

Theology and Religious Thought

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The Encyclopedia of Modern French Thought

Although the origins of modern French theological and religious thought are elusive, it may not be inappropriate to trace them to the work of the seventeenth century philosopher René Descartes. While Descartes' use of "clear and distinct ideas" and his insistence on the alliance between philosophical reflection and the sciences have been extremely influential for the French intellectual tradition in general, his connection to the theological and religious thought of France has more to do with his attempt to establish an absolute, self-grounded epistemological system, a so-called "first philosophy." Clearly, the notion that philosophical inquiry should be the foundation upon which all other knowledge is built extends back to the beginnings of philosophy itself, but it takes its modern form in Descartes' *Meditations on First Philosophy*, the work in which he most explicitly sought to delineate his own irrefutable basis for all knowledge. In the *Meditations*, Descartes argued that "first philosophy" should take as its point of departure an epistemological examination of the human entity: What is it, he asked, that we can know with absolute certainty? He attempted to answer this question by initially calling into doubt everything of which he was unsure, using only that which cannot be doubted in order to establish what is philosophically certain. In short order, he stripped away the apparent reality of the physical world, including the idea of the body, leaving himself only with the *Cogito*, the thinking subject.

Using elements of Anselm's ontological argument, woven together with his own conception of the human subject as an imperfect being, Descartes argued from the *Cogito*

back to the necessary existence of God. The significance of this argument for the *Cogito* itself is important to note; for even though Descartes' meditative inquiry moves from the *Cogito* back to God's existence, God is still conceived to be *ontologically* prior to human beings. Given that his first philosophy turns on the idea that the human being is an intermediate entity, something between "God and nothing," this conception of God's ontological primacy was essential to Descartes. As the contemporary philosophical theologian Paul Ricoeur says: ". . . God confers on the certainty of myself the permanence that it does not hold in itself."

The Cartesian attempt to fuse the imperfect self with the perfection of the divine gave rise to an on-going debate by the heirs of Descartes. Malebranche, for example, and to an even greater extent Spinoza, noting Descartes' projection of an infinite point of arrival back onto a finite point of origin, identified the *Cogito* as no more than an abstract and empty truth. For the whole tradition of idealism extending through Kant, Fichte, and Husserl, the *Cogito* came to be understood not as a foundational "first truth" upon which a second, third, and fourth truth could be built, but only as the "ground that grounds itself, incommensurable with all propositions, not only empirical ones but transcendental ones as well." In twentieth century France, the dispute over the *Cogito* would begin to take shape as a philosophical conflict between Jean-Paul Sartre and Gabriel Marcel.

Interestingly, Sartre suggested, like Descartes in the *Meditations*, that the starting point of philosophical inquiry must be the "subjectivity" of the human subject, and that the fundamental truth of that subjectivity is the *Cogito, ergo sum*. He even went so far as to argue that "[t]here can be no other truth to take off from than this: *I think; therefore, I exist.*" But Sartre did not limit himself to the Cartesian *Cogito*. Rather, he defined an

existentialist subject that has the power to choose how it will participate in the world. Sartre's philosophy is predicated on the notion that life has no pre-determined meaning, that "existence precedes essence." Deeply influenced by the work of Martin Heidegger, Sartre followed the great German thinker by arguing that "existence" is characterized by the human subject being "thrown," without its assent, into a world that seems to lack any sense of cosmic purpose or guidance. This position was not unique to Sartre, as it can certainly be seen in the work of a thinker like Nietzsche, or perhaps more importantly in regard to Sartre, in the work of the Danish religious philosopher Søren Kierkegaard. Like Sartre, Kierkegaard also believed that the senselessness of the world could fill us with feelings of hopelessness and despair. Kierkegaard, though, believed that if one were willing to take an "absurdly" courageous "leap of faith," one would come to understand that the things that occurred in the world were part of God's eternal plan. Sartre found this position naïve, claiming not only that God did not exist, but that authentic existentialism is grounded on the notion of the nonexistence of the divine.

Although he did not believe in God, Sartre resisted any idea that God should be abolished "with the least possible expense." Rather, said Sartre, the existentialist "thinks it is very distressing that God does not exist, because all possibility of finding values in a heaven of ideas disappears along with Him." If God does not exist, then everything is possible; there is nothing that human beings are constrained to be, they are free. Indeed, as Sartre said, without God, humanity is "condemned to be free"; condemned "because he did not create himself . . . because, once thrown into the world, he is responsible for everything he does." For Sartre, the brute facticity of our thrownness and our freedom

leads to a profound sense of existential “anguish.” In fact, insisted Sartre, humanity “is anguish.”

Although Marcel was a Christian thinker whose philosophy was infused with the notion of God, it was not Sartre’s atheism that he found most troubling. Rather, what disturbed Marcel above all else about Sartre’s existentialism was the latter’s idea that the “essence of the relations between consciousnesses is not the *Mitsein*; it is conflict.” What Sartre was suggesting by giving expression to this ominous proclamation becomes clear if one calls to mind an oft-quoted story found in *Being and Nothingness*. Sartre asks us to imagine that a man is kneeling outside a door, peering through the keyhole and attempting to eavesdrop on what is going on inside. Intent on what he is doing, he does not hear the approach of another person until it is too late; looking up, he realizes that he has been caught, the other stands watching him. According to Sartre, in the “gaze” of this other I become aware of myself as an “object” of another consciousness as subject. In an almost violent sense, said Sartre, the other’s consciousness invades mine; I experience the other as a free subject making me into an object for another.

As Marcel suggested, there is perhaps “nothing more remarkable in the whole of Sartre’s work than his phenomenological study of the ‘other’ as looking and of himself as exposed, pierced, bared, petrified by his Medusa-like stare.” Marcel believed, though, that this part of Sartre’s work was too often misunderstood. Returning to the story of the man caught in his act of deceit, Marcel says that it is not by chance that this example is chosen by Sartre. As he pointed out, the act of eavesdropping is something not ordinarily “pursued in public”; we expect that we will be alone, hidden away from prying eyes. But, argued Marcel, it remains to be seen whether this sense of being alone is “true of

human life as a whole.” Clearly it is for Sartre, insisted Marcel, as the awareness of others cannot be separated from the “shock of the encounter” with my existential freedom, an “alien freedom” which is ultimately “adverse and threatening.” Caught by the gaze of the other, I am confined within the being-in-itself: “I bend down to peep through the keyhole in exactly the same way as a tree is bent by the wind.”

Marcel believed that Sartre’s existentialism leaves us with no possibility for the intimacy of the communal, whether we are speaking of friends, of life-partners, or of God. For Marcel, Sartre’s analysis of the interaction between the self and the other necessarily leads to a wholly negative conclusion. The goal of the relational act becomes merely a way of achieving “absolute value” in the eyes of the other, a way of transforming the objectifying gaze which had “previously passed through me or had immobilized me in an in-itself.” To be sure, Marcel admitted that Sartre’s existentialist conclusions may seem appropriate in a mid-twentieth century world where the “sense of the ontological,” of being at its deepest levels, is lacking. Indeed, Marcel sounds more than a bit like Sartre when he says that the modern world is characterized by a sense of “brokenness,” that as the world has become more and more technologically advanced, the individual has become increasingly fragmented, divided into a diffuse mass of what Marcel calls “vital” and “social” “functions”: consumer, church-goer, parent, citizen, and so on. For Marcel, as it was for Sartre, this “functionalized” world is empty and devitalized. Unlike Sartre, though, who Marcel claims has offered up a philosophy that “rests upon the complete denial of *we* as subject, that is to say upon the denial of communion,” he believes that we are in the presence of a great ontological mystery that manifests itself in the communal moment between the self and the other.

It becomes more obvious what Marcel meant by the notion of the communal if his discussion of the idea of the “gift” is examined. Turning back to *Being and Nothingness*, Marcel draws our attention to what he took to be the “astonishing interpretation of giving” presented by Sartre. As Marcel pointed out, Sartre tells us that: “Gift is a primitive form of destruction . . . a form of destructive appropriation.” Ultimately, “to give is to enslave.” As might be expected, Marcel rejected this characterization of the gift, claiming that it merely reveals Sartre’s inability to “grasp the genuine reality of what is meant by *we* or of what governs this reality, that is precisely our capacity to open ourselves to others.” Marcel, of course, was not naïve enough to believe that there is no such thing as a “pathology of giving,” or that there are not “cases of moral suicide” where a person “abdicates and annuls himself completely for the benefit of another.” This is not what he meant by the notion of the gift, though, as for Marcel, “to give oneself is to devote or consecrate oneself to another, and no doubt simply to consecrate oneself.”

Marcel revealed more about his claim for the consecrating character of self-giving when he considered the act of giving from the perspective of the beneficiary of the gift. In regard to this, Marcel suggested that if one is to be certain that something has been given, and not simply lent, one needs a “formal assurance.” According to Marcel, this assurance comes by way of words, either spoken or written, that “may appear as constituting the gift as such.” This at least is the case for particular things that can be “designated as gifts” and “whose possessor can be identified,” said Marcel. But does it hold true for the “. . . infinitely more important thing, the fundamental gift: the gift of life, that is, the fact, with all its concrete applications, of being in the world?” For Marcel it does hold true, as for him we cannot be in the world without “being fitted into it in

conditions which are fixed to a certain point or extent in the vast human adventure.” The essential gift of life, then, is bestowed upon us by way of God’s ultimate act of creative consecration; and this special gift is constituted as such by the revelation of the Word in the midst of the communal moment.

The explicitly religious ideas of Marcel lead the discussion to the work of Paul Ricoeur. Although like Marcel, Ricoeur places himself firmly within the Christian tradition, he has struggled his entire career to pursue an “autonomous, philosophical discourse,” one that would allow him to bracket out the “convictions” that “bind [him] to biblical faith.” Initially, one can see in this struggle Ricoeur’s desire to rethink the existentialism of Sartre without resorting to what he understands to be a “naïve faith.” Toward this end, Ricoeur seeks to reformulate Sartre’s idea of the “nihilation of being-in-itself” by arguing that the process of negation functions on two unique, but interrelated levels: On a primary level, negation is the constitutive element that gives rise to the differences between and among the things-of-the-world; on a secondary, or existential level, however, negation acts as a “denegation,” as the application of the “not” to the primal negativity of objective differentiation. Sartre’s philosophy, says Ricoeur, does not allow for this secondary denegation of ontological difference because it defines being as a “brute fact”: The subject is simply a thing-in-the-world. Because of this, the “value” which “introduces a *need-to-be* into being, can only be lacuna or lack,” and thus “all possibility of grounding nihilating acts in a higher affirmation is ruled out under the penalty of falling back into the initial ensnarement. Being can no longer be a refuge, it is a trap. . . .”

What Ricoeur is claiming here, sounding very much like Marcel, is that on an existential level, negativity represents a moment of transgressive denegation that marks the point at which the subject seeks to overcome the fragility of existence by *affirming* the relational bond between the self and the other. At this point, Ricoeur appears to have left himself somewhere between Sartre and Marcel, between what he himself understands as a nihilating withdrawal from the other and the “first faith of the simple soul” that is constituted in the revelation of the Word. Ricoeur seems well aware of this, especially as he shifts the focus of his “conflict of interpretations” from Sartre to other thinkers in the French tradition.

Although he does not write specifically about Jacques Lacan, it may be argued that in a certain sense Ricoeur’s monumental work, *Freud and Philosophy* is a response to the ideas of the great psychoanalyst. Lacan, following Freud, posited the resolution of the Oedipus complex as the crucial moment in the formation of subjectivity. What so many have found especially intriguing about Lacan’s notion of subjectivity is his linguistic interpretation of the Oedipus stage, and in particular his suggestion concerning the human being’s access to language. Lacan argued that this accession involved the “casting of original desire into the abyss of the unconscious.” Desire cannot be signified directly because it does not happen in language, but before language. What we are left with, then, are the traces of desire, made manifest by way of metaphoric and metonymic signifiers forever pointing beyond themselves to a realm of the signified lost.

Again, Ricoeur does not write specifically about Lacan, but he at least alludes to his ideas in *Freud and Philosophy* when he defines his own notion of a “hermeneutics of suspicion.” According to Ricoeur, interpretation as an act of suspicion can be linked to

the work of Freud, Nietzsche and Marx. Ricoeur suggests that fundamental to all of these thinkers is the idea that we must “look upon the whole of consciousness as a ‘false’ consciousness.” In this way, the work of Freud, Nietzsche and Marx once again reveals the problematic of Cartesian doubt. Everything that makes its way into consciousness must be called into question. The three masters of suspicion broaden this Cartesian aporia, though. Where Descartes doubted the objects of consciousness but maintained that consciousness itself was the great Archimedean point which grounded subjectivity, Freud, Nietzsche and Marx not only doubted the objects of consciousness, they doubted consciousness itself.

If Ricoeur remained on the side of a hermeneutics of suspicion he could more easily be aligned with figures like Sartre and Lacan, and ultimately with postmodern thinkers such as Jean-François Lyotard and Jacques Derrida. But in *Freud and Philosophy* he proposes to overcome suspicion with what he calls a hermeneutics of restoration. Oddly, although he says that he wants to keep the discourses of philosophy and religion apart, he grounds his restorative hermeneutics on faith. Admittedly, he does claim that this is a faith that has “undergone criticism,” a “post critical faith,” as Ricoeur terms it. Nevertheless, it is still faith. It seems, then, that for Ricoeur, the “other is the necessary path of injunction,” that with the “aporia of the Other, philosophical discourse comes to an end.”

In a rather ironic way, Ricoeur’s allusion to the end of philosophical discourse connects his work to that of Lyotard, who sees the “postmodern condition” as one in which “grand legitimating narratives” are breaking down. Lyotard claims that these narratives first emerged as stories told by humans in order to define a cultural identity. In

each culture, says Lyotard, certain of these stories began to take on a special meaning; they became the “legitimizing” narratives that identified a culture as unique, giving it a sense of justification and worth. According to Lyotard, the current condition of Western society is one in which we no longer accept the grand narratives of our cultural history as legitimate. The negative effect of this, contends Lyotard, is that capitalism and its discourses have been able to dominate in the late twentieth century. The positive effect, though, is that the possibility has been opened up for the articulation of a whole series of small narratives and practices.

An example of one in this series of “petite narratives” is the work being done by French feminist thinkers such as Luce Irigaray and Julia Kristeva. It is important, and interesting, to note that both of these thinkers have defined their own work within, and over against, the psychoanalytic framework marked out by Lacan. Calling attention to the fact that in the foundational place of the Oedipal stage the “mother appears only as a shadowy figure” and the “daughter’s development is parasitic upon what is essentially a drama played out between the son and the father,” Kristeva and Irigaray seek to enter the psychoanalytic discussion at the precise point where the “woman is missing.”

It may be argued that Irigaray lays out her feminist themes in opposition to the masculine boundaries imposed by Lacan’s linguistic order. For Lacan, the order of language, what he calls the “symbolic order,” is formed during the Oedipal stage; and because the Oedipal stage is primarily masculine, the symbolic is essentially a male ritual. Beyond this, though, the symbolic is also an order of “identity,” a linguistic and masculine attempt to reduce everything to sameness and solidification. Because of this, says Irigaray, the symbolic order is resistant to changeable, flowing and adaptable modes

of experience. Irigaray contrasts this masculine rigidity with feminist expressions of the corporeal, the fluid and the tactile. This can be seen in works like *This Sex Which is Not One*, where she attempts to overcome the inflexibility of theoretical articulation by the use of tropes, double-entendres, poetic prose, and questions which continually unfold back upon themselves.

Although she also wishes to enter the discussion of psychoanalysis at the point where the woman is missing, one might make the case that Kristeva is not as wary about the symbolic order, about the order of language, as is Irigaray. Where Irigaray contrasts her feminism with the masculine elements of psychoanalysis, Kristeva seeks to discover the feminine which has been repressed within its margins; or, put another way, she attempts to allow the symbolic to reveal what is non-symbolic in it. Kristeva terms the non-symbolic the “semiotic.” She defines it as a pre-linguistic, pre-verbal, archaic dimension of language that is bound to the drives of the child toward the mother, before the moment of the father’s interference. The importance of these semiotic drives, says Kristeva, is that they have the power to disrupt the overwhelming influence of the symbolic from within the symbolic order itself.

In a powerful sense, the treatments of religion offered up by both Irigaray and Kristeva grow out of their critiques of psychoanalysis, and finally of the Western intellectual tradition as a whole. Irigaray’s references to religion tend to be fleeting, and thus are somewhat hard to trace. It may not be inaccurate, though, to say that for Irigaray, religion is like the Oedipal moment, rigidly reducing everything to the same: “the Other . . . as yet manifest through his creation (the Father), present in his form (the son), mediator between the two (spirit).” This God, though, asks Irigaray, “are we

capable of imagining it as a woman? Can we dimly see it as the perfection of our subjectivity?" As one might expect, Irigaray answers no to these questions. What is needed for woman to emerge from the shadows, says Irigaray, is "God in the feminine." Provocatively, Irigaray posits Jesus as this possible ground of feminist expression. Of course, for Irigaray, this is not the "ethereal Jesus of the pulpit," but the bodily Jesus of the Gospels who suffered and died on the cross; the Jesus who Christianity has attempted to "disincarnate," from whom it has sought to "tear away the flesh," the Jesus it has been intent upon "defeminizing" since the first century.

As with the threat of the symbolic, Kristeva seems less suspicious about religious discourse than does Irigaray. Although she does maintain that it can "all too easily take the form of an institutionalized discourse," she also believes that it can "manifest the subversive power of the semiotic." This latter notion can be seen in her discussion of the Virgin Mary in her oft quoted essay, "Stabat Mater." Writing at once as a scholar and a poet, Kristeva weaves together discussions of the complex interconnection between language and subjectivity, ruminations on the role of the Virgin Mary in the Catholic tradition, and on her own experience of the maternal. Presented in parallel columns, which push and strain against each other, the essay is focused on maternity throughout. In this way, Kristeva is seeking to reveal the "physical doubling of a woman's body during pregnancy that allows her to be, quite literally, both one and other." It is this experience of radical alterity, says Kristeva, which the dominant male culture has attempted to cover over. Kristeva argues that this can be seen quite clearly in the Catholic vision of the Virgin Mother: by way of giving prominence to Mary's Immaculate Conception, her perpetual virginity, and her ascension into heaven, the

Church has sought to “erase the bodily traces of actual birth.” For Kristeva, this effacement of the body has deprived the figure of the Virgin Mother of her power of subversion, deprived her of the possibility of being understood as the “split and fluid” feminine obverse of the masculine Trinity.

Although he has written very little about religion, it is perhaps appropriate to give the last word on this subject to Derrida: “*How ‘to talk religion’? Of religion? Perhaps one must take one’s chance in resorting to the most concrete and most accessible, but also the most barren and desert-like, of all abstractions.*” This is Derrida delaying, “deferring” as he would say, his discussion of religion, a deferral that has extended over some forty years. It is an example of his peculiar negative or apophatic theology. Characteristic of Hellenistic, Jewish and Christian mystical traditions before and after the beginning of the common era, apophatic theology uses “negating concepts” to define what God is by saying what he is not. The power of this type of theological articulation, especially for someone like Derrida, is that it exposes the inadequacy of human language to speak about God in the very moment that it gives expression to concepts which are applied to God. This act of apophatic doubling appears to be much like Derrida’s own deconstructive doubling. Indeed, in his *Margins of Philosophy*, Derrida himself admits that the “detours, locutions, and syntax” within which he “will often have to take recourse” will look very much like those of negative theology, occasionally even to the point of “being indistinguishable from negative theology.” For Derrida, “this difference, this negativity in God is our freedom, the transcendence and the verb which can relocate the purity of their negative origin only in the possibility of the Question.”

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