



Tyler Tritten
Gonzaga University, USA
ORCID: 0000-0002-7907-6504
e-mail: tritten@gonzaga.edu

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.12775/RF.2020.048>

Paul Tillich on Question and Answer: The Method of Correlation or From Existential Phenomenology to the Meaning of Being

Metaphysics closes itself to the simple essential fact that man essentially occurs only in his essence, where he is claimed by Being. Only from that claim "has" he found that wherein his essence dwells.*

Martin Heidegger**

The thesis of this essay is as follows: Mere existentialism is not adequate to answer the questions implied in man's concrete existence, insofar as mere existentialism, consisting of a phenomenological description of the human predicament, serves as a departure point for ontology only, but needs an "essentialist" answer, and that by means of revelation.

Before beginning the argument, grounded in a reading of Paul Tillich, one should note one very important point: Tillich is an Augustinian and not a Thomist. He unequivocally writes, "I myself, and my whole theology, stand much more in the line of the Augustinian than in the

* "Metaphysics" in this quote is to be equated with what we will call "ontology".

** From "A Letter on Humanism", in: Martin Heidegger, *Basic Writings*, ed. David Farrell Krell (New York: Harper & Row, 1977), 204.

Thomistic tradition [...] a philosophy of religion which is based on the immediacy of the truth in every human being."¹ He elucidates the distinction between the two by noting that for Augustine "the soul is the place where God appears to man [...] He is in the center of man, before the split into subjectivity and objectivity [...] He is our own *a priori* [...] God is given to the subject as nearer to itself than it is to itself."² For Aquinas, however, "the world, although not the first in itself, is the first which is given to us [...] God must be found from outside. We must look at our world and find that by logical necessity it leads to the conclusion of a highest being."³ I believe this distinction to be very important if one is to understand the entirety of what follows; for, many people are unfamiliar with Tillich but this, his reliance on this Augustinian principle as the possibility of truth, is the decisive point of his theology. The emphasis throughout his work that God is not *a* being is a lucid example of his rejection of Thomism⁴ as well as his general rejection of God as a supernatural, that is, transcendent being. This distinction is helpful in understanding why God cannot be proved for Tillich, but is a matter of "revelation," that is, God is *immediately* "given" and not "derived;" God is first *both* with respect to the order of being *and* of knowledge.

I. Terminological Issues

Should one not already be well versed in the thought of Tillich as well as Heidegger and Emmanuel Levinas, then the following definitions should prove helpful.

¹ Paul Tillich, *A History of Christian Thought* (New York: Harper & Row, 1968), 104.

² *Ibidem*, 112.

³ *Ibidem*, 194.

⁴ One Tillichian commentator has pinpointed one of the reasons for Tillich's rejection of Thomism and aptly points out that Tillich's critique is unduly harsh. He writes, "Tillich's constant definition of the term '*actus purus*' as 'pure actuality' [...] has failed to interpret the phrase as 'pure activity' [...] depriving himself of an idea most congenial to his own concept 'power of being' and needlessly widened the gulf between himself and Thomism" (Adrian Thatcher, *The Ontology of Paul Tillich* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978), 160). Tillich's interpretation also seems to ignore aspects of Thomism, for example, when Aquinas unequivocally writes, "In vain would it be said or proved of God that He is a being" (John Hick (Ed.), *Classic and Contemporary Readings in the Philosophy of Religion* (New Jersey: Englewood Cliffs, 1970), 52).

A. Existentialism and Essentialism

“Existentialism” and “essentialism” are complementary rather than contradictory terms. Existentialism’s task is to describe the structures of existence, e.g. as in Heidegger’s *existentialia*.⁵ Essence is a way of indicating that existence must have roots in something other than itself (contra Sartre), even while standing out from that basis,⁶ such that existence can never be derived from essence (contra Hegel).⁷ Human existence is thus dependently independent with respect to essence.⁸ This distinction is paramount because, as Tillich insists, “A complete discussion of the relation of essence to existence is identical with the entire theological system.”⁹ This work hopes to make that relation.

Although terminology not employed by Tillich himself, but by Heidegger, one should also note that something is existential (*existenzial*) if it refers to a universal structure of existence but existentiell (*existenziell*) if the referent is some content of experience that elucidates those same existential structures. Existentials have no content, but are formal relations/structures (*Gestalt*); an existentiell understanding is how one understands oneself through the content of experience, that is, through what is “ontically” given.¹⁰

⁵ Martin Heidegger defines “existentiality” (*Existenzialität*) as “the coherence of the structures (of existence)” (*Being and Time*, transl. Joan Stambaugh (New York: State University of New York Press, 1996), 11).

⁶ In a note in *Being and Time* Heidegger wrote, “Da-sein exists, and it alone. Thus existence is standing out and perduring the openness of the there: Ek-sistence” (ibidem, 125). “Standing out and perduring” is the translation of “*das Aus- und Hinausstehen*,” therefore, a better translation may be “standing out and out towards” thus avoiding the odd translation “perdure,” which cannot be used as a transitive verb in English.

⁷ “Idealism and naturalism are alike in their attitude to the existing person; both of them eliminate his infinite significance and make him a space through which something else passes” (Paul Tillich, *The Courage To Be. (First Edition)* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1970), 178).

⁸ “Nothing divine is irrational [...] Only the transition from essence to existence [...] is irrational” (Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology Vol. III: Life and the Spirit: History and the Kingdom of God* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1963), 284). Note also: “Existentialism is not a philosophy which can stand on its own legs [...] it is based on essentialism” (Tillich, *History*, 438). And, finally, note how God is, and is not, to be thought of as essence: “It is wrong to speak of God as the universal essence [...] as universal essence [...] he is identified with the unity and totality of finite potentialities; but has ceased to be the power of the ground in all of them, and therefore he has ceased to transcend them” (Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology Vol. I* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1951), 236).

⁹ Ibidem, 204.

¹⁰ As Heidegger writes, “We come to terms with the question of existence always only through existence itself. We shall call *this* kind of understanding of itself *existentiell* understanding” (*Being*, 10).

B. Phenomenology and Phenomenalism

Phenomenology refers to the method by which existentiell understanding is approached in order to arrive at the universal structure of human existence. Phenomenology is existentialism's tool. Phenomenology is methodologically neither theistic nor atheistic, but begins by bracketing both assumptions.¹¹ Phenomenology is also descriptive rather than explanatory and prescriptive, but this is not to say that phenomenology is but an account of mere appearances, because phenomena are transphenomenal,¹² even if they are only manifest by the phenomenal. Simple phenomenalism, contra phenomenology, is thus but naïve positivism. As Tillich says in regard to the phenomenological method, "This method is absolutely *necessary* (emphasis added) for all the humanities. The understanding of meanings [...] is dependent on the use of this method [...] without that method, existentialism would not be able to utter one word."¹³

C. Ontology and Metaphysics

Ontology, for Tillich, is that branch of philosophy that is ultimately about the ground from which existence stands, that is, the transphenomenal that is allegedly the ultimate aim of phenomenology, being-itself and the structure of being.¹⁴

¹¹ "Phenomenology is, in a methodological sense, atheistic [...] (we) do not bring in God as an 'explanation' for anything" (John Macquarrie, *Heidegger and Christianity* (London: SCM, 1994), 7).

¹² Note Heidegger, who has stated that phenomena "must not be confused with what is denoted by 'appearance' or 'semblance.' 'Phenomena' designates beings as they show themselves in the various possibilities of the becoming disclosed" (*Plato's "Sophist"*, 6). Additionally, in the glossary at the end of Sartre's *Being and Nothingness*, it is noted of transphenomenality: "Being although co-extensive with its appearance is not limited to it" (Jean Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, transl. H. Barnes (New York: Washington Square Press, 1992), 807).

¹³ Tillich, *History*, 329.

¹⁴ Tillich claims ontology is possible "because there are concepts less universal than being but more universal than any ontic concept" (Tillich, *Systematic Theology Vol. I*, 164). One Tillichian commentator, in regard to ontological concepts, has remarked, "Whereas they cannot be entirely empty of content drawn from ordinary existence, ontological concepts are the most suitable kind of linguistic currency for speaking about what cannot be contained by any words at all" (Thatcher, *The Ontology of Paul Tillich*, 165). Tillich has also said, "The symbol is the means of expression in metaphysics" (Paul Tillich, *The System of the Sciences According to Objects and Method*, transl. P. Wiebe (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 1981), 187). Finally, Tillich does not make a distinction between metaphysics and ontology and in his earlier writings would often use the words interchangeably, but in later writings he abandons the word "metaphysics." He remarks, "It is time to dismiss this abused and

Fundamental ontology is practically equivalent with an existential analysis of human existence, but this is because human existence has, nay, *is*, an understanding of being,¹⁵ its ground and structure, which, for Tillich, is the objective of ontology proper. Formally speaking, fundamental ontology is not equivalent to existential analysis, because the latter could be carried out for its own sake; it is only fundamental ontology when it has the task of paving the way for an understanding of being-itself.¹⁶

In this work metaphysics will be used in the sense given to it by Emmanuel Levinas; accordingly, the metaphysician is she who experiences the Metaphysical, that is, she who in the face-to-face relation with the Other produces the Infinite¹⁷ – the infinite gap between I and Other that adheres because the Other cannot be totalized – which, according to Levinas, is the only genuine notion of alterity and transcendence.

II. Why Merely Essentialist Ontology Is Speculative and Swallows the Individual

If ontology is attempted in the way it was Enlightenment rationalists, then two distortions occur. First, it loses touch with the ontic and existentiell by becoming too abstract; it becomes a theoretical, axiomatic-deductive system akin to an arithmeticized geometry, which historically speaking, it took as its model. Secondly, when this occurs, nature and history can be interpreted deterministically, and existence is seen as the place through which this deductive process becomes manifest to itself with the consequence that none of the existents can attain a separated independence. Phenomenology, as a method, provides a protective against the first distortion of a genuine ontology. In phenomenology, no assumptions can be made concerning the mathematical nature

distorted word “metaphysics,” the negation of which has become an excuse for a terrific shallowness of thought” (Protestant, 86) and “the preposition *meta* now has the irremediable connotation of pointing to a duplication of this world by a transcendent realm of beings” (Tillich, *Systematic Theology Vol. I*, 20).

¹⁵ Martin Heidegger introduced fundamental ontology into the philosophical lexicon and, as he said, “*Fundamental ontology*, from which alone all other ontologies can originate, must be sought in the *existential analysis of Da-sein*” (Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 11).

¹⁶ Existential analysis, Heidegger contends, only has the character of fundamental ontology when it “does not aim [...] at an ontological basis for anthropology (but) has a fundamental, ontological goal” (ibidem, 186).

¹⁷ For Levinas, the Infinite is actually only meaningful on the ground of the Idea of the Infinite, which is an idea of that which always surpasses and overflows one’s idea of it. Hence, the relation with the Other produces the Idea of the Infinite.

of reality-in-itself or no scheme is pre-given guiding the interpretation of all phenomena, for example, according to substance-attribute. Tillich understood the lasting importance of the phenomenological method. As we have seen above, he claimed that theology, insofar as it is one of the humanities, could not utter one word without it. A genuine ontology is nothing more than a completely worked out phenomenology, a phenomenology that has elucidated the meaning of the ultimate. As Tillich himself said, "Phenomenology is a way of pointing to phenomena as they 'give themselves,' without the interference of negative or positive prejudices and explanations"¹⁸ and it is for this reason as well that Heidegger was able to say, "Ontology and phenomenology are not two different disciplines which belong to philosophy. Both characterize philosophy itself."¹⁹ Any true ontology makes use of the phenomenological method and all true phenomenological philosophy has its culmination in true ontology.

The second threat of a merely essentialist ontology is counteracted by existentialism, which refuses to let existence be relegated to a pre-determined role in the drama of being. Existentialism is a constant reminder that the self is free, that in a certain regard the self is independent and separated. Human existence is not annexable by essence, but nevertheless, human existence is not an arbitrary, inexplicable facticity, but is "thrown" from... and grounded in... The human being cannot be without a base, nor is she reducible to it.

III. Why Mere Existentialism Is Only Phenomenal and Is Not a Philosophy

Recent literature in existentialism has been regarded as existential phenomenology (see below); for, "Twentieth-century existentialism in general, having been inspired by Husserl even more than by Kierkegaard contains strong essentialist elements [...] hence most of the school, following Heidegger, values existential analysis solely as a starting-point for the construction of an (ontology)."²⁰ Existentialism without an ontological goal is merely an attitude and not a philosophy, because while it would describe existence, it would not reach the phenomenon "existence," otherwise it would be on the way to answering what it is from which existence stands. Mere existentialism would always be a merely reactionary revolt against the consequences of merely essentialist ontol-

¹⁸ Tillich, *Systematic Theology Vol. I*, 106.

¹⁹ Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 34.

²⁰ Kenneth Hamilton, *The System and the Gospel: A Critique of Paul Tillich* (London: SCM, 1963), 53.

ogy, but it would never have an autonomous standing of its own apart from its reactionary character unless it finds a base for itself – though it need not be swallowed by this soil in which it would find its roots. The significance of existentialism is its witness to the meaning and significance of human existence as more than a cog or a moment of universal essence and to the human's self-affirmation in her concrete situation. This is the reason why existentialism and phenomenology, which is the method that has as its task the elucidation of meanings, are so easily wed, because phenomenology discloses the meaning of the phenomena in preparation for ontology, just as existentialism should make visible the meaning of the phenomenon of existence. As mentioned above, ontological concepts are used to grasp the structure of being, but they cannot grasp being-itself, the ontologically unconditioned in its primordial indifference, that is, as it is in its ultimacy and abysmal character beyond essence and existence. In other words, ontology "cannot attempt to grasp the Unconditioned from the perspective of being, but must try to grasp it from the perspective of meaning" and therefore the fundamental task of ontology is the "doctrine of the elements of meaning."²¹ Now, we can see more clearly why fundamental ontology (or "critical phenomenology," see below) is needed, why its method must be phenomenological in order to grasp the meaning of phenomena and why fundamental ontology has the task of elucidating the phenomenon of existence, because the meaning of being is not given to the human being from a view from nowhere,²² nor is it given to her as is an object of experience, but it is *mediated* to her through existence, that is, existentially.

IV. Critical Phenomenology as the Only Approach to the Meaning of Being

Essentialism and existentialism are not foes, but need each other, lest the former become totalitarian and the latter shallow and void of meaning. We have seen that neither merely essentialist philosophies nor merely existentialist philosophies (if such were possible) should avoid the phenomenological method; therefore, we can now say that any approach

²¹ Tillich, *The System of the Sciences According to Objects and Method*, 185. To attempt to grasp being-itself, the ontologically unconditioned, from the perspective of being would make it into a transcendent (not to be confused with transcendental) object, which in the Kantian use of the term is an object that transcends the bounds of experience. Tillich's lifework was nothing, if not an obsession with showing the theoretical and religious inadequacy of God conceived as a transcendent object.

²² Of course, the phrase "the view from nowhere" comes from Thomas Nagel, *The View From Nowhere* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986).

regarding the meaning of being, which is the only genuine approach to the ontologically unconditioned, that is, the Absolute, must make use of existential phenomenology. Tillich refers to existential phenomenology insofar as it is fundamental ontology as critical phenomenology. Critical phenomenology not only describes phenomena, but asks for their significance for human existence, that is, it passes judgments on them.²³ "Critical phenomenology is the method best fitted to supply a normative²⁴ description of spiritual meanings. Theology must use it in dealing with each of its basic concepts."²⁵ The philosopher asks for the meaning of being on a semantic level, wanting only to conceptualize it; the theologian asks for the meaning of being in search of an *answer* to the human predicament, seeking healing and not conceptual clarity merely. A fundamental ontology, then, that would not understand itself as a critical phenomenology would not understand being as imposing any kind of demand on human existence, whereas this is precisely what critical phenomenology does. Perhaps if Heidegger had written *Sein und Zeit* as a critical phenomenologist, he would have found the *Jemeinigkeit* of the individual in the "call of Being" rather than in death, because Being would make a demand/call to which one could never be indifferent. For critical phenomenology, the ontological is inextricably connected to the moral, as will be explicated in more detail at the end of this essay.

It may be beneficial at this moment to pause in order to give a brief account of Tillich's assumptions and conclusions concerning being. For Tillich, being is meaningful, though no particular being is inherently valuable, good or holy in and of itself, as anything is able to become good or bad, holy or demonic. Tillich will, however, claim that being-itself is inherently meaningful and good. However, Tillich would reproach us if we were merely to dismiss this as a bald assumption insofar as this claim is not merely an assertion, but has a phenomenological justification and he does not just baldly assert at the beginning of his system that being is meaningful rather than neutral. If Tillich is unable to convince us that being-itself carries with itself and as itself the meaning of being,

²³ If the ontologically unconditioned can only be approached through the perspective of meaning and not that of being, then either fundamental ontology must always be equivalent with critical phenomenology or they are different, but then fundamental ontology will never be able to reach the ontologically unconditioned. Tillich presents his phenomenology without ever engaging in an explicit discussion of fundamental ontology. I cannot even harbor a guess as to whether Tillich would make a difference between the two, for his approach is very similar to Heidegger's, though his conclusions are usually more in line with Schelling; however, I think that it is only sensible to make a distinction, however stipulative, between the two.

²⁴ That is to say, a formal description, for example, a defining of sin not by enumeration, but structurally and the like for the holy and other such concepts.

²⁵ Tillich, *Systematic Theology Vol. I*, 108.

that is, is inherently holy, then his doctrine of God and concomitantly his entire system will fail or, at best, Tillich would only be an ontologist, but not a theologian.

V. Theology and Critical Phenomenology

We must now show more explicitly how Tillich's theological method, his "method of correlation," is a critical phenomenology that asks for the answer to the predicament that is human existence. One author has noted, "Tillich's method in theology is empirical in the sense that he does not approach the central problem of theology by asking 'What is God?' but rather by asking 'What is holy?'"²⁶ "Empirical" is poor choice of terms here, as it normally invokes the ontic and is not at all equivalent with the phenomenological, which is the issue here. The prior quote is only intelligible if "empirical" is replaced with "phenomenological." The question of theology is not about the empirical existence of a being called God, but what is meant by the word "God" or, better, what is meant by the holy, which *ought* to be nothing less than what is also divine. Tillich uses the phenomenological method²⁷ and applies it to human existence and then uses this as the departure point for asking about the meaning of being, which is the answer to human existence. This, then, is the correlation, a correlation between question and answer, existence and essence (the human being's essential being and abode, what she ought to be) and their resolution in the ground of being. Tillich is a critical phenomenologist/theologian, because he sees in existence a question needing an answer; he approaches being-itself not in a detached, theoretical manner but existentially, and he claims that the answer to existence has been revealed to human existence. "Theology can express itself only through the ontological elements and categories with which philosophy deals" because these represent ultimacy in philosophy, "while philosophy can discover the structure of being only to the degree to which being-itself has become manifest in an existential experience,"²⁸ because being-itself can only be experienced through meaning and not by conceptual means alone.

²⁶ John H. Thomas, *Paul Tillich: an Appraisal* (London: SCM, 1963), 46.

²⁷ It is interesting that "one of the philosophers who impressed him [Tillich] as most interesting was Edmund Husserl [...] describing himself as one of a generation of thinkers saved by Husserl from naturalism" (John H. Thomas, *Tillich* (London: Continuum, 2000), 50–51).

²⁸ Tillich, *Systematic Theology Vol. I*, 230.

The question and answer correlated in Tillich's method of correlation²⁹ are human existence and God respectively. An elucidation of both poles is necessary if any sense is to be made of the human being's concrete religious life. "Without the concept of God and the doctrine of man, the concept of religion remains incomprehensible."³⁰ This work has laid the methodological groundwork of this approach, which will first use critical phenomenology to expose human existence as a predicament and then expose the ground and aim of the phenomenon of human existence as an answer or response. As one commentator has noted, "for Heidegger as for Tillich, philosophy is first of all ontology, and the task of ontology is to clarify the meaning of Being."³¹ The remainder of this essay will show that, for Tillich, God, as the meaning of being, as the answer to the human predicament, must be understood ontologically rather than ontically, as only in this way can the parameters outlined by Heidegger in the following quote be satisfied. "Only from the truth of Being can the essence of the holy be thought. Only from the essence of the holy is the essence of divinity to be thought. Only in the light of the essence of divinity can it be thought or said what the word 'God' is to signify."³²

VI. Phenomenological Description of God

A phenomenological description of God elucidates the meaning of God for the human being, i.e. it is but a *description* of holiness and its manifestation in an "ultimate concern" for a factual religious life. What, though, is the basis of something's claim to holiness? A claim to holiness devoid of a basis is arbitrary. Accordingly, the meaning of that which is capable of non-arbitrarily, that is, justifiably answering the request for holiness, namely, divinity must be laid bare. By clarifying the meaning of divinity we shall have a criterion by which we can judge an appropriate and adequate, that is, non-idolatrous, ultimate concern for the human being.

²⁹ "This (the method of correlation) is neither synthesis nor diastasis, neither identification nor separation; it is correlation. And I believe the whole story of Christian thought points in this direction" (Tillich, *A History of Christian Thought*, 293). This highlights the point that existence cannot be derived from essence, nor that it is *radically* separated from its ground, thereby avoiding an irreconcilable and irrational bifurcation in being-itself.

³⁰ Tillich, 1974. *The Construction of the History of Religion in Schelling's Positive Philosophy: Its Presuppositions and Principles*, transl. with intr. V. Nuovo (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 1974), 41.

³¹ Thatcher, *The Ontology of Paul Tillich*, 3.

³² Heidegger, "Letter", 230.

The question of divinity will be answered through an ontological interpretation of being itself, rather than the existential analysis requisite for holiness. To speak, admittedly artificially, in terms of structures and categories of finitude, ontological analysis would be the search for the ultimate ground, while existential analysis asks for the ultimate *telos* of the human being. One must nevertheless always keep in mind the relation between the two, i.e. between ontology proper and existential analysis, between God and the human, always making sure that the answer is accessible for the human being, otherwise the ontology is too speculative, so inaccessible that the ground of the human being would not necessarily coincide with her end. We will see that Tillich sees the unity of the efficient, teleological and also the formal in being itself, although only that which is ontologically ultimate, that is, divine, ought to be one's ultimate concern. In answering the question of what constitutes divinity, Tillich explicitly states, "It is the element of the unconditional and of ultimacy."³³ More precisely, he defines divinity as the ultimate in being and holiness as ultimate in meaning. That which can fulfill the requirements both of holiness and divinity can *properly* be called "God." We will first see if "ontic gods" can fulfill these requirements and then whether an "ontological God" can. After our analyses we shall see that, for Tillich, any god *that is a being alongside other beings cannot be divine and any "non-divine being" – which will turn actually to be a redundant phrase – that claims ultimacy for itself is not holy, but demonic; God, as being itself, is ultimate ontologically, that is, divine, and can also be venerated as "the Holy."*

VII. Rejection of the Categorical or Ontic Gods

"Categorical gods," is a title that refers to those gods that can be categorized by genus and species and, consequently, thought according to cause/effect and substance/attribute relations. In fact, any being that can be classified by genus and species – which includes all beings – is *ipso facto* also thinkable according to substance and attributes. If a god, or any being at all, can have something predicated of it, then such a god could possibly be conceived by the human being, which *a fortiori* means that such a god is "within" at least time and perhaps also space as well, and, as Kant has shown, any being that appears within a temporal sequence is also thinkable according to causal relations. In short, categorical (ontic) gods are those gods that are subject to the structures and conditions of finitude; they share our fate insofar as they are fellow beings in existence. One might also call them cosmological gods as they are, at best, cosmic forces.

³³ Paul Tillich, *The Dynamics of Faith* (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1957), 10.

A. Cannot Answer the Predicament of Human Existence if They Too Exist

For Tillich, human existence is a question, a question about a unitary answer concerning our ultimate ground and end. The human being is this question insofar as she ex-ists, that is, stands out of her ground and end; for, if the answer could be found within existence itself then there would be no necessary universality of the question, but only its accidental and empirical occurrence in certain lives and its absence in others. Human being or human ex-istence as such is a question because it stands out of its ground and away from its end. As one commentator notes, "According to Tillich, the contemporary idea of existence is drawn from modern Existentialism and cannot be applied to God because it signifies estrangement and nonbeing and implies that being has fallen away from essence"³⁴ [...] "Existence is synonymous with estrangement."³⁵ Any god that exists is estranged just as we are and, accordingly, also must ask about the meaning of being. An estranged god is no less separated from its ground and aim than is an estranged human. A god that exists is estranged and hence cannot be the answer to existence.

One may wish to retort that their god, though existent, does not exist in this world but is transcendent. This, however, misses the point and relies on a fundamental confusion. Even if one's god did not exist in this world but in another transcendent realm, such a god would still exist and would still be estranged.³⁶ Not only does the relegation of a god to transcendent realm not solve our problem it even creates a new one by making said god *ad hoc* and perhaps even irrational. What concern could a god in a transcendent realm have with our world? Also, if this other world is truly transcendent to our own, a parallel universe let us say, then

³⁴ In Tillich's own writings essence takes on many meanings at different times. Here, essence simply represents that from which existence has fallen, stands out from, in this case, being itself, despite the fact that being itself is technically beyond essence and existence. The "fall" does not first signify moral perversity, but is rather a transcendental fall; a fall that is necessary if there is to be existence.

³⁵ John P. Newport, *Paul Tillich*, ed. B. Patterson (Waco: Word Books, 1984), 106.

³⁶ F.W.J. Schelling, from whom Tillich heavily draws, speaks of God as ground and as existing; however, Schelling is able to do this because the existence of God is necessarily in harmony with its ground, unlike the existence of the creature. The same could be said of the Whiteheadian God, in regard to its antecedent and consequent natures. Tillich, I believe, avoids this route, because he fears it would undermine his goal of overcoming supernaturalism; I believe he is fearful that such a notion could be too easily misinterpreted. In my estimation, Tillich would find that talk of nature as the self-expression of God in his fleeing himself only to return to himself in self-awareness (a caricature of Hegel and Schelling) or of the world as the body of God (Whitehead) too easily risks literalistic distortions.

by definition it has no relation to our own, but if this is so, then the transcendent world and its god cannot be thought by us, otherwise it would have at least one relation to our own. Rationality is connectedness; the irrational is that which has no connections to that which is under question; therefore, the god who is a transcendent object is either irrational and cannot be thought or it is not a transcendent object and does belong to this world, in which case we have made no progress whatsoever. To speak of a supernatural realm solves nothing insofar as such a god still cannot be the answer to existence, that is, holy, and it compounds the issue by violating Ockham's Razor and becoming *ad hoc* and irrational.³⁷

B. Existent Gods Are Finite

Now that we have seen that, for Tillich, an existent god never ought to be regarded as holy because it too questions (though many things in existence may make this claim to holiness and thereby become demonic), we must now ask whether they can be divine. In order to see whether an ontic god can be divine, that is, ultimate ontologically speaking, we will analyze the concepts of finitude/non-finitude and contingency/necessity. We will begin with finitude/non-finitude.

Finitude is a state of existing that entails a certain limit or determination and infinitude, defined merely negatively as non-finitude, is the absence of said determination and does not exist.³⁸ Finitude encompasses more than having spatial and temporal boundaries, but also includes having predications. All predications are determinations, whether they are tangible or not. For example, that which is said to be benevolent has an intangible quality but is still demarcated from the malicious and indifferent, or that which is hard, a tangible quality, is demarcated from the soft. Anything that admits of a possible opposite is thereby finite, which also demonstrates finitude/non-finitude's relation to contingency/necessity below.

All existents are, by *definition*, finite. All existents are finite because all existents exist in a certain way; they display certain qualities that separate their being from the being of others. Even qualitatively equivalent existents exist as numerically distinct from one another due to the

³⁷ "Supra-naturalism (is) a theology that imagines a supra-natural world beside or above the natural one, a world in which the unconditional finds a local habitation, thus making God a transcendent object [...] To criticize such a conditioning of the unconditional, even if it leads to atheistic consequences, is more religious, because it is more aware of the unconditional character of the divine than a theism that bans God into the supra-natural realm" (Paul Tillich, *The Protestant Era*, transl. J. Adams (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1948), 82).

³⁸ We will see later that Levinas and Tillich have positive definitions of infinity.

structures of space and time; all existents exist in a manner of standing over and against all others, either numerically, qualitatively or both; all existents as finite exist as a *Gegen-stände*. As one author has noted, "'Existence' in short properly functions as an abstract constant always implying 'actuality' as an abstract variable. Hence, to say that anything 'exists' requires that the variable 'actuality' have *some* specific value."³⁹ Actuality implies a material limit, but even concepts such as love and justice are finite insofar as they have some value that demarcates them from other concepts. Concepts and actual existents are both objective because they can be thought and thought makes distinctions. Thought is discursive, which is why Schelling could write, "In becoming an object, everything objective *ipso facto* becomes finite"⁴⁰ and "To come to consciousness and to be limited are one and the same."⁴¹ In short, all that has de-*finition* is necessarily finite, or to make the same play on words in German, *Alle Dinge sind bedingt*.

One may wonder whether the divine could be a consciousness, for our discussion has shown that everything that can become an object for consciousness is necessarily finite, but could a consciousness be non-finite? Now, insofar as consciousness makes everything an object with a specific value, it synthesizes. Discursive thought always has the form of S is P. Hence, consciousness always has a finite relation. In other words, consciousness is intentional, but we cannot say that this relation is grounded in any particular synthetic consciousness as non-finite, but synthetic consciousness is grounded in the non-finite structure of being itself; otherwise, we would have to postulate multiple non-finites for every consciousness and there would be multiple grounds for all that is finite and accordingly there would not be an ultimate unifying principle which is necessary for all rational thought.⁴² Furthermore, every consciousness would be at least numerically different from others and most likely qualitatively different and, as we have seen, finite. Insofar as consciousness is dependent on an objective pole, that is, it is always about something (intentionality), so all consciousnesses must be grounded in that which makes synthetic thought possible, that where subject and object are one inherently and not one by synthesis, for example, another synthetic, discursive consciousness. The ground that makes synthetic thought possible can only be called a consciousness in a metaphorical

³⁹ Schubert M. Ogden, *The Reality of God and Other Essays* (New York: Harper and Row, 1977), 48.

⁴⁰ Tillich, *The System of the Sciences According to Objects and Method*, 36.

⁴¹ *Ibidem*, 43–44.

⁴² All philosophy that posits transcendental egos as absolute reality has this problem. How can one absolute reach another? In this sense, Schelling's realism is a decided advance over the irrational pluralism of Johann Gottlieb Fichte's idealism.

sense as such a ground is incapable of thematic thought, otherwise its consciousness would be based on synthesis, that is, it would itself be intentional and so finitely directed rather than a primordial unity. We can now see that consciousness (as spirit) is the door to ultimate reality, though not itself the ultimate reality, as it has a connection with the ultimate, non-finite ground of being and meaning and a connection with finitude. If the human being is a question, then it is because she has the answer and yet is separated from it; this simultaneity of having and not-having, participation and estrangement, is the nature of consciousness.

Nothing that exists, whether it be conscious or not, can be non-finite and that which is finite cannot be the very ground of all that is finite; therefore, a finite god cannot be divine. Our conclusion in regard to finitude and non-finitude should not be controversial though, for Aristotle already said as much more than 2,000 years ago, "It is not possible for any infinite thing to exist; otherwise, infinity would not be infinite."⁴³

C. Finitude Implies Contingency

As mentioned above, finitude is related to contingency as all finite existents are demarcated and admit of possible opposites, which is to say that they are contingent. We have also shown how all existents are finite and how nothing finite can be the ground of being and thus how nothing finite can be divine. However, we will briefly analyze contingency/necessity here in order to fully flesh out our point.

Contingency means that something can be otherwise. If finitude is a demarcation that sets an object apart but the negation of which is possible, then a finite being could conceivably be other than it is and is hence contingent. Necessity is a lack of contingency; it is that which must be because it cannot not be. However, no particular being can be necessary because all particular beings, as we have seen, have a contingent material principle. Therefore, all ontological necessity is to be found in a non-hypostatized, non-objectified, *sine qua non*. Non-finitude cannot be hypostatized, because if it was, then it would take on predicates and in becoming an object it would become finite; therefore, only the non-finite, can be necessary. Many theologians have attempted to show the necessity of a First Cause, but this fails for many reasons. The notion of causality is itself a category of finitude and if the First Cause is reified, then it belongs to the chain of beings and even though it has been dogmatically asserted to be at the beginning of the chain, it itself begs for a cause other than itself, because as reified it is finite and necessity cannot be found within its concept. This point is nicely illustrated historically by the fact

⁴³ Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, 994b, 991.

that “the very argument that Plato used to prove that there are many gods was used by later writers to establish the existence of the one and only God.”⁴⁴ Plato’s gods were finite and contingent because they served as particular causes for particular events; so even if we speak of the cause of the totality and merely collapse the multiplicity of causes into one,⁴⁵ then we have done nothing to change the nature of the cause. The god would still be a particular cause for a particular event, *this* world. That god is not the condition of the possibility of the existence of worldliness as such, but the first finite cause in the chain of events that is our contingent world. This god would not be world-creator so much as the first moment *within* a specific world. This god would be a part of the very world of which it is supposed to be the cause. Neither anything in existence nor any consciousness can be the ground of being.

D. The Demonic and Idolatrous

If ontic gods cannot claim ontological ultimacy, that is, if they cannot claim divinity for themselves, then they are also unable to justifiably claim to be ultimate in terms of meaning, that is, in terms of holiness, for they cannot heal. That which is not ontologically ultimate causes a heteronymous and demonic split in man if it is taken to be the ultimate in meaning for man’s existence. Now, Tillich defines the demonic, which is synonymous with the idolatrous, as “the elevation of something conditional to unconditional significance.”⁴⁶ This means that the demonic, as a perverted holiness, is not a quality that inheres in an object, but rather is a term that signifies an object’s significance for a person and that even an activity such as a rite or ritual can become holy and/or demonic. Any time something conditioned, that is, something existent, is *itself* raised to the level of the holy and ceases to merely be the bearer of the holy, the unconditional, it becomes demonic. “Demon possession” is the possession of a self by that which is conditioned, by that which is unable to heal a person, to make a person whole, by that which destroys a person’s center and replaces it with a heteronymous, peripheral concern that ought to be subordinated to a concern adequate to the task, a concern that does not obliterate one’s autonomy. For Tillich, if theism is the belief in the *existence* of a god, any god, then theism is demonic and atheism is the proper response. Existence, in the technical sense of the term, when applied to God, brings God “down to the level of that of a stone or a star,

⁴⁴ Walter Kaufmann, *Critique of Religion and Philosophy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1958), 143.

⁴⁵ One here is a number and not a unity. Sheer unity without division is not one in a numerical sense; it is not a number at all.

⁴⁶ Tillich, *Systematic Theology Vol. I*, 140.

and it makes atheism not only possible, but almost unavoidable."⁴⁷ Even monotheism, if it means the *existence* of only one god, as opposed to two, is demonic because it is inherently polytheistic, there just happens to be only one polytheistic god who lives. As Tillich wrote, "All polytheistic gods are demonic, because the basis of meaning on which they stand is finite."⁴⁸

E. Atheism as a Proper Response

John Robinson, a controversial author⁴⁹ who was heavily influenced by Tillich, once wrote, "To the ordinary way of thinking, to believe in God means to be convinced of the existence of such a supreme and separate Being. 'Theists' are those who believe that such a Being exists, 'atheists' those who deny that he does."⁵⁰ Now, given what we have said regarding the demonic, if the term "theism" is to be used as we have just defined it, then the morally and theoretically correct stance is atheism. No divine being "exists;" nothing within the whole of reality is divine. All atheism does in this case is destroy an idol, a demonic god, which is surely much more benevolent and pious than a demonic theism.

Perhaps the most famous atheist in history is Friedrich Nietzsche, who is renowned for the proclamation that "God is dead."⁵¹ Is Nietzsche right? Can God die? Can something die, that cannot exist? Of course, these questions miss Nietzsche's point, which Tillich rightly identifies when stating the obvious, "This is a symbol, for it can only mean that God is dead as far as man's consciousness of him is concerned" [...] "in man the consciousness of an ultimate in the traditional sense has died."⁵² A certain way of conceiving the ultimate, a type of symbol of man's ultimate concern has died, at least for Nietzsche and Tillich, and if existence necessarily signifies estrangement, then rightfully so. It is not that

⁴⁷ Tillich, "Two Types of Philosophy of Religion". *Union Seminary Quarterly Review* 8 (1946).

⁴⁸ Tillich, *Systematic Theology Vol. III*, 102.

⁴⁹ Robinson, who was a theologian and bishop in the Anglican Church, has seen his book condemned as atheistic. "What is striking about Dr. Robinson's book is first and foremost that he is an atheist" (Alasdair MacIntyre, "God and the Theologians", in: *The Honest to God Debate*, ed. D. Edwards and J.A.T. Robinson (London: SCM, 1963), 215). In reply, Robinson wrote, "Atheism after all is no new charge against Christians, and in the 2nd century they survived it with equanimity" (From "Comment" contained in the same chapter as the MacIntyre quote, 229).

⁵⁰ John Arthur Thomas Robinson, "Comment", in: *The Honest to God Debate*, ed. D. Edwards and J.A.T. Robinson (London: SCM, 1963), 17.

⁵¹ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Joyful Wisdom*, transl. Thomas Common (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1910), 168.

⁵² Paul Tillich, *Perspectives on 19th and 20th Century Protestant Theology*, ed. C. Braaten (London: SCM, 1967), 201.

there is anything wrong with thinking divinity through finite representations – for how else can we who are only capable of discursive, objectifying thought think the ontologically unconditioned – but when these representations cease to be symbolic and sacramental and claim ultimacy for themselves, they become demonic and ought to die. The next section shall thus present a corrective, a non-onto-theological way of conceiving of the divine that regulates against its idolatrous tendencies.

VIII. Being Itself and Divinity

“He (God) is being-itself beyond essence and existence.”⁵³ Tillich’s claim, and that for which he is most known, is that the most appropriate way of talking of God is to say that God is being itself, which is to be clearly distinguished from any particular being, even the greatest one, and from being taken as totality or even the “world” as universal horizon. Being itself cannot be said to be any-thing whatsoever, but rather it is no-thing. Tillich recognizes that this term can be misleading, which is why he will also use analogical terms such as “ground of being” or “power of being,”⁵⁴ with one of the more common errors being the equation of being itself with the totality of beings. Being, in opposition to being itself, refers to all that is within being; one can look out of a window and observe being or one can question the meaning of one’s being, but being itself is beyond being, insofar as it is the ground *of* being; one can never observe being itself nor question it thematically as I could being as presence, as Heidegger might phrase the matter. Tillich explains what he means by being itself and shows its historical origins when he writes, “I would prefer to say ‘being itself.’ But I know this term is [...] disliked. And so I speak of the ground of being. I actually mean, with the classical theologians, being itself” [...] “If I were able to go back to the classical scholastic term ‘*esse ipsum*,’ I would prefer that.”⁵⁵ In this section, we will flesh out the meaning of being itself in order to show its divinity and its internal structure, although the structure can only

⁵³ Tillich, *Systematic Theology Vol. I*, 205. Exodus 3:14 – “God said to Moses, ‘I Am Who I Am’ (or ‘I Will Be What I Will Be’). This is what you are to say to the Israelites, ‘I AM has sent me to you.’” Yahweh is a form of the Hebrew verb “to be,” thus Yahweh means, “He Who Is” or more simply “He Whom Being Is.” Also of note is the ancient Jewish reluctance to say the name of God, lest they commit blasphemy. Perhaps they understood better than we that to reduce God to the status of that with a name, namely beings, was to strip it of its holiness and divinity.

⁵⁴ Tillich also uses “power of being” to speak of the second potency of being-itself.

⁵⁵ Tillich, *Ultimate Concern: Tillich in dialogue*, ed. D. Brown (New York: Harper and Row, 1965), 46.

be spoken of analogically through an analysis of being as present, i.e. through ontic representations.

A. Being-Itself and Nominalism

Many who grasp that being itself does not have any specific content, that is, that nothing can be predicated of it, will want to call it an empty concept, to claim that it is the most universal genera, nothing more than the largest means of classification – in short, many, like Nietzsche, will wish to interpret it nominally. For Tillich this is completely incorrect, being itself “is not the highest abstraction [...] For this reason, the medieval philosophers called being⁵⁶ the basic ‘*transcendentale*’; beyond the universal and the particular.”⁵⁷ Being itself is neither genus nor species, that is, a name of any sort, but beyond them both; it is not the highest abstraction, though one must be capable of abstraction to understand the term to be sure. Given his doctrine, Tillich will call himself a realist, so long as this is meant in the sense that Medievalism gave to it. He will claim that today “idealism” and “realism” have almost switched meanings from what they had in the Middle Ages. He claims that realism then meant that being itself and its structure could be interpreted non-nominally; realism is the opposite of nominalism. As one Tillichian commentator has written, “To be consistent with Tillich’s realism, in contrast with nominalism, being itself cannot be said to be an empty concept, but rather is the richest of all concepts.”⁵⁸ Tillich must attack nominalism, because nominalism breeds disregard for ontological questions and even more importantly questions pertaining to the meaning of our being. For his system to work, the meaning of one’s being cannot be merely subjective, but must be related to the ground of being as such, which must be more than a name.

There is another reason for Tillich’s critique of nominalism that has more to do with the theoretical quest for truth and the possibility of knowledge than it does with the existential quest for meaning. His thesis is that “radical nominalism is unable to make the process of knowledge understandable.”⁵⁹ Nominalism not only makes knowledge of that which cannot be cognized impossible, since nominalism makes all theories of participation unintelligible, but it also makes knowledge of even particulars unintelligible because knowledge implies a structure that al-

⁵⁶ “Being” here means, of course, *esse ipsum*.

⁵⁷ Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology Vol. II: Existence and the Christ* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1957), 11.

⁵⁸ Victor Nuovo, “On Revising Tillich: An Essay on the Principles of Theology”, in: *Kairos and Logos*, ed. J. Carey (Macon: Mercer University Press, 1978), 50.

⁵⁹ Tillich, *Systematic Theology Vol. I*, 17.

lows for the union of subject and object in acts of cognition, the *prius* of the split between subject and object. Nominalism makes particulars ultimate, meaning that no such harmony that underwrites the particulars and subjectivity is possible. Cognition would be impossible, because being would consist of nothing but isolated aggregates; union would be impossible. Nominalism is theoretically inadequate as well as unhealthy, as radical nominalism, if taken to its logical conclusion, leads to solipsism.

B. Being Itself and the Structures and Categories of Finitude

If being itself transcends any object of possible thought, we are left with the problem of how it can be the answer to human existence. How can God, being itself, be spoken of at all if God is that which words truly cannot capture? The task, in other words, is to understand how we can apply the structures and categories of being to the ground of being in an analogical way.

Now, it is true that "God is 'ineffable,' there is literally nothing that can be said about him without falsification – except the fact that something must be said."⁶⁰ However, this does not mean that nothing should be said, nor does it mean that anything can be said, but rather one should take care to use a language that points to something more than ontic concepts, that is, one should reject a simple reference-theory of language, but also without necessarily following into a stringent negative theology. One should use positive concepts but in such a way that they can avoid the tendency to be taken too literally. The prime example of this is, of course, "being itself." Another prime example is the, for Tillich, equivalent expression,⁶¹ "ground of being." One author here criticizes Tillich by asking, "How does a 'ground' differ from a 'cause?'"⁶² We cannot simply assert that "ground" is a term that is non-categorical while asserting that "cause" is. We can only a way of reading the terms in the right way. Traditionally, the notion of causality is a category of finitude, while ground (*Grund*) is absent from that discussion and in some authors already has a historical use as a term that tries to point beyond the categorical language of causality, for example, in Schelling. Tillich chooses the word for this reason and the fact that it is helpful in avoiding

⁶⁰ John Arthur Thomas Robinson, *Exploration into God* (London: SCM, 1967), 55.

⁶¹ Actually, since nothing can be predicated of God, everything that is said of God is equivalent to anything else said of God if the terms are understood correctly. This is a corollary of the doctrine of simplicity. Nothing is said "about" God; there are only attempts to show to the other person God Himself.

⁶² John Hermann Randall Jr., "The Ontology of Paul Tillich", in: *The Theology of Paul Tillich*, ed. C. Kegley and R. Bretall (New York: Macmillan, 1952), 161.

the ontic and static notion of substance as well; "'ground' indicates that its meaning is not categorical. It oscillates between cause and substance and transcends both of them."⁶³ One traditional way of speaking of what is beyond the structures and categories of finitude is to show how it is beyond some of its common polarities.⁶⁴ For example, above we analyzed finitude/non-finitude. Non-finitude was there defined negatively in relation to the positive account of finitude, but technically being itself could not even be said to be non-finite because then its negative concept rests on the ectypal concept of finitude; neither half of the polarity is befitting for literal use when applied to the divine. "Being itself is not infinity; it [...] lies beyond the polarity of finitude and infinite self-transcendence."⁶⁵

Even the very polarity of essence and existence is falsifying if literally applied to God, for we have seen that God can neither exist nor be an "essent"; essents also have an essence (*essentia*) and as ineffable, God does not have an *essentia* either. Later, we will use general concepts taken from being as a whole to speak of a structure of being itself, but even this cannot be read literally. Tillich writes, "The scholastics were right when they asserted that in God there is no difference between essence and existence. But they perverted their insight when [...] they spoke of the existence of God [...] Actually they did not mean 'existence.' They meant the reality."⁶⁶ It should now be clear that although we must speak of a unitary ground that gives coherence to experience and cognition, a unity that precedes the subject-object bifurcation of finite existence, we nevertheless can only speak of this ground by using concepts drawn from being. As Tillich tells us, "We could not even think being [itself] without a double negation: being [itself] must be thought as the negation of the negation of being [...] If we speak of the power of being-itself we indicate that being affirms itself against nonbeing [...] The self-affirmation of being without nonbeing would not even be self-affirmation but an immovable self-identity."⁶⁷

This foreshadows the not yet discussed structure of being, but it does give a clear insight into how one must interpret God-talk. One should note that to speak of being itself as a double-negation points to the origin of its concept, but not to its literal reality. If one could literally

⁶³ Tillich, *Systematic Theology Vol. I*, 156. God as a First Cause is the traditional theistic answer, while God as the universal substance is the traditional pantheistic answer. Each has its truthfulness and its shortcomings. We attempt to transcend both, keeping the positives and avoiding the negatives.

⁶⁴ This is akin to Nicholas of Cusa and his "coincidence of opposites."

⁶⁵ Tillich, *Systematic Theology Vol. I*, 191. Here Tillich uses "infinity" in a positive way and not just as the negation of finitude.

⁶⁶ *Ibidem*, 205.

⁶⁷ Tillich, *The Courage To Be. (First Edition)*, 179.

speak of its reality, then being itself would be the largest genera and interpreted nominally. Being itself is sheer positivity, but such positivity can only arise as a concept via the negation of the negation of being. It is interesting that even Tillich sometimes fell into the illusion that he could say something about God directly, as evidenced by the following remark, "God is being-itself is a nonsymbolic statement,"⁶⁸ but in the sequel he corrects himself with the more sober remark that the only nonsymbolic statement about God is, "Everything we say *about* [emphasis added] God is symbolic."⁶⁹ There are times where we can speak literally, but only about our relation to God, as is the case when we say that God is ineffable or mysterious.⁷⁰ Now that we have thoroughly outlined the limits of and use of ontological language when applied to God as being itself, we can commence with the explication of the structure of being.

C. The Structure of Being and Being Itself by Analogy

Ogden offers one of most traditional critiques of Tillich's doctrine of God as being itself, bemoaning, "Tillich continues to assume with classical theists that the fundamental concept in terms of which God must be conceived is that of absolute unchanging 'being' [...] God as 'being-itself' is [...] literally *nonrelative* and *changeless*,"⁷¹ and furthermore, "The more serious weakness in Tillich's view, as in classical theism itself, is that God is finally conceived to be *nothing but necessary*."⁷² Ogden's objective was to promote a process view of God, so Tillich along with classical theism becomes an easy target. However, I believe that far from promoting a stagnant, changeless and non-relative God, Tillich's conception of God portrays a living God, a God that is always fueling the creative process. Tillich's God may be nothing but necessity, that is, without accidents, but this does not mean that God must be conceived in a way that forbids a divine life. Divine life means neither mental/conscious life nor a life of events, but rather that God *must* be seen as dynamic because the

⁶⁸ Tillich, *Systematic Theology Vol. I*, 238.

⁶⁹ Tillich, *Systematic Theology Vol. II*, 9.

⁷⁰ The "problematic" concerns that which we do not happen to know, but can conceivably know. The "mysterious" is that which can never become an item of discursive knowledge for us. The mysterious is always a participatory rather than controlling knowledge. "Mystery characterizes a dimension which 'precedes' the subject-object relationship" (Tillich, *Systematic Theology Vol. I*, 108). Tillich here obviously seems to be alluding to Gabriel Marcel.

⁷¹ Ogden, *The Reality of God and Other Essays*, 55.

⁷² *Ibidem*, 24.

divine life is constantly overcoming and reaffirming itself. This is due to the structure of being.⁷³

Tillich claims that in order for life and existence to be possible we must conceive of three potencies⁷⁴ in the ground of being, the first of which is the negative potency, non-being. Non-being, for the Greeks, was conceived in two ways: *ouk on* and *mè on*. “‘*Ouk on*’ is the ‘nothing’ which has no relation at all to being; ‘*mè on*’ is the ‘nothing’ which has a dialectical relation to being.”⁷⁵ The former concept of non-being is absolute nothingness, or sheer nullity, and cannot be cognized, as it has no relation to anything. The latter concept is thought as the negation of being, which is the only way that non-being can be cognized.⁷⁶ The second potency is that which affirms being over the negative element, the power of being. Conceived in isolation, there is nothing that could separate the first two potencies from one another, which is why they must always be thought together in polar and living relation. The first potency breaks up the identity of sheer positivity and is what makes existence possible, it is the abysmal element in the ground of being; the second potency is that which overcomes the negative side. This side only becomes manifest as the overcoming of the negative side; it cannot appear without the negative side. This second potency can be referred to as the power of being and its reaffirmation of itself over the negative side that fuels the creative process may be spoken of as the meaning of being.⁷⁷ Now, just as the first potency makes possible the fall into existence, into freedom,⁷⁸ which

⁷³ I think that being itself could be replaced with the Whiteheadian term for the Absolute, “Creativity;” for, both emphasize the dynamic character of the Absolute over its static character. Both are also not actual, but nevertheless, are the necessary condition for all actualities; without being itself there are not beings and, for Whitehead, without Creativity there are not actualities/concrescent events. Both assume a Heraclitian flux and explain permanence rather than vice versa.

⁷⁴ Potency (*Potenz*) is a term taken from Schelling, but this term only appears in Tillich’s earliest works.

⁷⁵ Tillich, *Systematic Theology Vol. I*, 188.

⁷⁶ Being itself is necessary (though it does not exist) because its negation is impossible. *Ouk on* cannot be, otherwise it would no longer be non-being and would be being. For *ouk on* to be what it “is,” it must always not be.

⁷⁷ Thus, the meaning of being is to create oneself, to have the courage to affirm oneself, to assume one’s existence as justified rather than arbitrary and meaningless and become a person.

⁷⁸ As evidenced by his discussions of the two figures in his *A History of Christian Thought*, when Tillich speaks of the Fall, we should think of this along the lines of Origen and Schelling, that is, as a transcendent fall. The Fall is not equivalent to sin, though without the Fall sin could not be, nor does the Fall point to a time at the beginning of time. The Fall is simply a mythical term that signifies that existence has its origins in something other, whether we call it “essence” or something else. To say that it is a fall into freedom does not mean that it is a fall from necessity, as it is rather a fall from that which transcends both. The Fall is a fall into such polarities

breaks up the monotonous identity of being itself as the *prius* of subject and object, so the dynamic, yet harmonious, unity of the two potencies is the third potency, Spirit.⁷⁹ This potency is that which drives the human being out of herself; it is the fullness of life. Ontologically speaking, the dynamic unity of the first two potencies, constituting the third potency, is the teleological ground that makes life and creativity intelligible; otherwise we would have death and stagnancy. The ground of being must be conceived along these structural terms because “any ontology which suppresses the dynamic element in the structure of being is unable to explain the nature of a life-process and to speak meaningfully of the divine life.”⁸⁰ This ontology is as formal (free of content) as possible, simply elucidating the structure as minimally as possible with a negative potency, a positive potency and their dynamic tension.

As mentioned, the elements can be spoken of metaphorically using more tangible metaphors from existence. The first potency being the abyss, the second potency the power of being as it reaffirms itself against the abysmal side and then the dynamic unity between the two as the meaning of being. In this way, “God as Spirit is the ultimate unity of both power and meaning;”⁸¹ for, Spirit is the ultimate in power as the source of the drive that impels being to affirm itself against non-being and this is nothing more than the meaning of being – the conquering of nihilism, of the threat of non-being and meaninglessness manifest as anxiety and inherent in finitude itself. The existent can either be swallowed by the whole or it can choose to affirm itself, conquering the negative polarity, that is, its anxiety, and giving itself meaning.

We can here give a cursory description of the human spirit, not to be confused with Spirit, in order to make intelligible in ontological terms how such self-transcendence is possible. The spirit participates in the divine Spirit, but it is not pure, that is to say, it is “entangled” in the ambiguities of existence. The polarity of the potencies in spirit is often in tension, in *pólemos*, whereas in Spirit they are always in perfect harmony. In an early writing of his, Tillich wrote, “The concept ‘spirit’ is not as fundamental as the concepts ‘being’ and ‘thought,’ for it is dependent on them: spirit is the self-determination of thought within being.”⁸² The spirit is the capacity for transcendence from one state of being into another. The Spirit is not the capacity for transcendence from one par-

and sin is their disharmonious tension. The Fall was not evil, but it is the perversion of a “fallen” state that is evil, thus the concept of the Fall in Tillich is quite ambiguous.

⁷⁹ “Spirit is the unity of the ontological elements and the ‘telos’ of life” (Tillich, *Systematic Theology Vol. I*, 249).

⁸⁰ *Ibidem*, 180.

⁸¹ *Ibidem*, 250.

⁸² Tillich, *The System of the Sciences According to Objects and Method*, 137.

ticular state to the next, but it is pure, that is, it is the unity of the power of being overcoming non-being devoid of material limits, thereby affirming itself as the primordial ground of power and meaning, but it is not itself any particular meaning nor a transcendence towards one. It is, so to speak, a transcendence towards itself. Spirit is the potency that makes the actual spirit possible; the latter depends on the former and the former is only experienced in the latter and, in this sense, Spirit only "is" where there is spirit and vice versa. The potencies are not actualities, otherwise their use would be categorical. The potencies and their unity say nothing "about" reality, they only take concepts from reality and use them in a way that points to what must be the underlying structure that makes reality possible. The potencies "are neither functions nor categories. They constitute neither an area nor an object of meaning; they constitute meaning itself."⁸³ The potencies constitute the *conditio sine qua non* of all forms of meaning and actuality.⁸⁴

It is in Spirit that the ambiguities of existence have their primordial unity from which they came and to which they strive. *Spirit shows the unity of the efficient, teleological and formal questions.* If the formal question asks for the possibility of truth, which requires a necessary rather than accidental unity between subject and object, then Spirit satisfies this demand. In response to efficient and teleological questions, Spirit, as the "ultimate unity of both power and meaning,"⁸⁵ serves as the *sine qua non* of spirit insofar as it serves as our "from which" and "to which," our ground and aim. Tillich can speak of this living, yet harmonious unity between the potencies, that is, Spirit, as the "meaning of being," because for the human being this harmony is a healing, *salvus*, and thus, the meaning of being. The Spirit, though a concrete unity, is not *particular*, but universal. The Spirit does not give any particular meaning to being and history, but it is the *sine qua non* of meaning and the aim of history; history's aim is the harmonious unity of the potencies as *actual*.⁸⁶ Thus, for Tillich, being itself is inherently "meaningful" even if we do not view

⁸³ *Ibidem*, 162.

⁸⁴ The actualization of the potencies of being itself into being does nothing to obliterate the unity of being itself. It always stands as a unity beyond the fragmentation that is existence. As Kant once said, "The derivation of all other possibility from this original being, strictly speaking, also cannot be regarded as a *limitation* of its highest reality and as a *division*, as it were, of it; for then the original being would be regarded as a mere aggregate of derivative beings" (Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, transl. & ed. Paul Guyer and Allen Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 557).

⁸⁵ Tillich, *Systematic Theology Vol. I*, 250.

⁸⁶ Being itself as Spirit is thus not a-historical and a-temporal, but rather, as the unity of beginning and end it is the possibility of time and history, the fullness of temporality and not its negation.

it as such, and accordingly, being itself is *the* Holy, that which intrinsically sets itself apart as full of meaning. Thus, what the human being calls holy could be either demonic or truly touch the Holy that is also the Divine, being itself. For the human being to be in a state of genuine faith, what she takes to be holy must somehow touch what is divine and also inherently holy,⁸⁷ but the human being can view the Holy as vain and empty and instead can take what is less than ultimate in meaning and being as holy. This is the nature of the idolatrous and demonic.

D. The *Persona* of God

Given the structure of the ground of being we can see that there is a divine life, but many things are said to have life that are not said to be personal or to be a person. Is it legitimate to speak of God as personal, that is, having a persona, or furthermore, being a Person? There is a distinction here, for one's pet can have a persona, but not be a person. One's pet may have a certain persona, or we may perceive one at least, insofar as the pet exhibits habitual characteristics and ways of being in the world. However, to say that a pet is a Person is to say that there is a definite freedom⁸⁸ behind the mask, that there is a consciousness that chooses a persona for itself. This may or may not occur in a pet, but it is certainly not necessarily presupposed by the appearance of a persona.

In the case of God, we can say that He has a persona, but not that He is a Person. If being is grounded in being itself, the divine, then being/nature is the persona of God; it is the manifestation of an alleged actor. Nature is the non-derived consequence, the act of a more primordial ground; hence, nature is the persona of being-itself. To take the further step though and to say that being itself is a Person would be akin to saying that God is a thematic, discursive consciousness; it would be anthropomorphism. As Tillich himself says concerning the uses of the words "persona" and "person" in application to God, "'persona' for the

⁸⁷ Of course, that symbol that serves as the criterion of all other symbols, that symbol which is "objectively" holy because by the very act of becoming transparent to the Divine Holiness it concomitantly negates itself as the bearer of Holiness, is the event of the Christ in Jesus of Nazareth. Jesus as the Christ is the perfect exemplification of the "Protestant Principle," that principle that says that we must always be in protest against the bearer of the Divine as the Divine itself. However, we will not be able to discuss these related issues, as such would take us too far off topic into general issues of symbolism and Christology.

⁸⁸ All freedom is *definite*, that is, it transcends concrete situations towards others; it has a finite relation.

Trinitarian hypostases but not for God himself. God became 'a person' only in the nineteenth century."⁸⁹

Although we cannot call God "a" person, we can speak of God using anthropomorphic metaphors so long as we do not take them literally, thereby making them idolatrous. Tillich finds a use for the two most general faculties of human consciousness, intellect and will. "Intellect," he writes, "does not mean intelligence; it means the point in which God is for himself subject and object."⁹⁰ Being-itself is the *prius* of subject and object. Consciousness is a subjective awareness of oneself as an object of one's own thought; therefore, to be a subject and object for oneself simultaneously is intellect. The disanalogous aspect, of course, is that being itself is literally neither subject nor object, but before both. "Will," writes Tillich, "refers to the dynamic ground of everything."⁹¹ The disanalogous aspect here is that will in a consciousness is causally efficacious, but causality does not apply to being itself. Furthermore, existence is *causa sui*, but in creating itself it has separated *itself* from its necessary ground, being itself, without, however, becoming any less dependent on being itself.

E. Beyond Theism/Atheism

Earlier we noted that atheism could be a proper response to certain forms of theism, literalistic anthropomorphic ones viewing God as a person, a consciousness, or any other form of theism that speaks of God ontically, that is, using the categories and structures of finitude in an absolute way. In short, all these forms of theism have lost the unconditional element and have made for themselves a conditioned god and, unfortunately, the majority seemingly uses the term "theism" in just this way. However, the term "atheism" has the unavoidable consequence of implying that there is no meaningful way of using the word "God," that because God if cannot be said to "exist" in this sense of the term, then there is nothing left to say. Given the above, we can easily see that this misses the point just as much as naïve forms of theism, that is to say that theism and atheism are different sides of an ill-conceived dichotomy. Now, if it is the entire dichotomy that rests on a misconception of the divine, then what paradigm ought we use? I do not have one proposal, but

⁸⁹ Tillich, *Systematic Theology* Vol. I, 245. "You and I are persons because we are able to reason, to decide, to be responsible, etc. Such a concept of person was not applied to God at all (historically speaking)" (Tillich, *A History of Christian Thought*, 46). "To speak of God as a person would have been heretical for the Middle Ages" (*ibidem*, 190).

⁹⁰ Tillich, *A History of Christian Thought*, 189.

⁹¹ *Ibidem*, 190.

three, none of which are mutually exclusive of the other as are theism/atheism, but each helps to point to the reality in question and, I believe, complements the others.

We will first begin with Tillich's metaphor, which is not actually a tidy title. He suggests speaking of the "God above God."⁹² The God above God is the God that being itself is. As Tillich contends "The atheists are those who deny the God of the theists, but they do not deny the God above the God of the theists – they cannot."⁹³ Only he who does not understand the meaning of the phrase can deny the God above God, for being itself is the necessary condition of being as present. One may plausibly reject the metaphor "being itself" or contend that being itself has no concrete religious effect and that, therefore, being itself should not be called "God." I do not think Tillich could or would deny that the term may be religiously inadequate, but his whole system rests on the point that if the reality of the concept is more than just an ontological structure of being, but a depth of being that poses a demand on us, that it has religious import, and *if* such is the case *and* one understands everything entailed in the metaphor "being itself," then one can no sooner deny its reality as God than that I am being appeared to computer-screenedly.⁹⁴ Logically one cannot doubt being itself, though one may not experience it in a way that is religiously significant.

Another way of characterizing our line of thought is to say that it is panentheistic. Admittedly, this term is better suited for the process view of God than Tillich's; however, I do not think that it is without its merits. For, Tillich's God is the ground of being, thus all is in God, though nothing within the totality grounded in God is God Himself, nor the totality itself, which many call pantheism. God can never be radically separated from anything in being and at the same time it is always wholly other than anything within the totality of being.

Lastly, I am fond of the term, "a-theism." Admittedly, I like this term primarily for its shock value, but often the best didactic devices are the ones that are most shocking because they leave a lasting impression. "A-theism" indicates that no god exists, but that nevertheless that does not mean that there is nothing to say; it says that nothing can be said "of" God, but that nevertheless, we must find a way to speak God Himself. It says that we must learn how to live in a world without a god, but that nevertheless, we cannot forsake our obligation to be ultimately concerned with the "sacred" – a term that carries with it the notions of holiness and divinity. Perhaps all three of these classificatory suggestions

⁹² This is a phrase that Tillich has perhaps borrowed from Meister Eckhart.

⁹³ Paul Tillich, "The God Above God", *The Listener* 66 (1961): 418.

⁹⁴ Or in the reader's case, "book-pagedly." In other words, being itself is as indubitable as Roderick Chisholm's self-presenting state claims.

convey the significance spoken of in the following quote by Tillich, written in defense of his phrase: "The term(s) (are) meant as a critical protection against attempts to take the symbols literally and to confuse the images of God with that to which they point, the ultimate in Being and Meaning."⁹⁵

Now, if being itself is the ultimate in Being (ontologically) and the ultimate in Meaning (existentially), then it is divine and given as holy and is the proper ground of faith. Faith is being grasped by an ultimate concern, but what is worthy of being an ultimate concern. Tillich's response, "Faith is the state of being grasped by the power of being-itself."⁹⁶ This is true faith or absolute faith and "the content of absolute faith is the 'God above God'."⁹⁷ This, then, completes the task of giving an adequate phenomenological definition of God by asking what is holy and of giving an adequate ontological account of what could be justified in making a claim to holiness and answer the human predicament.

Bibliography

- Aristotle. 1998. *The Metaphysics*, transl. Hugh Lawson-Tancred. London: Penguin Books.
- Hamilton Kenneth. 1963. *The System and the Gospel: A Critique of Paul Tillich*. London: SCM.
- Heidegger Martin. 1996. *Being and Time*, transl. Joan Stambaugh. New York: State University of New York Press.
- Heidegger Martin. 1977. "Letter on Humanism". In: Martin Heidegger. *Basic Writings*, ed. David Farrell Krell, 193–242. New York: Harper & Row.
- Heidegger Martin. 2003. *Plato's "Sophist"*, transl. Richard Rojcewicz & Andre Schuwer. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Hick John (ed.). 1970. *Classic and Contemporary Readings in the Philosophy of Religion*. New Jersey: Englewood Cliffs.
- Kant Immanuel. 1998. *Critique of Pure Reason*, transl. & Ed. Paul Guyer and Allen Wood. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Kaufmann Walter. 1958. *Critique of Religion and Philosophy*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Levinas Emmanuel. 1979. *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*. Transl. Alphonso Lingis. Boston: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers.
- MacIntyre Alasdair. 1963. "God and the Theologians". In: *The Honest to God Debate*, ed. D. Edwards and J.A.T. Robinson. London: SCM.
- Macquarrie John. 1994. *Heidegger and Christianity*. London: SCM.

⁹⁵ Tillich, "The God Above God", 420.

⁹⁶ Tillich, *The Courage To Be. (First Edition)*, 172.

⁹⁷ *Ibidem*, 182.

- Nagel Thomas. 1986. *The View From Nowhere*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Newport John P. 1984. *Paul Tillich*, ed. B. Patterson. Waco: Word Books.
- Nietzsche Friedrich. 1910. *The Joyful Wisdom*, transl. Thomas Common. London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd.
- Nuovo Victor. 1978. "On Revising Tillich: An Essay on the Principles of Theology". In: *Kairos and Logos*, ed. J. Carey. Macon: Mercer University Press.
- Ogden Schubert M. 1977. *The Reality of God and Other Essays*. New York: Harper and Row.
- Randall John Hermann Jr. 1952. "The Ontology of Paul Tillich". In: *The Theology of Paul Tillich*, ed. C. Kegley and R. Bretall. New York: Macmillan.
- Robinson John Arthur Thomas. 1963. "Comment". In: *The Honest to God Debate*, ed. D. Edwards and J.A.T. Robinson. London: SCM.
- Robinson John Arthur Thomas. 1963. "The Debate Continues". In: *The Honest to God Debate*, ed. D. Edwards and J.A.T. Robinson. London: SCM.
- Robinson John Arthur Thomas. 1967. *Exploration into God*. London: SCM.
- Sartre Jean Paul. 1992. *Being and Nothingness*, transl. H. Barnes. New York: Washington Square Press.
- Schelling Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph. 1978. *System of Transcendental Idealism*, transl. P. Heath. Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia.
- Thatcher Adrian. 1978. *The Ontology of Paul Tillich*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Thomas John H. 1963. *Paul Tillich: an Appraisal*. London: SCM.
- Thomas John H. 2000. *Tillich*. London: Continuum.
- Tillich Paul. 1970. *The Courage To Be. (First Edition)*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Tillich Paul. 1957. *The Dynamics of Faith*. New York: Harper & Row Publishers.
- Tillich Paul. 1974. *The Construction of the History of Religion in Schelling's Positive Philosophy: Its Presuppositions and Principles*, transl. with intr. V. Nuovo. Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press.
- Tillich Paul. 1961. "The God Above God". *The Listener* 66: 169–172.
- Tillich Paul. 1968. *A History of Christian Thought*. New York: Harper & Row.
- Tillich Paul. 1967. *Perspectives on 19th and 20th Century Protestant Theology*, ed. C. Braaten. London: SCM.
- Tillich Paul. 1948. *The Protestant Era*, transl. J. Adams. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Tillich Paul. 1951. *Systematic Theology Vol. I*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Tillich Paul. 1957. *Systematic Theology Vol. II: Existence and the Christ*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Tillich Paul. 1963. *Systematic Theology Vol. III: Life and the Spirit: History and the Kingdom of God*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Tillich Paul. 1981. *The System of the Sciences According to Objects and Method*, transl. P. Wiebe. Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press.

Tillich Paul. 1946. "Two Types of Philosophy of Religion". *Union Seminary Quarterly Review*. May: 3–13.

Tillich Paul. 1965. *Ultimate Concern: Tillich in dialogue*, ed. D. Brown. New York: Harper and Row.

Summary

This essay is an attempt to reconstruct Paul Tillich's argument that existential philosophy is not adequate to answer the question, i.e. the problem, of the human situation because mere existentialism, consisting of a phenomenological description of the human predicament, serves as a departure point for ontology only. Only revelation can provide a sufficient "essentialist" response to this problem. Tillich is also an Augustinian rather than a Thomist. As such, he finds the human connection to God within the soul rather than positing God as an object, e.g. as a first or final cause, outside the soul. This Augustinian principle grounds the possibility of truth for Tillich, which is, arguably, the decisive point of his theology. The emphasis throughout his work that God is not *a* being is but one lucid example of his rejection of Thomism as well as his general rejection of God as a supernatural, that is, transcendent or externally located being. This distinction precludes any proofs for God's existence for Tillich, which must thus be a matter of revelation. God is either *immediately* present to the soul rather than inferred or not at all. Accordingly, this essay will show how, given this Tillichian foundation, God can be first *both* with respect to the order of being *and* of knowledge.

Keywords: Paul Tillich, Martin Heidegger, Correlation, Phenomenology, Existentialism, Ontology, Metaphysics, God, demonic, holy