

George Pattison, *God & Being: An Enquiry*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011. 350 pp. ISBN: 978-0-19-958868-8.

Many today recognize that our Greek metaphysical concepts have their limitations (even dire ones). There are some among these persons who try therefore to resurrect certain notions of a much critiqued metaphysics, or onto-theology, as it has come to be labeled in its post-Heideggerian guise. ‘Overcoming onto-theology’, as Merold Westphal has more recently put it, has become something of a particularly favorite pastime among contemporary philosophers and theologians alike, though it has yet to be dealt with in a manner that does justice to both its well-documented shortcomings *and* its potential successes. My initial impression of George Pattison’s recent book *God and Being: An Enquiry*, however, is that he manages to do far more justice to the theological stakes of the debate than those who have come before him.

The real question, of course, and one which Pattison’s book brings clearly into focus, is whether or not such an overcoming could ever really be a reality, whether it is a much worn utopian vision of things and just how such a vision might cohere with theology’s most precious subject matter, namely God. By adopting a self-described ‘critically hermeneutical’ method and by therefore also recognizing the absolute centrality of language to the task of describing the ‘presence’ of God (even and especially as we are not able to say *with* language *what* it is that language does for us), Pattison proceeds to unfold the stakes of onto-theology through an inspection of the concepts of both God and Being, their mutual interaction and their notorious difficulty in defining. By doing so, the book presents us with a solid foundational exercise for discerning the core constituent features of the historical articulation of God in relation to Being, proceeding from scripture to Augustine and Aquinas, and, among others, to more contemporary thinkers such as Hegel, Kierkegaard, Tillich, Buber, Marcel, Sartre and Levinas. Though he fills in some detail through the occasional nod to poets, painters, the Romantics, novelists such as Dostoevsky and Tolstoy and even Zen Buddhists, the main figures of this work in many ways remain Heidegger, Kierkegaard and Derrida, and somewhat in that order.

Essentially, as Pattison winds his way through a vast amount of literature on the subject, we discern the central proposition of the work, that our notion of Being has been weakened over time, and that this is what the myriad critiques of onto-theology have perceptively noted. What has not been noted as much, however—and this is where the unique point of the work enters our frame of sight—is how such a weakening may in fact offer us potentially new resources for better understanding the ever-elusive nature of God. This is the point that Pattison underscores with what I feel might become a true lasting significance. To claim this much is of course, and as Pattison himself states, ‘merely to touch the hem of the mystery to which our reflections are leading us in this matter’ (107). But it is also a crucially honest admittance, and one that should not be dismissed as the softening of a keen intellect.

To be fair, laying the stress on one’s *becoming* instead of *being*, a move which does subtly subvert the strong foothold of seeing God as the ‘Purus Actus’ which has dominated theological speculation for so long, is a difficult thing to do traditionally speaking. So many notions of God are dependent upon just such a formulation of the Godhead that it is difficult to discern precisely how one might alter our more traditional definitions in order to take account of what Pattison is here reconceiving. Avoiding moreover the problematics normally associated with trying to ground a particular ontology in a given communal identity (which Derrida’s critique of a community always yet ‘to come’ sought to do) is not an easy task.

Another way to frame this inquiry is perhaps through the question he himself asks: ‘Can a love that is always *à-venir* also become incarnate?’ (237). Or, in other words, what is the potential for such a radically embodied communal, almost utopian notion, one yet very much central to our understanding of the Kingdom of God? It is precisely because such a concept must be embodied that Pattison turns directly to questions of embodiment in relation to both God and Being. In his reading, and following Merleau-Ponty very closely on this, the body is the site of our ‘potential actions’, that is, it is directed towards ‘the possible’ as he puts it. Seeing things as such is to reconceive the terrain of metaphysics on a profoundly immanent level in some sense, and this would serve to indicate much of what Pattison lays before us throughout the volume.

Such a shift in focus allows us as well to glimpse new features of the divine that we may not have noticed before. In a sentence that mirrors so many contemporary thoughts on the movement from traditional forms of transcendence to a more robust account of immanence, Pattison refers to the real revelation that we are uncovering about Being, writing that the real revelation we are witnessing today in terms of Being is ‘...from the point of view of classical

Christian theology, a revelation grounded in what is weakest, most fallible, and most distant from the plenitude of divine Being. It is the truth that is revealed in the vision of humanity, 'the thing itself', as a 'bare, forked animal', nothing more' (256).

Very much akin to the works of Gianni Vattimo, John Caputo or even Giorgio Agamben in this regard, Pattison's turn toward the 'weakness' of God has a significant resonance with contemporary theologians looking to discern what role a more traditional ontology might play in theological matters. The answer, it would seem, is not much. To embrace the God who is pure possibility—no matter whether we call such an abyss of potentiality a form of nothingness, *khôra*, silence, an impossible gift, a utopian dream, the ground of all forgiveness, or simply love—is still a radical gesture these days, despite the fact that traction seems to be gaining among a host of theologically inclined thinkers. From Pattison's perspective, at least, 'What truly matters, then, is to set that movement in motion, to awaken the longing that, whether it figures itself as lack or as love, looks to God as the one in whom all our human possibilities find their beginning and their end' (320). This search, presumably, is what will far outlast whatever content we pour into our religious longings.

By pointing toward the precarious nature of our selves in relation to others, others whom we also love—a dynamic which, so to speak, changes the coordinates in the game of being—Pattison is able, I would suggest, to follow the Levinasian move of prioritizing the 'ethical' demands of love over any ontology that is to come afterwards. Such a gesture is also what allows him to make more than a few profound connections to the Christian narrative. It is such a reading of things too that contains a certain undisclosed resonance with William Desmond's work on being and love, something which he likewise seems to borrow from the Kierkegaardian corpus. Such recourse to a love which takes priority over being and which therefore is creative and inventive of new possibilities beyond the realities we encounter in our world is what opens Pattison's general reformulation of the divine to a focus on God's existence as a form of possibility rather than as a permanently solidified sense of actuality.

There are certain books a reader in a given field looks for to provide a sense of unification of the many things they read; that is, a work that presents us with a plausible stitching-together of the many diverse strands of critical thought that often exist apart from each other. For me, to read a work that is simultaneously able to demonstrate the validity of much of contemporary continental (philosophical) thought yet in relation to a long theological struggle to articulate both God and Being is a most profound thing. To read one as masterfully put together as this one is a rare occurrence indeed. For this reason, among many others I have not the time to go into, I highly recommend this book.

Colby Dickinson
Loyola University Chicago