

A Natural Theology of Hope

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How does one begin to address the meaning of hope? On the one hand, there is no theme that goes more to the heart of life than that of hope. On the other hand, precisely because hope stands at the core of the human condition, there is no aspect of life that is unrelated to it. Our very birth is an affirmation of hope even when our parent(s) or guardian(s) despair of any. The fact that we rise each day is an affirmation of hope even if only with the smallest glimmer. The major life transitions of childhood to puberty, the relationship with a significant other, the pursuit of education and a career, the birth of our own children, and retirement are all expressions of hope. Despite the injustices, tragedies, and suffering of life, we can find even in the darkest hours a glimmer of hope. Death is no negation of hope. With the death of a loved one, we gather to celebrate life and to affirm the hope that makes any such celebration possible.

What is hope? Is it a grand illusion that we embrace willingly as a coping mechanism in the face of the overwhelming negativity in life and in face of the triumph of death over life? In what follows, I want to explore the “groundless ground” for hope in experience that stands behind, under, before, and ahead of any religious doctrine regarding hope. Perhaps then we can be sure that we are engaging “real” hope and are not being blinded by wishful thinking.

The strategy for exploring the “groundless ground” of hope will be to examine the human condition in the world for any indication that humanity is sustained by a limitless dimension that requires of us to affirm real possibilities in even the darkest hours of life. Hence, whereas this project does not deny the possibility of revelation, it is concerned with natural theology and not with revealed theology. The question whether or not revealed theology necessarily presupposes the natural theology of hope investigated here must remain open.

The Historical Framework for Investigating Experience for Hope

Christian theology from its beginnings has drawn pre-consciously or consciously upon the resources for understanding the human condition culturally available to it. These resources have included the various schools of Judaism, Hellenistic Mystery Religions, and Greek philosophical schools. Such a plumbing of resources is an expression of the strength, not the weakness of Christianity. Christianity’s strength is its diversity. Klaus Berger describes the diversity of the early Church as follows:

The picture of the history of the early Church as an explosive event is confirmed here [in *Das neue Testament und frühchristliche Schriften*, a collection of all available texts used by early Christian communities in the first two centuries]. At the beginning one does not find a unified confession, but very early a great number of theological starting points.

The first two centuries still constitute essentially the phase of the working out of different sketches. This wealth is something to be acknowledged, and consequently one should resist attempting to determine the content of “the” Kerygma. One finds a possible significance for the present in that a certain plurality in teaching is to be accepted if not applauded. For the early Christian explosion is certainly a unique phenomenon in the history of religions. It could be that it is the consequence of the fact that one was extremely free to engage ones given situation ...

... The “gospel” demonstrates itself from the beginning to be so unbelievably flexible that the problems associated with establishing a unity to the confession are established at the very beginning of the Christian church.¹

To be sure, most of the appropriation of the religious and philosophical environment for these various theological alternatives should probably be understood as pre-conscious. In other words, the early Christian church created neither the dualisms of light and darkness nor of spirit and flesh, nor the distinction of our being in the world and not of the world, nor of the description of the body as the prison of the soul, but neither were the appropriations of such dualisms the consequence of conscious selection from the Kulturgüte of the age. One might well describe such conceptions as “in the air” and as taken for granted the way we take DNA for granted.

This project in natural theology proposes, nonetheless, that it is helpful to re-examine key understandings found primarily in the writings of Plato and Aristotle as a way of illuminating the issues surrounding the nature of hope. In particular, an investigation of the Aristotelian notion of μεγαλοψυχία (magnanimity) will assist us in thinking through the relationship between fate and virtue in the ancient world that can serve as a horizon for foregrounding the notion of hope in our age under entirely different metaphysical and epistemological conditions. In addition, a return to Plato’s *Parmenides* can perhaps help clarify the meaning of the “one” that will allow us to speak of God as the horizon of possibility surely concealed by all actuality but, nonetheless, as the “groundless ground” of all hope.

1. Klaus Berger and Christiane Nord, *Das neue Testament und frühchristliche Schriften* (Frankfurt a.M.: Insel Verlag, 1999), 15 (author’s translation). See in addition Berger’s description of the early Church in *Theologiegeschichte des Urchristentums: Theologie des Neuen Testaments* (Tübingen: A. Francke Verlag, 1995), 5 as “... a progressive -- in part certainly the result of an explosive -- divergence that finds its unsurpassable end in the distinguishing among the individual sketches. The value of this proposed model (... divergence) might be that the unity and multiplicity of early Christian theology be grasped in a non-static manner. -- Such a comprehensive divergence (with its simultaneously proposed coherence) is in a real sense an historical exception: the consequence of a rapidly accomplished mission and -- as one can see in the texts of the New Testament -- for today’s imagination an almost unbelievable openness to variation with respect to the message of Jesus.” (5) (author’s translation)

Magnanimity, Fate, and Virtue

In the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle distinguishes between ethical and dianoetic virtues.² Ethical virtues are concerned with praxis, actions in the world. Dianoetic virtues are concerned with contemplation. Magnanimity (μεγαλοψία) is an ethical virtue, according to Aristotle, since it is concerned with external actions. Of all the external goods that one can receive, honor is the greatest. "... for honour is the prize of virtue, and it is for good [things] that it is rendered" (*Nicomachean Ethics* 1123b 35). Magnanimity is possessed by the one who has earned honor and conducts her-/himself appropriately in light of the honor. In so doing, the magnanimous person reaches the mean between two evils: vanity (χάυνος) and meanness of spirit (μικρόψυχος). Hence, μεγαλοψία means pride in the sense of self-sufficiency in every situation. As with all ethical in contrast to dianoetic virtues, the person of pride and self-sufficiency is rooted in the world.

In contrast, the dianoetic virtues, according to Aristotle, are independent of "the practical world" of ethical virtues. Dianoetic virtues elevate the human because they are concerned with the divine in humanity. Humanity is related to the divine in the leisure of contemplation (*Nicomachean Ethics* 1177b 1-30). Precisely in the contemplation of Wisdom, one finds freedom: "... we do not seek it [Wisdom] for the sake of any other advantage; but as the man is free, we say, who exists for his own sake and not for another's, so we pursue this [Wisdom] as the only free science, for it alone exists for its own sake" (*Metaphysics* 982b24-27). In contrast to the pride and self-sufficiency of magnanimity (μεγαλοψία), bound to the vicissitudes of the world, contemplation (θεωρία) is entirely unconcerned with the world.

In Stoic philosophy, however, magnanimity becomes the virtue of "knowing superiority" over fate. Magnanimity is a part of courage (ἀνδρεία), one of the four cardinal virtues along with insight or practical wisdom (φρόνησις), self-control (σωφροσύνη), and justice (δικαιοσύνη). For the Stoics, magnanimity is the highest expression of self-control. There was not the slightest doubt that one had the capacity to exercise magnanimity (self-sufficiency over against fate): "freedom as freedom of the 'self-conscious' individual is not a problem"³ according to the Stoics. However, this freedom expresses itself in a kind of resignation in the face of the vicissitudes of life. One remains "above" such things.

2. The following summary of Aristotle's discussion of virtue and μεγαλοψυχία is indebted to Gerhard Krüger, "Die Herkunft des philosophischen Selbstbewußtseins," *Logos. Internationale Zeitschrift für Philosophie der Kultur* 22 (1933): 261-72.

3. Krüger, "Die Herkunft des philosophischen Selbstbewußtseins," 265.

Here is where the theme of hope enters the discussion, for Augustine ridiculed the Stoics for placing their hope in themselves. Aquinas, however, investigates two meanings to faith and hope: “‘fiducia’ [trust, confidence] appears to come before ‘fides’ [faith].”⁴ By trusting in God, the Christian acquires hope. However, as Krüger observes, hope involves a level of uncertainty.⁵ “One hangs here between two possibilities: if one ‘knows’, then there would be no ambiguity. But (sic) one couldn’t confidently hope if one only ‘meant’ it could go well and didn’t believe in it with a ‘solid’ opinion.”⁶ Faith, according to Aquinas, is in the middle between knowledge and opinion. “Confronted with two possibilities, I can take both to be equally probable: then I doubt; I can on the basis of weaker clues lean to one option: then I surmise ...; [or] I can seize one of the possibilities, but not without dreading the other: then I opine ...”⁷ According to Hebrews 11:1, “faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.” “According to Aquinas, it [faith] is an ‘opinion’ that is so decisive that it ‘knows’ ... Faith presupposes a certain understanding, that of the believability of what is believed; [in short,] the presupposition of the entire Thomistic philosophy is that what is believed is not impossible. When, however, ... a decision of the will is necessary to bring understanding to an assent ..., then one can overcome the gulf of uncertainty in Christian faith only by blind confidence in the truthfulness of the revelation of God through the church. This leap is the affair of grace ...”⁸

However, we are confronted with a far greater chasm to leap across when we get to Descartes. What unites Plato, Aristotle, the Stoics, Augustine, and Aquinas is their experiential (!) awareness that they are rooted in an eternal order. Universals, the objects of Wisdom, are the condition of possibility for any and all conscious experience, and universals constitute an eternal unchanging order independent of any finite consciousness but the necessary condition for any and all consciousness. For us in our age, however, the notion that ideas do not change is incomprehensible. We live in a post-Cartesian, post-Lockean world comfortable with Descartes’ conclusion at the end of the second Meditation that perception is merely a series of mental judgments, and these mental judgments can easily be false. There is nothing permanent about ideas, they change all the time. Hence, Descartes proposes that what constitutes the image of

4. Krüger, “Die Herkunft des philosophischen Selbstbewußtseins,” 266.

5. Krüger, “Die Herkunft des philosophischen Selbstbewußtseins,” 267.

6. Krüger, “Die Herkunft des philosophischen Selbstbewußtseins,” 267.

7. Krüger, “Die Herkunft des philosophischen Selbstbewußtseins,” 267.

8. Krüger, “Die Herkunft des philosophischen Selbstbewußtseins,” 267-68.

God in humanity is not a divine order of universals that we can contemplate but the will unlimited by anything external to it. The loss of any experienced sense of enduring universals, the loss of any direct and immediate experience of God in the inwardness of consciousness, combined with the Lockean notion that ideas change, makes far more probable Descartes' judgment in the first Meditation that God might be a malicious deity tricking us with mathematics,⁹ precisely those enduring truths that seem to us to be permanent. In light of our doubt about any and all enduring truths, what unites God and humanity is freedom, the freedom of the will. Given the loss of any sense of humanity's experiential rootedness in divine reason, we are left confronted with what can appear only to be an "impossible" leap. We are to choose (to exercise the will) to leap solely on the basis of revealed theology without any experiential warrant to embrace "things unseen." Here we have the emergence of "self"-consciousness. The self is an autonomous consciousness endowed with the free capacity to choose but afloat in a sea of transient uncertainty and doubt.

Therefore, when we get to Descartes, the notion of magnanimity undergoes a radical transformation because of the Cartesian method of doubt. In the self-certitude of the *cogito sum*, the self discovers a sovereignty over the senses and can even question the magnanimity of God. The strategy for establishing this confidence, however, is not grace, but the free exercise of self-consciousness. Nonetheless, Descartes can encounter the Christian faith only with another faith, the faith in self-conscious philosophy and culture that requires confidence in an endless progress.¹⁰

Although we stand on this side of Descartes and Locke, we have lost the confidence in endless progress that empowered them. On the one hand, in light of the crumbling of an experiential warrant for a metaphysics of the eternal, we cannot fathom the contemplative freedom of Plato and Aristotle, the confidence in the "ground" of the Logos uniting the visible and the invisible for the Stoic, or the "blind" leap of faith required by grace for Augustine and Aquinas. On the other hand, in light of the destructiveness of the last century and our awareness of the fragility of our ecology under the weight of technology, we no longer have the confidence in progress presupposed by Descartes and Locke. In the face of the paradox of our sovereignty over nature but of our vulnerability given the fragility of nature and in the face of our destructiveness, we easily despair of hope. However, a re-examination of the way we have come

9. See Krüger, "Die Herkunft des philosophischen Selbstbewußtseins," 246-49.

10. Krüger, "Die Herkunft des philosophischen Selbstbewußtseins," 270-71.

to define all understanding and meaning in terms of actuality either physical or spiritual offers perhaps a way of breaking open our “world” to a “groundless ground” of hope.

Beyond Actuality to Possibility

By turning to the pre-Plotinian roots of Christian theology,¹¹ it might be possible to acquire a new understanding of the meaning of hope. The goal of such a turn would be a) to examine the spiritual nature (not merely the actual content) of human experience and b) to shift the focus of God talk from actuality to possibility.

The first shift in focus turns attention away from the perceptible, material, divisible, measurable, and constantly changing dimension of the material world to emphasize the imperceptible, immaterial, indivisible, immeasurable, and in part unchanging dimension of consciousness (spirituality). In short, the first shift in focus calls for development of the implications of spirituality in the midst of a material world. The second shift in focus turns away from attempting to establish the “what” to emphasize the “how” of knowledge. Here the question of “how” is not concerned with causality (how something is caused to happen according to efficient causality). To focus on “how” in the sense meant here is to focus on the conditions of possibility enabling any and all experience. The “how” of experience and knowledge is dependent upon the concealed depths of a no-thingness that is both the temporal horizon of all

11. It is surely no accident that Hartshorne’s and Reese’s massive and brilliant analysis of philosophical theology focuses on Augustine as the founder of Christian Classical theism. See Charles Hartshorne and William L. Reese, *Philosophers Speak of God* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1969). However, Augustine’s roots go to Plotinus’ Neoplatonism, not Philo of Alexandria’s Platonism. David T. Runia points out in *Philo in Early Christian Literature* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 322: “... just like his mentor [Ambrose], Augustine only mentions Philo’s name once in all his vast corpus of writings.” See as well, Ernst Benz, *Die Entwicklung des Abendländischen Willensbegriffs von Plotin bis Augustin* (Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer, 1931), 1-38. The key difference between Greek and Latin Christianity is over the conception of humanity’s relationship to God. For Greek Christianity the central experience is contemplation; for Latin Christianity the central experience is our inability to control the will. Benz points out that the source of Latin Christianity’s understanding of the will is found in Plotinus (Benz, *Die Entwicklung des Abendländischen Willensbegriffs von Plotin bis Augustin*, 1,22) and comes from Egyptian and not Greek philosophy of religion.

While the present paper agrees with Process Theology that we need to get beyond the conception of God as Totally Other, impassible, and unchanging (hence, unloving) God of Classical Theism, the route proposed here is to recover from pre-Plotinian reflection the spiritual nature of actual human experience always rooted in an historical context precisely because God is nothing actual and everything possible.

actuality as well as the potentiality that enables all that is both as being and becoming. In short, the “how” of experience and knowledge is inseparable from the concealed horizon of possibility in any and all actuality either being or becoming. Since I have attempted elsewhere¹² to develop a notion of spirituality that is other than an encapsulated mind that “goes out” into the world only to “return” to its isolated inwardness, that is other than a form of romantic escapism from materialism, that is other than a call for mystical absorption into a transcendent Oneness, and that is other than a form of spirituality that champions merely imperceptible values as the orienting framework of action in the world, I will return only briefly to these themes at the end of the present paper. Here, however, I want to develop in greater detail the implications of the second shift in focus for theology, the shift to thinking about God as possibility. My goal is to reflect about monotheism and not about any Trinitarian formulation of monotheism.¹³

One may speak of my project as an attempt at “theology from below” or natural theology. In other words, I am interested in establishing what we may legitimately say about human spirituality and God in light of the role of presuppositions and the profound limits to the human condition without simply ignoring or escaping those presuppositions and limits by means of unbridled speculation in an attempt to merely justify what we want to believe. In short, my work is a protest against “top down causality,” for “top down causality” is too easily employed uncritically simply to justify theological beliefs to which we are already committed.¹⁴ Although I am not about to dismiss materialism or speculation about top down causality from our concern, the issue is not whether but how: not whether we are materialists or whether we engage in speculation, but how we are materialists and how we are speculative. To the extent that

12. In addition to Douglas McGaughey, *Strangers and Pilgrims: On the Role of Aporiai in Theology* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter & Co., 1997), see the concluding chapter of Douglas McGaughey, *Christianity for the Third Millennium: Faith in an Age of Fundamentalism and Skepticism* (San Francisco: International Scholars Publications, 1998).

13. For a marvelously creative suggestion for thinking about the Trinity, see Jürgen Moltmann, “Die einladende Einheit des dreieinigen Gottes,” *Concilium* 21, no. 1 (February 1985): 35-40. Although Moltmann’s proposal to think of the Trinity in terms of a “perichoretic unity” [all encompassing unity] that takes into itself all suffering by the organic inter-relationship of its parts and with the world (39a) (in contrast to Barth’s insistence that God is a transcendent One outside of the world (39b)) is compatible with what the present paper proposes with respect to the oneness of God, Moltmann’s discussion remains entirely confined to notions of actuality at the expense of the fruitfulness of thinking of divine oneness in terms of the notion of possibility.

14. See, for example, Arthur Peacocke, *Theology for a Scientific Age: Being and Becoming--Natural, Divine, and Human* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993).

speculation is limited to “what” we can experience and know and not to “how,” speculation can only result in a blind embracing of unclarified presuppositions.

The origin of Western critical reflection concerning ultimate reality is lost in the haze of pre-history. If we are not to succumb to the anachronism of the “noble savage” and even if we want to believe that the original religious impetus of humanity is rooted in intellectual insights, we must acknowledge that we encounter a record of critical reflection about ultimate reality only with the Greek Naturalists in the 6th century BCE. The Greek Naturalists sought the ἀρχή/αί (the first principle(s)) of all reality. Thales of Miletos is the first recorded thinker to propose there to be an original principle upon which everything is dependent. Perhaps in acquiescence to the centrality of the principle of fluid as the basis of life at the core of pre-Minoan and subsequent sacrificial religion,¹⁵ Thales spoke of water as the original principle. Heraclitus subsequently proposed fire as more primordial than water, Anaxagoras proposed four (water, fire, earth, and air), and eventually Aristotle spoke of five principles (water, fire, earth, air, and ether). The presupposition of all these reflections is that something cannot come from nothing or that actuality precedes potentiality to use Aristotle’s language. Ever since the initial Ionian reflections upon first principle(s), the focus for speaking of ultimate reality (and of what “is” in general) has been directed toward actuality. Although Plato enigmatically suggests in the Republic 509b that the First Principle of the Whole (or the Good) is higher than being (ἐπέκεινα τῆς οὐσίας, higher than being/essence), the all too ready assumption is that Plato’s First Principle is not nothing but is something actual.¹⁶

Plato’s philosophical reflections presuppose a First Principle and an unlimited two as the condition of possibility for experience.¹⁷ The problem Plato addresses in the Parmenides is that

15. This is precisely Aristotle’s reading of Thales’ motivation for choosing water as the first principle. See Metaphysics 983b 13-25 and Richard Broxton Onians, *The Origins of European Thought About the Body, the Mind, the Soul, the World, Time, and Fate*, reprint, 1937 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 121, 535-36.

16. Already with Plato’s teacher, Socrates, we are confronted with ambiguity about the nature of what is actual. Definition is the key to the actual. However, the early aporetic dialogues from Plato establish our inability to define even the most common of things since we cannot simultaneously determine identity and difference. In the absence of definition, we cannot know what is actual. We can only presume to know. Since we must assume (i.e., presuppose) the actual universal in light of our inability to define any universal, when we wish to define something we must point to an actual particular.

17. See Aristotle’s testimony in Metaphysics A6; Plato’s Phaedo, Lesser Hippias 300f, and Republic 524bc.

of the definition of the one and the many. The one and the many are no different, however, than definitions in general: definitions prove to be impossible. We cannot establish simultaneously identity and difference; what is identical to a set and what distinguishes this set from all other sets. This is particularly the case with the one and the many. There can be no one without at least a two.¹⁸ There appears to be a profound contradiction that excludes the possibility of defining the one, and, in the absence of a definition of the one, there can be no definition of two as distinct from one.

... the conclusion of all these arguments is that the one both is and is becoming, older and younger than itself and than the others and also neither is, nor is becoming, either older or younger than itself or than the others [that are many]. (Parmenides 155c4-7)

It appears, then, that the one, when it acquires or loses existence, comes into existence and ceases to exist.

Also, since it is one and many and a thing that comes to be and ceases to be, when it comes to be one, its being many ceases to be, and when it comes to be many, its being one ceases to be. And as coming to be one it must be combined, as coming to be many, separated. (Parmenides 156a6-156b5)

... when it passes from one to many or from many to one, it is not either one or many, and it is not being separated or being combined ...

All these changes ... may happen to the one, if it exists.

We have next to consider what will be true of the others, if there is a one.

Supposing, then, that there is a one, what must be said of the things other than the one?

Since they are other than the one, they are not the one; if they were, they could not be other than it. Yet the others are not wholly destitute of the one [unity], but partake of it in a way. (Parmenides 157a4-157c1)

... things that have a share in the one [i.e., possess unity] will be different from the one that they share in [i.e., the unity they possess]. And things different from the one will naturally be many, for if the things other than the one were neither one nor more than one, they would be nothing. (Parmenides 158a9-158b3)

... the things other than the one ... are unlimited and also have limit. (Parmenides 158d6-7)

Given these presuppositions regarding the one and the many, Plato then points out the absurdity they involve:

If there is a one, what must be true of the things other than the one?

The one ... must be separate from the others and they from it ... Consequently, the things other than the one, not possessing unity either in part or as a whole, can have no

18. On the issue of the One and the Many in Plato's Parmenides, see Walter Bröcker, "Plato über das Gute (1949)," in *Das Problem der ungeschriebenen Lehre Platons. Beiträge zum Verständnis der platonischen Prinzipienphilosophie*, edited by Jürgen Wippert (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1972), 222, 228-30.

unity in any way. The others, then, are not one in any sense, and there is no ‘one thing’ to be found among them.

It follows that the others are not many either. For ... not having unity in any sense, they are neither one nor many, neither a whole nor parts. (Parmenides 159b4-159d6)

Thus, if there is a one, the one is both all things and nothing whatsoever, alike with reference to itself and to the others. (Parmenides 160b2-3)

Cornelia de Vogel has observed that Plato’s dialogue, the Parmenides, represents a crisis for Plato.¹⁹ The Parmenides has long been seen as a bump in the road where Plato confronted the limits to the very two principles upon which all his philosophical reflections depend. Somehow, it is often assumed, Plato seems to have forgotten this dialogue and returned to his usual reflections oblivious to the implications of the Parmenides.

However, another alternative is that Plato himself is the first post-metaphysical thinker.²⁰ When Socrates says that wisdom consists of our knowing that we do not know what we think we know, we are reminded that our experience and understanding depend upon actual conditions that we can only assume to know but can at best only presume. On the one hand, the dimension of sense perception only provides us with opinions. On the other hand, we can know neither universals (the many) nor the First Principle of the Whole (the one). All we can do is describe particulars, but in order to describe a particular we must presume the universal that distinguishes that particular from all other particulars unlike it in kind. Hence, whereas all that we actually are, and can be, understand and can understand is dependent upon both the actuality of universals and the actuality of the First Principle, we are incapable of knowing those actualities. At the very beginning of the Western metaphysical tradition, then, we find a post-metaphysical Plato.²¹

19. See C. J. Vogel, “Plato: The Written and Unwritten Doctrines,” in *Rethinking Plato and Platonism* (New York: E. J. Brill, 1988), 6 and 28, n. 58.

20. John Sallis has also proposed that with Plato “... the beginning of metaphysics will have been already the end of metaphysics.” John Sallis, *Chorology: On Beginning in Plato’s Timaeus* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), 123 Sallis reminds us that Plato was not necessarily the defender of eternal archetypes that Platonism made him out to be. Plato refuses in the *Timaeus* 51b-52c to give a “definitive answer” to whether or not universals are archetypal or ectypal. Universals are a matter of presupposition. See Sallis, *Chorology: On Beginning in Plato’s Timaeus*, 112. Plato already proposed in Book VI of the *Republic* that universals are “hypotheses.” See Plato’s simile of the line in *Republic* 509d-511e, especially 510b and 511a-b.

21. Speaking of the “three kinds” of things (existence, motion, and rest) Plato writes in the *Sophist* 259a2-b6: “... an opponent must either convince us that our account is wrong by refuting it, or, so long as he proves unable to do that, he must accept our statements (a) that the

This does not mean to suggest that Plato denied what is actual and our dependence upon metaphysical conditions necessary for experience. It merely means to suggest that Plato recognized that we cannot know the actual and those conditions since they are a mixture of “is” and “is not.”²²

We know that the Platonic Academy in its first centuries was known for its skepticism. However, the depth of that skepticism is already articulated in the Platonic corpus. We might have here the key to the enduring religious character to Plato’s work.²³ His turn to “Mythos” when he reached the limits to “Logos” was not always a mere speculative move beyond rationality. In the *Gorgias* Plato writes (523a): “So hear then -- as one is careful to say -- a very beautiful Logos. You will surely take it, I believe, to be a Mythos, but I take it to be a Logos; for, what I am about to relate to you, I tell you as something that is true.” Furthermore, we are told in the *Republic* Book I (327a-b) that Socrates and his companions were returning to Athens from Pireaus after having taken part in a religious festival and in the *Phaedo* 118a that Socrates after having drunk the hemlock and just before he died arranged to have a cock sacrificed to Asclepius.²⁴ Are such pervasive religious elements in Plato’s writing merely a diversion for his detractors who were convinced that Plato was a threat to popular religion? Was Plato simply

kinds blend with one another, (b) that existence and difference pervade them all, and pervade one another, (c) that difference [*or* the different], by partaking of existence, *is* by virtue of that participation, but on the other hand *is not* that existence of which it partakes, but is different, and since it is different from existence [*or* an existent], quite clearly it must be possible that it should *be* a thing that *is not*, (d) and again, existence, having a part in difference, will be different from all the rest of the kinds, and, because it is different from them all, it *is not* any one of them nor yet all the others put together, but is only itself, with the consequence, again indisputable, that existence *is not* myriads upon myriads of things, and that all the other kinds in the same way, whether taken severally or all together, in some respects *are* and in many respects *are not*.”

22. Certainly in the *Laws* 644e-645c, Plato acknowledges the profound limits to our knowledge about the origin of the human condition. Nonetheless, we are and must act “as if” we possessed knowledge.

23. In contrast to Protagoras who is reported to have said that “Man is the measure of all things” (Aristotle, *Metaphysics* IX3.1047a6), Plato responds that “God is the measure of all things” (*Laws* 716c).

24. According to Greek mythology, Asclepius was killed by a lightning bolt from Zeus because he raised a person from the dead. As the god of physicians, Asclepius was symbolically represented by the snake, the symbol of eternal life. See Robert Muth, *Einführung in die Griechische und Römische Religion* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1988), 137-38.

protecting himself from his enemies like Hume is often assumed to be doing at the close of his *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* where the narrator states that Cleanthes, the object of the (refined) skeptic Philo's eroding attack throughout the entire dialogues, is probably correct? I wish to propose that neither Hume nor Plato are disingenuous but forthright in their acknowledgment of the limits to the human condition that make absolute judgments impossible and, thereby, make religion entirely appropriate and necessary. After all, Plato tells us in the Republic that we should revere our religious traditions, for piety is an important element in the cultivation of virtue.

By returning to Plato's reflections about the one and the unlimited two within the framework of acknowledging the limits to human knowledge, I believe we can gain a new insight into the very nature of God that leaves us neither with only the option of Negative Theology nor with a Plotinian metaphysical One over against the many. In short, Negative Theology and Plotinus continue to think of God in terms of the categories of actuality although they recognize that no categories of finite actuality are appropriate for expressing the nature of God. If instead of actuality we employ the notion of possibility to reflect about Plato's one and unlimited two, we acquire an entirely different understanding of the nature of God. God is not some inaccessible Other of an absolute dualism as in Negative Theology and Neo-Orthodoxy. We find already in Plato a hint that we are to think of the one as possibility rather than actuality:

... if there is a one, the one is both all things and nothing whatsoever, alike with reference to itself and to the others.

We have ... to consider what follows, if the one is not.

What ... is the meaning of this supposition, 'if a one does not exist'? It differs from the supposition, 'if a not-one does not exist,' and not only differs from it, but is the direct contrary. (Parmenides 160b2-c2)

Starting afresh, then, from the supposition, 'if a one does not exist,' we are to consider what consequences follow.

First ... this must be true of it, that there is knowledge of it; otherwise the very meaning of the supposition that 'a one does not exist' would be unknown.

Also, it must be true that other things are different from it; otherwise it could not be spoken of as different from them. So, besides being knowable, it must have difference in character ...

And further this nonexistent one has the characters of being 'that' and 'something,' and of being related 'to this' or 'to these ... Thus although the one cannot have existence, ... there is nothing against its having many characters; indeed it must, if it is *this* one, and not another that does not exist ...

It follows that the one possesses unlikeness with respect to the others ...

Moreover, if it has unlikeness to the others, it must have likeness to itself ...

Further, the one is not equal to the others ...

so a one which does not exist will, it appears, have equality, greatness, and smallness. (Parmenides 160d2-161e1)

Thus it appears that the one has being, if it *is* nonexistent, and also, since it *is not* existent, has not-being. (Parmenides 162b5-6)

Therefore, the nonexistent one both becomes, and does not become, unlike ... And so the nonexistent one, as becoming unlike, comes to be and ceases to be, and as not becoming unlike, it does neither.

Thus the nonexistent one both comes to be and ceases to be, and also does not come to be or cease to be. (Parmenides 163a6-163b4)

I propose that we read “one” here as possibility, which is both one (possibility) and many (possibilities) but concealed by actuality. Possibility “is not” actual (i.e., it is the “nonexistent one”), yet possibilities are unceasingly coming to be actualized. However in becoming actual, possibility remains “unlike” from what is actual. In short, possibilities neither come to be nor cease to be. Furthermore, whereas possibilities are unlike everything that is actual (the existent), they are not absolutely nothing. Possibility is the no-thingness that all actuality conceals and presupposes. Possibilities are non-existent, yet they are. In coming to be, possibilities cease to be as possibilities, but their coming to be actual in no way eliminates unactualized possibilities. Actuality is dripping with possibility.

Although there is not room to develop his thesis here, Heinz Happ argues that Aristotle’s notion of hyle (ύλή, matter) is possibility.²⁵ He points out that hyle does not mean tangible

25. I proposed in *Christianity for the Third Millennium: Faith in an Age of Fundamentalism and Skepticism* that we think of Plato’s Good (τὸ ἀγαθόν) as possibility. Plato spoke of the Good as ἐπέκεινα τῆς οὐσίας (beyond being) Republic 509b. Derrida tantalizingly proposed thinking the χώρα (“empty space”) of Plato’s *Timaeus* as also ἐπέκεινα τῆς οὐσίας. See Jacques Derrida, “Tense,” in *The Path of Archaic Thinking: Unfolding the Work of John Sallis*, edited by Kenneth Maly (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995), 73-74. See as well, Sallis, *Chorology: On Beginning in Plato’s Timaeus*, 113, n. 23. It would be a fruitful exercise to read both the Good and chora as possibility, for such a reading “unites” the invisible and the visible -- to be sure, not by means of an ontological category of “being” (not as a form of Derridian “presence” or the “hyper-essential”) but by means of “not being,” by the concealed possibilities in all that is manifest both invisible and visible. Such a reading in conjunction with Happ’s work on Aristotle’s notion of ύλή (matter) would allow us to applaud Aristotle’s reading of Plato’s χώρα as ύλή (On Generation and Corruption 329a; see Sallis, *Chorology: On Beginning in Plato’s Timaeus*, 152). To be sure, we could no longer read ύλή as “physical stuff,” but according to Happ Aristotle’s ύλή is nothing physical. Since John Sallis takes Aristotle’s ύλή to mean physical stuff, he is adamantly opposed to reading Aristotle’s ύλή as the same as Plato’s χώρα, and in so doing Sallis is entirely correct. However, neither Plato’s χώρα nor Aristotle’s ύλή mean anything physical or actual. These central notions (ἀγαθόν, χώρα, and ύλή) all refer to possibility if not in exactly the same way. Sallis’ champion Schelling proposes precisely this when he wrote in *Philosophische Untersuchungen über das Wesen der menschlichen Freiheit und die damit zusammenhängenden Gegenstände* in *Sämtliche Werke* (Stuttgart and Augsburg: J.G. Cotta’scher Verlag, 1860), I/7: 398 (see Sallis, *Chorology: On Beginning in Plato’s Timaeus*, 165, n 33): “As concerns the plurality of possible worlds, infinite possibility certainly seems to be offered by matter [*Stoff*] (insert by

“stuff,” according to Aristotle, but is applicable to the highest principle (ousia, being).²⁶ This is not to suggest that Aristotle understands hyle (matter) to be an unlimited potency. Possibilities are incapable of realization by themselves. They are always limited by an actual historical condition.²⁷

To think about the oneness of God in terms of possibility enables a way to speak about the indubitable presence of a “groundless ground” to hope without metaphysical flights of speculation that ignore the epistemological limits of the human condition or without employing our metaphysical and epistemological limits in order to simply embrace what we wanted to believe before we commenced our critical investigations. In addition, to think about God in terms of possibility is to push the radically figurative nature of human reflection to its metaphorical limits by requiring that we always think of God in terms of a profound “is”/“is not” at the core of reality (the “is”/“is not” possibility in relation to actuality).²⁸

Sallis) [= “Plato’s matter” = χῶρα] (insert by McGaughey), which is in itself unruly [*ein an sich Regellos*] (insert by Sallis) ... that is still unformed but receptive to all forms’ ...” χῶρα is infinite possibility (i.e., Plato’s and Aristotle’s “matter” read as possibility not as something actually physical).

How would one, then, respond to Aristotle’s claim that actuality precedes possibility? I would challenge us to think of this claim as epistemological and not ontological. In other words, the claim that actuality precedes possibility is similar to Aristotle’s claim that knowledge is always first concerned with form in matter. Both claims are statements more about how we come to know than they are statements about ontology. See Gerard Verbeke, “The Meaning of Potency in Aristotle,” in *Graceful Reason*, edited by Lloyd P. Gerson (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1983), 55: “Dealing with the relationship between act and potency, the Stagirite declares that, with respect to their concept and knowability [!], act is prior to potency [note: Met. ix.8, 1049b10-17].” Furthermore, “... the highest level of intelligibility is represented by what is universal, unchangeable, uncompounded, and necessary ... [I]n this respect act is undoubtedly more intelligible than potency.” (56) However, concealed possibility is the necessary condition for any and all actuality (i.e., intelligibility). Hence, ontologically, possibility is higher than actuality.

26. Heinz Happ, *Hyle. Studien zum Aristotelischen Materie-Begriff* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1971); Heinz Happ, “Weltbild und Seinslehre bei Aristoteles,” *Antike und Abendland. Beiträge zum Verständnis der Griechen und Römer und ihres Nachlebens* XIV (1968): 72-91.

27. Verbeke, “The Meaning of Potency in Aristotle,” 55-59.

28. Paul Ricoeur describes the metaphorical nature of truth in Paul Ricoeur, *The Rule of Metaphor: Multi-Disciplinary Studies of the Creation of Meaning in Language*, translated by

My goal is not to establish the correctness of monotheism simply because monotheism is taken to be a conviction one must hold to be a Christian. My goal is to think about the reality of God “from below” as the condition of possibility for our natural experience with as much critical awareness about the context in which such reflection must transpire and with no preconceived notions about the way God must be. To think about God as possibility requires that the notion of God be understood metaphorically. Derrida dismisses metaphor for precisely the reason that it depends upon a metaphysical proper meaning.²⁹ The heart of metaphor, however, is not that it depends upon a metaphysical foundation of a proper meaning extended inappropriately to the target notion by means of what I.A. Richards and Philip Wheelwright call the “vehicle” and the “tenor.”³⁰ Ricoeur reminds us that metaphor thrives on indeterminacy of meaning because its starting point is not a metaphysical foundation but a dead metaphor. Ricoeur’s theory of metaphor is precisely an expression of the non-epistemic faith at the heart of understanding.

To speak of the nature of God’s “oneness” as possibility is obviously metaphorical since possibility is simultaneously “one” and “many,” a classic example of the “is”/“is not” character of metaphor. To be sure, this metaphor does not permit us to think of God as something actual

Robert Czerny, Kathleen McLaughlin, and John Costello (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1977). See, particularly, Study 7.

29. Derrida, “White Mythology” in Jacques Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy*, translated by Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 207-71.

30. See I.A. Richards, *The Philosophy of Rhetoric* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1965), 1-138. Tenor and vehicle distinguish the two halves of a metaphor: “... [a]t present we have only some clumsy descriptive phrases with which to separate them. ‘The original idea’ and ‘the borrowed one’; ‘what is really being said or thought of’ and ‘what it is compared to’; ‘the underlying idea’ and the ‘imagined nature’; ‘the principal subject’ and ‘what it resembles’ or, still more confusing, simply ‘the meaning’ and ‘the metaphor’ or ‘the idea’ and ‘its image.’” (96) “We need the word ‘metaphor’ for the whole double unit, and to use it sometimes for one of the two components in separation from the other is as injudicious as that other trick by which we use ‘the meaning’ here sometimes for the work that the whole double unit does and sometimes for the other component - the tenor, as I am calling it - the underlying idea or principal subject which the vehicle or figure means.” (96-97) “The traditional theory ... made metaphor seem to be a verbal matter, shifting and displacement of words, whereas fundamentally it is a borrowing between and intercourse of *thoughts*, a transaction between contexts. *Thought* is metaphoric, and proceeds by comparison, and the metaphors of language derive therefrom.” (94)

Wheelwright extends the notion of metaphor from an intercourse of thoughts to describe the profoundly “tensive” character of reality in contrast to a “steno” or literally accessible reality. See Philip Wheelwright, *Metaphor and Reality* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1968).

over against the actual world or the actual universe. Rather, God as possibility is the concealed dimension to all actuality, the “One” of possibility, that is the very condition of possibility for all that is. Nonetheless, possibilities are different for each actual situation although somehow shared by all in the situation. Hence, one must speak of possibilities as “Many.” In short, the metaphors of “one” and “possibility” express the profound dependence of all that is and of all temporality on God while preventing any one religious community to stake an exclusive and excluding territorial claim on the actual meaning of God.

These can only be proleptic suggestions for theological reflection, of course. One would surely want to explore the implications for humanity with respect to what amount to destructive possibilities. However, I would underscore that it is not the possibilities that are destructive. Possibilities are always conscribed by a historical context, and one can champion no better criteria for the actualization of possibilities than to insist they always be a constructive response to one’s historical situation that is not destructive of the conditions of possibility for oneself or others.

The Greeks spoke of the need to maintain balance and to avoid excess. Christianity speaks of the love of neighbor as the ultimate criterion for ethical decision making. Paul Ricoeur challenges us to think beyond the immediate horizon of the self to remember the deeds and sufferings of those who have gone before as we seek to create just institutions for all.³¹ Another way of expressing a similar set of criteria for adjudicating which possibilities one ought to actualize is to wrestle with the ambiguities of authentic and inauthentic thrown Being-in-the-world as developed by Heidegger in *Being and Time*. Heidegger challenges us to live our ownmost possibilities in a project of care and solicitude for others but recognizes that there is great ambiguity distinguishing one’s ownmost possibilities from the possibilities the public “they-world” wishes for us to actualize. In all such criteria, one can point to the necessity for the development of criteria as well as the conditions for the application of criteria as expressive of the radical human freedom and responsibility inherent in the notion of God as possibility. At the same time, however, the condition that enables our freedom and our responsibility is that our world be informed by a concealed horizon of possibility. This very concealed horizon is the condition necessary, as well, for hope.

Given limited space, I can only suggest with broad brush strokes the theological implications such a rethinking of the oneness of God might allow. First, thinking about God as possibility provides a way of talking about the reality and otherness of God that is not something

31. See Paul Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, translated by Kathleen Blamey (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1992).

metaphysically actual beyond being.³² In other words, God is not something finite, limited by other finite things. Second, to think about God as possibility provides a way of talking about God that understands God to be profoundly and organically related to all actuality and not merely to humanity. Given the limits to the correspondence theory of truth, one can understand God as the very condition of possibility for any and all truth in the sense of ἀλήθεια (the unconcealed). Third, to think about God in this manner prohibits limiting God to dependence upon inward experience or restricting our understanding of God to analogy based on human experience.³³ In the order of things, this way of thinking and of engaging the divine refuses to permit our taking humanity to be an exception with regard to its relatedness to God. One may speak of a difference of degree, not a difference of kind. Fourth, such an approach to thinking about God ensures the radical freedom inherent in any and all events, including human decision making, while at the same time affirming the profound dependence of events upon divine conditions not of our making. Fifth, we may talk about God as the source of hope in the midst of our darkest hours without turning that hope into mere wishful thinking that ignores the risk, despair, and suffering in life. In short, one is not only empowered but required to speak of grace as the necessary assumption for experience, and one can understand the transformative power of God's grace that enables dramatic change in the personal lives of individuals. God initiates and creates while we actualize our lives out of our dependence upon actual conditions and upon possibilities not of our creation. Sixth, to think about God as possibility provides us with a framework for rethinking the theodicy question since only actualities are either good or evil. Just as thoughts and possibilities are in themselves neither good nor evil, so also consciousness and possibilities are in themselves neither good nor evil. Paul spoke in Romans 7 precisely in this fashion. In our inward selves, we are good, for it is only external actions that can be good or

32. The tradition has wrestled with the notion that God is beyond being at least since Plato proposed that the Good or the First Principle of the Whole is ἐπέκεινα τῆς οὐσίας (beyond being) in the Republic 509b. The most radical form of such a metaphysical actual "beyond being" is Karl Barth's proposition that God is Totally Other in opposition to history. Barth is a radical dualist because he can contemplate God only as something actual over against an actual world. See Karl Barth, *The Word of God and the Word of Man*, Douglas Horton (trans) (Gloucester, MA: Peter Smith, 1978).

33. The anthropological, the teleological, the ontological, and the moral arguments for God, as well as Process Theology are all dependent upon an appeal either to human experience or to an analogy based upon human experience. There is no more serious challenge to such a grounding for theological reflection than David Hume, *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion and the Posthumous Essays of the Immortality of the Soul and On Suicide*, edited by Richard H. Popkin (Indianapolis: Hackett Pub., Co., 1982).

evil. Nonetheless, we cannot not act, but the possibilities that are the presupposition for our actions are themselves neither good nor evil. We are responsible and accountable for the actualizing of our possibilities, and the conditions necessary for that responsibility is the freedom that those possibilities demand of us. Freedom, however, does not leave us trapped in the destructive actualities we actualize. In fact, it is precisely freedom and its conditions of possibility that enable a truly reconciling forgiveness for our destructiveness. The very condition of possibility for our freedom prohibits us from changing the actuality (we cannot go back and change what actually happened), but it can allow us to return to retrieve the possibilities concealed by the actuality in acts of horizontal forgiveness empowered by God as possibility.³⁴

Elsewhere, I have spoken of our need to recover an experiential spirituality that is neither a “going out” and “return” to an encapsulated self, nor a romantic escapism from materialism, nor a form of mystic absorption into God, nor a mere clinging to imperceptible values as inward principles for the guidance of life. Rather, I want to stress the radically intangible nature of experience inaccessible to the senses. Nonetheless, such a contemplation of the spiritual nature of experience does not necessarily mean a re-introduction of a Cartesian dualism of two substances. Rather, a retrieval of the concealed depths of possibility in terms of the divine presence at the core of reality overcomes any and all dualisms. God is not something actual over against our world/universe, and consciousness (spirit) is not something actual over against the perceptible/material world/universe. God as possibility is the gracious giver of all that is that enables spiritual freedom and personal accountability. In short, God enables hope. There is no higher freedom than that realized by our elevation into the spirit as the orientation for conducting our lives and realizing our possibilities in the world.³⁵ The conditions for this spiritual freedom are what provide humanity with hope.

34. Rather than forgiveness consisting of something “vertical,” where God eliminates our responsibility for the actuality of our actions over against the other, this notion of forgiveness requires the perpetrator as well as the victim (when another human being) acknowledge remorsefully the actuality of what occurred and to seek to recover the possibilities “eliminated” but not entirely liquidated at the time of the actual destructive event.

35. Alois Emanuel Biedermann spoke of Christianity as “Erhebung des Menschen, als endlichen Geistes, aus der eigenen endlichen Naturbedingtheit zur Freiheit über sie in einer unendlichen Abhängigkeit.” Alois Emanuel Biedermann, *Christliche Dogmatik* (Zürich: Verlag von Orell, Füssli & Co., 1869), 30. See also, Biedermann, *Christliche Dogmatik*, 2nd. ed., 1884-5, vol. 1, p. 241: “Die Religion, als subjective Erhebung des menschlichen Ich aus einer negativ empfundenen Weltschranke seines natürlichen Lebens zu einer incommensurabel über derselben erhabenen Macht um von ihr Befreiung zu erlangen, hat zu ihrem subjectiven Motiv alles, worin der Widerspruch zwischen dem Lebensanspruch des Menschen und seiner erfahrenen Schranke hervortreten kann. Zum Inhalte der Religion gehört alles, worin jene Erhebung sich vollzieht.

Furthermore, on the basis of God as possibility, one can rethink all three Christian virtues. Faith does not provide us with a form of knowledge beyond human reason. Rather, faith is our non-epistemic confidence that we as a community properly understand reality not only as it actually is but, above all, as reality involves a concealed horizon of possibilities. As non-epistemic, faith reigns in the violence either psychic or physical that arises as a consequence of religious gang alliances when religious communities square off against one another. Non-epistemic faith not only allows for but also depends upon the other's faith to enable correction of one's own commitments and to enrich the human condition since no one faith perspective can account for all human experience in its rich cultural and historical contexts. Hope is not dependent upon a mere human or revealed doctrine we must embrace by making a leap even if the leap is possible only by grace. Rather, hope is an ontological condition of reality embraced on faith since all actual reality can only be to the extent it is rooted in possibilities. Finally, Love is no longer reserved for those within one's faith community, one's gang alliance, but extends to every community and all persons. We need a theology that looks beyond the horizon of what is actually true to break open our lives to the possibilities that connect us all while simultaneously recognizing that we each have only our own possibilities to actualize. Hence, the other as individual and as a community can be celebrated for her/his and its otherness precisely because she/he and they enrich the possibilities of life far more than constituting a threat to us. When we can look beyond the limitations of actuality, beyond the limitations of our gang turf, to seize upon the possibilities of our lives individually, interpersonally, and inter-communally, we can truly be agents of the kingdom of God.

Die psychische Form des Glaubens ist der einheitliche Act persönlicher Erhebung: ein Gefühl von Weltschranke und Abhängigkeit als Ausgang und von Freiheit von derselben als Ziel; ein Vorstellen von einer unendlichen Macht über derselben, und ein Wollen, als Act der Selbsterhebung zu ihr mit dem Verlangen nach Freiheit von jener Lebensschranke. Alle diese Acte ... bilden jedoch nicht isolirt selbständige Theile, sondern nur in ihrer innern Wechselwirkung auf einander Momente der Religion; d.h. sie sind nicht isolirt für sich, sei's um ihres Inhaltes sei's um ihrer Form willen, religiöse Gefühle, religiöse Verstellungen, religiöse Handlungen."

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