

“Does the Philosophy-Theology Distinction Rest on a Mistake?: An Existential Analysis”

(in progress for a special issue)

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What quarantines philosophy from theology, securing it from God’s unwanted or unwarranted intrusion? Is there something, a principled distinction perhaps, or maybe a methodological choice, that is somehow at work keeping them apart, something more upholding and preserving their difference than just the personal resolve of those who for whatever reason wish to maintain it? Nothing could be any less obvious. For, examining the meaning of our existence taken as a whole, beginning with the birth none of has chosen to the death awaiting us, as with everything in between that must lead to the mystery of what that death itself might bring in the hereafter, could there be anything more dogmatic or ideological than the idea that, by bracketing the question of God, philosophy finds its purpose without ever dealing with what, since at least Kant, it has frequently relegated to the discipline of theology? Is this atheology the consummation of philosophy’s autonomy or rather its decay?

Still, history has not been totally unanimous in this evacuation of God from philosophy, and it is for good reason that the existentialists are those who come most immediately to mind as the exceptions: Kierkegaard, Dostoevsky, or Shestov stand as exemplars, but so too figures whose thought is defined as much by the denial of God as the former were their affirmations of God: Nietzsche, Freud, Camus, or Sartre. In the case of every towering existential thinker, even atheism does not exactly set aside the question of God so much as it begins by facing it. Who we are as individuals is defined first and above all, for Nietzsche no less than for Kierkegaard, by how we respond to “the question of God”—for the atheistic existentialists, God is a corpse whose myth we must move beyond, for the Christian existentialists, he remains the living one to whom we owe all. If it is impossible to deny that an individual life could evade the question of God forever (to try to ignore it is not to escape it), how could a philosophy worthy of existence itself do so? That a philosophy worthy of the name could define itself against theology, by appealing to the idea of methodological atheism or scientific naturalism, thus, is a pure fiction. Just as every individual existence must deal with God, so too must any philosophy of existence.

Definitions sometimes are unhelpful and do not clarify matters. But here it seems right to hazard one. Existentialism, then, as we mean to understand it, is the thought that always thinks our human condition in reference to the only frame of reference that here could truly matter, to God.