

TOM WHALEN

13 THEOLOGICAL INVESTIGATIONS

1. I WAS THINKING ABOUT GOD

I was thinking about God when suddenly a landscape appeared in which grass nestled in the paint and in the middle ground a tree lay in a ravine like a giant from storybook days drunk on blood. I am of the conviction that God, should He exist, would appreciate this picture, but it's best not to presume when it comes to deities. On the other hand, we can, within reason, make the opposite case. God, too, deserves all the unthought in us; in fact, He prostrates Himself in order to obtain our indifference. Divinity, of course, has a way of escaping meaning, like light falling through the windows of a narthex. As to exactly how human He is, or whether we were made in His image or vice versa, I'm not one to dismiss this philosophical problem out of hand.

2. FEUERBACH

For Ludwig Feuerbach, an unknowable God is only a negativity ("existence without existence")—a puddle of contradictions where little boys like to splash, though this isn't exactly how he expressed it. I like the name Feuerbach; however, I don't plan on making a religion out of what I like. When I was a child, I inclined toward seeing God as that which must be feared. There is certainly a touch of negativity in this, but there's also a lightning-bolt positivity. Feuerbach, of course, was far more sophisticated on this subject; I believe at base he saw God as a projection of the human mind. Does that mean God is not unknowable after all? If I say God is an essential, dynamic, and unknowable fiction—well, isn't that a kind of empirical, albeit paradoxical, verification that God is within our epistemic grasp? Closer to hand is the large salad the waitress has just placed before me, speckled with bits of beets and boiled egg.

3. KIERKEGAARD AND DOLLS

Scenarios come to mind of the most unusual sort, as if God Himself were only a poor novelist, or at least a poorly paid one. I see the head of a doll and the head is God—not the doll, who’s not much of anything but a doll body, to which the novelist owes many nights of pleasure and terror. How often He’s dreamed while she slept dreamlessly in His head, tugging this way and that. You might think He’s really Søren Kierkegaard, if you didn’t know better. Wasn’t Kierkegaard a connoisseur of dolls—or at least Danish ones? “Doubt is a kind of doll, too, you know,” he may have said to his father, or imagined himself saying. My father and I never talked about God or dolls. Was it because he served in the infantry in World War II and was wounded in the Alsace that I never ventured into theological realms with him? Anyway, I’m thankful that I don’t live in Denmark. The things they said about their most famous theologian!

4. WITTGENSTEIN AND BELIEF

Somewhere, I believe, Ludwig Wittgenstein places belief on his language game board and finds that the word reflects the believer more than the belief. I believe that this says nothing, but I am firm in my belief that “firm” is the apt predicate adjective—or something like that. If believing is merely (merely?) a state of mind, as Wittgenstein sort of said, then is disbelieving merely a state of non-mind? *Ach, Quatsch!* Time to put the pieces back in their case.

5. A GREY DAY

I am writing this on a grey afternoon, as grey as God, Whom, even as a young and free thinker (i.e. disbeliever), I imagined as grey, as I do omniscience. Does that mean that, for me, God is of one or two minds? Or maybe three? Omniscience is grey because grey is always fading. God, too, has been rumoured to exert His will in ever-lessening degrees. The matte clouds over the city and the grey light in the room where I am writing are also apposite. Logic, too, it seems, at least today, is of a shade neither white nor black. God, in His omnipotence and foreknowledge, created man and doomed him to sin and uncertainty—a grey theological point if I’ve ever heard one. To

me, there seems to be something a bit megalomaniacal in the idea of evil as the index of God's glory, or even in the dialectical twist to the index of man's glory as the creation of good, which would never have been possible if God, in His wisdom, had not made man separate from the Godhead. Isn't all that a bit too Hegelian? Not having read Georg Hegel adequately in the original, I can't really answer that, but I write this in Stuttgart, Hegel's city of birth. Often I visit the Hegel Haus on the corner of Torstrasse and Eberhardstrasse and stare at peculiar Hegelian artifacts preserved behind glass: a diploma, a robe, a brown velvet beret, and a plush cushion upon which he placed his dialectical buttocks.

6. THE ONTOLOGICAL ARGUMENT

I was strolling this morning on the Hasenberg and inhaling the alpine air when I suddenly remembered that, for Hegel, God was an essence simultaneously perfecting Itself and the world. I've no desire to tangle with Hegel, but the Ideal seems to me as remote as ever. Still, the forest path was edged with snow signed with pine needles, the sky was bluer than blue, and the cold was bright in my blood. A mother jogged by, pushing a baby carriage in which her wide-eyed child dreamed awake. Beneath the foot bridge on the Blauerweg a mouse scrubbed its face in the stream rushing past and then bolted back to its hole. Otherwise, I met no one on my stroll this morning.

7. IN ERLANGEN

I was walking with God in the modest city of Erlangen, with its two-story high eighteenth-century buildings on either side of us. We hadn't said much, both of us more attentive to the squirrels scabbling in the trees than to ourselves as we headed to the Botanical Garden. Besides, at that time I had perhaps more on my mind than I thought. Two years before, my wife and I had moved back to Germany, where the limits of my German were quickly reached. Today, though, I remember I felt comfortable in the presence of the Deity, due in large part to Himself. There was none of that mightier-than-thou routine from Him. In the Botanical Garden we sat for a while on a bench beneath a hanging beech tree and observed the behaviour of birds. A butterfly landed on my copy of Anne Brontë's *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* (1848). We talked for a while, God and I, but I don't remember about what.

The air was clear and soft, the sun warm on our faces, and for a while we both dozed. Later that afternoon we were walking down the streets of the city's northeast edge when we encountered two young female missionaries—one from Poland, the other from Utah. God stepped to the side a bit behind me while the young women made their play for our souls, and after a while, just to generate a little theology, I asked, in all politeness, what allowed them to distinguish false prophets from true ones? “The Holy Ghost,” said the one from Poland. “Ah,” I said, recalling Gerard Manley Hopkins. Then I thanked them for this information, refused their pamphlets, and walked away. For quite a while God said nothing. Then, as we neared our hotel, He muttered, “Slammed by another’s light. What a pity.”

8. THE COSMOLOGICAL ARGUMENT

Even Leucippus knew that, on the atomic level, the first cause was random. So to reiterate: there is no series of cause-and-effect relationships that compels us to the witch’s house or agent of change (i.e. God), Who, in all quantum likelihood, is only descended from another God *ad infinitum*. Besides, it’s too cold and lonely at the top, and that way lies madness of a most unfortunate kind, as any good noir tale will tell you. God has a way of doing that to His avatars—or at least the fictional ones I know, and I’ve known plenty of them. So there He sits pondering deeply why it is that He, of all gods, had to be the one to question the Rock of First Cause, and there’s no one there to answer Him but Himself. Do you want to answer for Him? I certainly don’t. My preference is toward a nice warm *Wähe*, which is a kind of fruit pie from Buchmann’s on Rennweg in Zürich. Why shouldn’t God be Swiss? To me, nonetheless, the cosmological argument recalls not the first cause or a round of Emmenthaler but rather Edgar Allan Poe’s masterpiece *Eureka* (1848). When the author says that “the plots of God are perfect,” I almost know what he means. And when he writes of “the final ingathering,” “the final agglomeration of all things,” and “the vortical indrawing of the orbs,” I’m certain I understand.

9. A FABLE

Once upon a time God lived in the back room of a mouse dwelling. He cleaned the walls, slicked whiskers, licked the young, shined fur, cooked when nec-

essary, and sprung traps, for which the mice were grateful and nudged Him with their snouts to show it. One day the mouse dwelling grew dark. There must be a storm outside, said one mouse. Or a power outage, said another, who put its ear to the wall but heard nothing except the usual ticking of the universe. For a moment longer a blue haze shimmered about the grey mouse forms until even this went black. The mice squeaked each in their way because they were afraid of the dark, and the smell of their fear pleased God like a song. Then He thought: "Am I old or ill? The mice children have enough to fear already." So He made His way through the dark labyrinth until He came upon a thread of light, which He caught between His teeth and dragged back into the bolthole, His hands scrabbling for purchase on the baseboards. Where were they? He raised His nose, but the smell of mice was everywhere. He couldn't call out "Where are you?" because the thread of light would escape if he opened His mouth. So He went on through the labyrinth beyond the bolthole in search of the mice in the dark, and to this day He's yet to find them.

10. VOID

The question arises of its own accord (i.e. without a discernible cause, thus, perhaps, divinely) that if the universe is reducible to atoms and void, as the atomists had it, then is there not void in God Himself? But if I posit the existence of a void in God, then doesn't a void, as in some atomistic cosmologies, devour all that surrounds it, despite its lack of digestive organs? When I say "devour," I must mean it metaphorically. Wasn't knowledge, for Friedrich Nietzsche, an undulating army of metaphors? I confess I haven't read Nietzsche with any attentiveness in years, but can't the same be said of many readers? Come to think of it, doesn't the very concept of a void come from metaphysics, making its way through metamatter, splitting off here, tumbling there, and even now threading its way into God's brain? This void-God tangle fascinates me, but I'm at the end of the page and it's time to prepare dinner.

11. TWILIGHT OF THE IDOLS

Often I wander the streets of Stuttgart, thinking now about Arthur Schopenhauer, now about Immanuel Kant. One moment I think pure Kantian

thoughts, the next pure Schopenhauerian thoughts. Kant, Schopenhauer; Schopenhauer, Kant. For days, too—weeks, in fact—I think only Schopenhauerian thoughts. Then, without any warning, I think: “I am looking at me looking at the world looking at me.” Again and again I read *The World as Will and Idea* (1819). If belief is separate from knowledge, as Schopenhauer had it, then the only question that should interest us is why we believe what we believe. I asked my Romanian dentist about this the other morning. As she tilted back the chair, she leaned over me and through her white mask said, “Open, please.” While she cleaned and scraped, tapped and dug, in my mind she added, “Who of us hasn’t gotten a little drunk at Nietzsche’s Motley Cow? But polytheism really is passé, and Dionysus is dead. What good is he to us now? In teeth there is no perfection.” I made a sound that might have been interpreted as affirmative, and she smiled down upon me. How could I tell? Her eyes crinkled at their canthi. “Wider, please. Wider, still.” Song of the drill.

12. THE TELEOLOGICAL (A.K.A. AESTHETIC) ARGUMENT

Yes, it’s easy to be snookered by this one. In no sense, pure or impure, do I hesitate to confess, as the six o’clock bells of the Pauluskirche bang in my head, that I’ve spent a lifetime *doing* if not believing aesthetics—not unlike, say, Yukio Mishima’s active nihilism, though I’m not as seduced by self-immolation. Of course there’s order and adaptation, but far be it for me to take the leap over (into?) the abyss to the side of a Great Designer. Kurt Vonnegut’s *The Sirens of Titan* (1959) and Robert Sheckley’s *Dimension of Miracles* (1968) restrained and sustained me, at one point, and perhaps still would if I were to reread them. Without the teleological argument would we even have a genre called science fiction? Perhaps you’d like to research this topic. I myself am at the moment (remember the church bells) about to dine on pasta with pesto. Patterns make themselves known in fiction more, perhaps, than in life. As for the watchmaker/universe-maker analogy (isn’t there a novel by A. E. van Vogt titled *The Universe Maker?*), I have a tale to relate—a true one, in fact—and someday, perhaps, I will.

13. DEDICATION

To God, naturally, without Whom I et cetera. Can you imagine anyone more

eminent? Eminence, by the way, I associate with cherry sodas at Borden's ice cream parlour in Lake Charles, Louisiana, ca. mid-1960s. We'd go there to cool off after basketball games at the YMCA. Surely I don't have to tell you how the soda tasted. The more I think about this dedication, the more names come to mind, to each of whom I et cetera. One may, and I do, regard many of them as influences upon, if not actual instigators of, my passing interest in all things theological. To list them would be to grapple with infinity, perhaps, though for reasons unknown (or that I prefer not to name) infinity reminds me of fathers coming home to their matchbox houses in the 1950s, to which decade I et cetera. Suddenly the sky darkens, and the clouds turn purple and roil in the kettle of the city. A neighbour's shutter bangs against the house like a gunshot, and a strong wind slams into the side of this turn-of-the-nineteenth-century, war-bombed building, rattling its base. God the Father, so-called, but doesn't everyone need a father, or at least the opportunity to invent one? I know I do. Nor should we forget the equal importance of mothers in theological matters. Outside, the storm relents and the rain slackens. I stand at the window and look down on pavement as slick as film under the streetlight.