.

98. See Eberhard Jüngel, "Metaphorische Wahrheit. Erwägungen zur theologischen Relevanz der Metapher als Beitrag zur Hermeneutik einer narrativen Theologie," in idem, *Entsprechungen: Gott—Wahrheit—Mensch. Theologische Erörterungen* (München: Kaiser, 1980), 103–57, 103–4 and 110.

(4) *Dualism*

Metaphysics is dissatisfied with the ordinary. Accordingly, it tries to reveal something “deep,” “beyond” or “behind” what appears. Theologically, it regards God as the addressee “behind” our world—a move that amounts to doubling that world by distinguishing between, say, the so-called natural and supernatural. The confusion here lies in developing God as a thing among other things, the highest of things, developing from this idea a theological ontology. Hence, theological metaphysics gets its own subject matter, something added to the list of things that, together, create the world.<sup>99</sup> However, this approach has serious problems despite this approach’s prominent defenders. Post-metaphysical thinking attempts to avoid a purely objectified concept of God. In this regard, it must elaborate constructively what it means to speak of God as a decisive qualification of our way of living by re-interpreting God’s relation to His world, namely, through the language in which God is addressed as a person and the concept of His absolute transcendence, which must be found, paradoxically, *in* this world.

Herein lay at least some of the items post-metaphysical theologians have tended to see as wrong with metaphysics, the positive positions of which will be discussed throughout the essays comprising this volume. However, there yet remains a final clarificatory task in this Introduction, namely, to define more precisely what this prefix “post” might mean in terms of “post-metaphysics.”

### III. The “Post” in “Post-Metaphysical”

Contemporary philosophy tends to excessively celebrate its conceptual goodbyes to previous ideas, as Jürgen Habermas poignantly elucidates.<sup>100</sup> Indeed, almost every influential, contemporary (philosophical) movement has transported itself through a self-distancing stage. The prefix “post” signifies the ambiguous indicator of that very transfer. Some of the best and most common examples of this prefix’s use is found in the following: from historicism to *posthistoire*, from modernity to postmodernity, from analytic philosophy to post-analytic thought, from structuralism to post-structuralistic systems, from liberal approaches to post-liberal projects. Habermas himself claims that there is no alternative—after a crucial change of the phil-

99. See the Process perspective as developed in the first section; only note that there will be no distinct difference between the natural and supernatural from the process perspective. God is the natural entity co-creating with the world.

100. See Jürgen Habermas, “Der Horizont der Moderne verschiebt sich,” in idem, *Nachmetaphysisches Denken*, 11–17, 11.

osophical climate—than thinking post-metaphysically.<sup>101</sup> It is interesting, however, that Habermas considers post-metaphysical thinking as only one among other elements intellectually constituting and influencing our time. The linguistic turn, the embeddedness of reason, the privilege of practice to theory and the overcoming of logocentrism belong to the same group.<sup>102</sup> It is more in accordance with Habermas' own critical reflections and, even, hermeneutic turn, that the editors of this volume have come to understand the idea of post- in post-metaphysics.<sup>103</sup>

All these developments that amounted to “the era of the ‘post’” did not leave theology untouched. The new type of procedural rationality, the growing (hermeneutical) awareness of our historical situatedness and involvement in the world, the new importance of rational mediation through signs, symbols and language are all highly important for theology. In some cases, theology has even contributed to these (as seen from today) revolutionary upheavals. That is why a statement like the following now sounds somewhat strange: “Insofar as all objective thinking and speaking are metaphysical and theology is necessarily objective, there can hardly be any such thing as a non-metaphysical theology.”<sup>104</sup> It is more to the point to notice that one of the core challenges of (recent) theology is to work through its own metaphysical past, and to do so for theology's own sake. It is equally important to notice that theology has already been meeting this challenge and has itself entered “the era of the ‘post’” as many different projects—all defined by critical reactions to metaphysics—show extensively. There is already the search for a theology after postmodernism (a doubling of the

101. See Jürgen Habermas, “Motive nachmetaphysischen Denkens,” in idem, *Nachmetaphysisches Denken*, 35–60, 36. Habermas holds that post-metaphysical thinking is the most far-reaching consequence drawn from Heidegger's philosophy; see also the critical perspective of Günter Figal, “Verwindung der Metaphysik. Heidegger und das metaphysische Denken,” in idem, *Zu Heidegger: Antworten und Fragen* (Frankfurt a.M.: Klostermann, 2009), 185–204, esp. 194.

102. See Jürgen Habermas, “Der Horizont der Moderne verschiebt sich,” in idem, *Nachmetaphysisches Denken*, 14.

103. There are, indeed, attempts to meet the post-metaphysical challenge within a metaphysical framework; see, for instance, Uwe Meixner and Peter Simons, eds., *Metaphysics in the Postmetaphysical Age* (Vienna: Austrian Ludwig Wittgenstein Society, 2001).

104. Schubert M. Ogden, “The Understanding of Theology in Ott and Bultmann,” in *The Later Heidegger and Theology*, ed. James M. Robinson and John B. Cobb (New York: Harper & Row, 1963), 157–73, 167.

“post”),<sup>105</sup> the call for a post-modern God,<sup>106</sup> a post-secular philosophy<sup>107</sup> or, more directly, a post-metaphysical theology<sup>108</sup> (for better or worse). Most prominent in theology is, arguably, post-liberal thinking that finds its founding fathers in Karl Barth and, perhaps, Karl Rahner.<sup>109</sup> Given the fact that post-metaphysical thinking in theology is, as we have argued, a question of ebbing and waning metaphysical tides, one could ask what all these projects, apart from all crucial differences, have in common to deserve the label “post-metaphysical.”<sup>110</sup>

First of all, “post” does not (necessarily) mean “anti” or “non,” but the “post” indicates something that goes beyond merely being naively metaphysical or buying into metaphysics’ historical presuppositions, especially those Cartesian and Enlightenment views that hermeneutics has done all-too-well in helping to overturn. Hence, post-metaphysical thinking cannot be so plainly defined as simply affirming or denying metaphysics; rather, it leaves this simplistic duality behind precisely because it has experienced “the difficulty in the transition from metaphysics to a different thinking,” as Heidegger states it.<sup>111</sup> The era of the “post” is not a crude goodbye, but the constitution of a critical distance to a tradition that is *not at all* without

105. Klaus von Stosch and Peter Hardt, eds., *Für eine schwache Vernunft? Beiträge zu einer Theologie nach der Postmoderne* (Ostfildern: Grünewald, 2007).

106. Graham Ward, ed., *The Postmodern God: A Theological Reader* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997).

107. Phillip Blond, ed., *Post-Secular Philosophy: Between Philosophy and Theology* (London: Taylor & Francis, 2007).

108. See Thomas A. Carlson, “Postmetaphysical theology,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Postmodern Theology*, ed. Kevin J. Vanhoozer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 58–75; also Cameron Freeman, *Post-Metaphysics and the Paradoxical Teachings of Jesus: The Structure of the Real* (Frankfurt a.M.: Lang, 2010); cf. the review by Eric E. Hall, in *Theologische Literaturzeitung* 136 (2011) 11, 1216–17.

109. Cf. Robert A. Cathey, *God in Postliberal Perspective: Between Realism and Non-Realism* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2009), 29–30.—One of the most influential post-liberal theologians is George A. Lindbeck (esp. *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1984). Concerning Lindbeck’s post-liberalism see also George Hunsinger, “Postliberal theology,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Postmodern Theology*, 42–57.

110. See again Walter Sporn, “Ontologische Metaphysik versus metaphysische Religion,” 23–39 and 57.—Of course, post-metaphysical theology is not a remedy in itself. There are theological approaches that could be considered to belong to this tradition that are problematic though of different reasons as well (i.e. internalizing faith, transferring faith into religious morality); cf. Gerhard Ebeling’s criticism of these elements within the liberal tradition: “Die Botschaft von Gott an das Zeitalter des Atheismus,” in idem, *Wort und Glaube*, vol. II (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1969), 372–95, 391–92.

111. Martin Heidegger, “Einleitung zu: Was ist Metaphysik?” (1949), in idem, *Wegmarken*, 3rd ed. (Frankfurt a.M.: Klostermann, 2004), 365–83, 381.

value but rather filled with important insight; it signifies a willingness to relate to that tradition somewhere between *rupture* and *continuity*, between *originality* and *inheritance*,<sup>112</sup> between *dialectics* and *understanding*. One might also hold that these “post” positions are interim positions for the lack not only of a better term, but also from the fact that they search for new theological shores. Hence, the “post” alludes to a deep uncertainty in locating where we are since “*post-meta*-physical” doubles the “after” (without neutralizing the conceptual repetition of *physis*). So, what does it possibly mean to speak post-metaphysically? Here are, at least, five short proposals, some of which have been mentioned before.

### (1) Leaving Metaphysics Aside

This proposal entails more than simply ignoring metaphysics, which is, we have argued, incompatible with post-metaphysical thinking. Rather, it is constituted by a negative reaction, a philosophical mood of disappointment that results from failed attempts to “overcome” metaphysics. (Although, it might be hardly clear what “success” means here.) Even the inability to overcome still exposes a mode that shows consideration for metaphysics. Hence, the only way out is, as Heidegger suggests,<sup>113</sup> to overcome the attempt of trying to overcome metaphysics and to leave this project aside altogether.

### (2) Working through Metaphysics

This proposal accepts that it is either impossible or, at least, not fruitful to circumvent the metaphysical tradition. Hence, it remains a more optimistic—perhaps even a more self-confident—philosophical attitude than (1). The notion of “working through” covers different ways of criticizing constructively: from distinguishing between “good” and “bad” metaphysics (presupposing one can delineate certain criteria to establish that very difference); to the reformulation of metaphysical ambitions into a non-metaphysical vocabulary (hoping that the problem lies in confused ways of expression); to separating metaphysical answers from problems that traditionally have their “home” in metaphysics.

112. These types of pairings are borrowed from Stephen Mulhall, *Inheritance and Originality: Wittgenstein, Heidegger, Kierkegaard* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

113. Cf. Martin Heidegger, “Zeit und Sein” (1962), in idem, *Zur Sache des Denkens*, GA 14 (Frankfurt a.M.: Klostermann, 2007), 3–30, 30.

## (3) “Post” as Metaphysics’ Own Structure

We could read the “post” also as a specification of (or within) metaphysics. Then, the “post” denotes not a quasi temporal indication, but a structural process of metaphysics within itself: metaphysics would enter its next chapter called post-metaphysics, which would still adhere to its initial values only now through new structures. This “post-structure” presents a relation of metaphysics to itself, as in Kant, for instance, who speaks of a “metaphysics about the metaphysics” (see again *CpR* B 869 and 871); or even in Hegel, who could claim the final metaphysical synthesis of all metaphysical and (perhaps) post-metaphysical positions. In contrast to (2) this version does not emerge from outside of metaphysics. Rather, it might itself be a serious metaphysical endeavor.

## (4) “Post” as a Stage after “Anti”

Contrary to (3) the “post” could be considered as signifying a temporal stage, namely, the philosophical result of an earlier attempt to deal with metaphysics. Following a period that distanced itself crucially from metaphysics in a highly negative way, the “post” represents a growing impression that “anti” is as dependent on what is denied as the denied position itself. The “anti” would, then, stand for an interim for which an increasing awareness that pure negation is the counterpart of conceptual independence fulfilled possibly in the “era of the ‘post.’”

## (5) “Post” as Conceptual Independence

This option draws the consequences of what is recognized in (4). However, “post” does not here stand for a period to come, but, conceptually, for an intellectual position that defines itself without referring to metaphysics anymore. This might imply two ideas: first, to accept that not all problems relevant for philosophy are philosophical in nature; second, that philosophical problems are indeed nothing more than philosophical (a point dismissed by Heidegger) and not necessarily pertinent to the whole of one’s life.<sup>114</sup> Apart from this more pragmatic point, the “post” could mean conceptual freedom from metaphysics in both directions, negatively in locating a point of view without elaborating it in relation to metaphysics and, constructively, to allow for an engagement with the metaphysical (where it is possible) insofar

114. Cf. Richard Rorty, “Overcoming the Tradition,” 54.



as metaphysics no longer play any absolutely constitutive or prescriptive role in defining the real.<sup>115</sup>

### Concluding Remark

Again, the relation between all five options causes new questions concerning the overlapping elements, their partial incompatibility and the possibility that the movement from (1) to (5) alludes to a certain progress within our post-metaphysical treatment *of* or *as* metaphysics. In any case, we should remind ourselves alongside Nietzsche that every offence against something honors what is offended.<sup>116</sup> Do we really want to welcome this hidden appreciation for metaphysics? Could we theologically afford or, perhaps, need to do so? What are the prospects of post-metaphysical thought not only as a reaction to the vagueness of the term “metaphysics” but also to the content of metaphysics as it comes to be defined?

This book will attempt to answer precisely these questions in due course, offering a variety of better fleshed out responses to the question of the meaning of metaphysics and what it means to theologically exist post-metaphysically. Most responses take on the mantle of those positions found in the previous section, especially of the latter and more “progressive” variety. These positions elucidate a number of recent responses to such questions, including contemporary constructive responses.

115. Ingolf U. Dalferth proposes this version for the term “post-secular”; see his “Post-Secular Society: Christianity and the Dialectics of the Secular,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 77:1 (2009) 1–29.

116. See Friedrich Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo: Wie man wird, was man ist*, in KSA vol. 6, ed. Giorgio Colli and Mazzino Montinari (Berlin: de Gruyter), 255–374, 275.