

Surviving Postmodernism: A New Ontotheology

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Abstract Postmodernism has applied deconstruction to theological doctrine and religious practice with mixed results. Whereas its use has made theology/religion less dogmatic, its excessive use has challenged the survival of theology/religion, including ontotheology. Postmodernism directly challenges the theistic, Abrahamic theologies that predicate a God personalized as a father or ruler and interpersonalized as responsive to soliciting prayer. Many Christian theologians now recognize that “God” is only a word that refers to nothing existent outside religious texts, so agreeing with Jacques Derrida. Nietzsche’s proclamation of God being dead might appear to be final. The postmodernist challenge can be countered by neo-ontotheology that recognizes the finitude of being (ontos) and the infinitude of the divine (theos) and that employs methods (logos) that are postmodernist as well as conventional. Unlike traditional ontotheology, neo-ontotheology borrows from postmodernism to deconstruct most language formations, yet avoids deconstructing ontological/scientific knowledge that reflects certainty, order, and universality. Using such knowledge to proceed from the finitude of secular knowledge to the infinitude of divine knowledge, neo-ontotheology is positioned between the “weak” theology of postmodernists and “strong” theology of traditionalists.

Keywords God and being are the same, or God has being from another and thus himself cannot be God, Meister Eckhart, *Sermons*

1. Deconstruction

Postmodernism started in the 1950s by word-weary philosophers, living in a century of the two world wars and possible nuclear extinction of the Cold War, when every expression, thought, and formula seemed to be ideological and contentious. What began as a squabble among French intellectuals over structuralism in linguistics and social science became an international challenge to all foundations of knowledge, including theology and religion. From a postmodernist viewpoint, at stake was reviving openness in perspective and freedom of inquiry.

Deconstruction is a kind of radical reductionism that began when Aristotle pioneered the metaphysical reduction of things to “first principles.” It became prominent in Western thinking, as applied in the scientific validation of phenomena to data, analytic and dissecting methods, literary and art criticism, and just plain factual or Heideggerian thinking. Modern philosophy would not be the same without Descartes’ idealist reduction of reality to the cogito or without the twentieth century reductionist methods of the idealist epoché of Husserl and the positivist reductionism of Wittgenstein. But deconstruction goes further to affirm that the constituency of something is accidental, arbitrary, or

illusory, which undercuts order and meaning, which is the difference between modernist reductionism and postmodernist deconstruction.

Not just an invented scientific method and meditative practice, deconstruction also occurs automatically, as particularly evidenced by the space between written words and the time between spoken words and much more such as punctuation, voice inflections, time and space unhinged, etc. Just as it automatically constructs meaning, language automatically deconstructs meaning. John Caputo [4:29] observes: “Nobody has to come along and ‘deconstruct’ things. Things are auto-deconstructed by the tendencies of their own truths.” He adds, “Whatever is constructed is deconstructible.” [4:30]

Deconstruction occurs – and needs to occur – because reality and being itself are undermined by arbitrariness and *différance*. As recognized in the semiotics of Ferdinand Saussure, word-signifiers lack an originary or direct connection with their signifieds and referent-things. Meaning deconstructs automatically because of this inadequacy of word-signifiers. The meaning between signifiers and signifieds and between signifiers/signifieds and referents is arbitrary, subject to the ever-changing uses of language. For example, the word “blue” has many intended referents and meanings, such as the color or the mood of being “blue”; the color “blue” depends on the circumstance of light and reflective surface and on the gradations from ceil blue or indigo blue. As a signifier, the word “blue” has no necessary or fixed relation with the color

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sensation or idea to which it refers; it is an arbitrary sound and four-letter construction that is related only to other words forming a text and not necessarily to anything outside the text. *Différance* provides the reminder that the word or form differs from what it represents and keeps open the discovery of new and ever-changing meanings that result from further or hermeneutic interpretation.

Originating *différance*, Derrida suspects the adequacy of language to be a logocentric exercise that conceals rather than reveals being. Written words are mere “traces” that have lost their connection with their original referents; thus language-created essence has been shredded by *différance*. Even originary language, if it ever existed beyond figures etched on a cave wall, is long gone as an originator of experience today, especially of written and formal language. Words only refer to other words; hence Derrida’s well-known statement, “there is nothing beyond the text.” To borrow a line from Leonard Cohen: There is a crack (of *différance*) in everything (of existence), that is how the light gets in (to disclose being). What predicative subjects and objects language constructs, *différance* deconstructs in the course of everyday language, as evidenced by a pause in voice or a comma in text that can let in new light.

Written language especially requires deconstruction. In replacing hieroglyphics and cuneiform, alphabetic characters obscured the origins of language. Similarly, spoken language no longer presented the immediate emotional responses once presented by utterances. The presentational became the representational that was cut loose from original images and utterances. Thus Derrida can speak of words as “traces” that have no founding origins to what they represent. In his early work *Of Grammatology*, he insists that language effaces the authentic experience of the things and contents of being. Language not just conceals being, as Heidegger believed, but actually rubs out or deletes original experiences and the immediate nature of the thing-itself, also the image or perception of the thing, the uttered sound signifying the thing, and even the (signified) idea of the thing.

This concealing of being results not just from the limits of language but also from the abuses of language by power elites. Derrida argues in *Archive Fever* that memory and history are never just factual, but are selected and constructed by archive keepers, which not only distorts reality but also closes its possibilities. Official statements are closed texts that are re-opened by deconstruction to reveal censored facts, contrived intentions, and simplistic outcomes. Deconstruction rejects the presumed connection between the text of the archive and reality it to which it refers or corresponds. The notions of “reference” or “correspondence” are complex and problematic: “Deconstruction tries to show that the question of reference is much more complex and problematic than traditional theories supposed. It even asks whether our term ‘reference’ is entirely adequate for designating the ‘other’. The other, which is beyond language and which summons language, is perhaps not a ‘referent’ in the normal sense.” [3:16]

The postmodernist mission began within philosophy as an attempt to deconstruct metaphysics and other logocentric formations in order to discover being that is totalistic, authentic, and originary. It became a response to Heidegger’s mission to unconceal the totalist Being of things that had been concealed by Platonic metaphysics. Derrida argued further that *différance* existed between the essence of texts and the originariness of being.

2. Postmodernist Uses

The concern here is with the effects of deconstruction and *différance* on theology and religion. A welcoming and reforming effect is the deconstruction of terms such as “omnipotence” and “omniscience,” which have little or nooriginary or experiential grounding. The prefix “omni” is Latin for all and originally had no theological use.

The word “God” has no certain origins; its use cannot be found in ancient Judeo-Christian manuscripts that were written in Hebrew, Aramaic, Greek or Latin. Its most likely origin is the Sanskrit word “*hu*” which means to call upon or implore, again with no theological use. As a construction of language, “God” comes in many different names and languages. Within Christian theology, the God of Mark differs from that of John, the Patristic Fathers, Scholastics, Luther, Hegel, Barth, and so on. The term itself has long troubled even the most devout, such as Meister Eckhart who exclaimed in his *German Sermon 52*, “I pray to God to rid me of God.” Eckhart prays to the real, authentic God behind the church-constructed father-God.

For most postmodernists after Derrida, semiotically speaking, “God” is a rootless signifier-word that cannot represent God as an ultimate referent. For most, the twenty-first century God is formless, ineffable, nonexistent. The named “God” cannot represent the ultimate God. The latter can be only an experience of an elusive presence or spirit, an experience beyond language and thought. Constructed as an object with finite identities, God becomes relativized and fragmented into subject/object, self/other, and one/other, also placed as an existent in finite time and space – all of which result from *différance* and mandate deconstruction. Enterprising religious minds construct from the non-existent and unknown God of total being an existent and conventional God of essence. Fatherly figures are constructed to appeal to popular consumption, including images of Jesus as the blue-eyed, Caucasian son of God. Such are propagated by new world mega-media evangelism and the old world of Papal splendor, and only little less so by the aroused reformers who see Jesus as a new age superstar, exemplar of love, or revolutionary zealot.

Postmodernist theologians emphasize that language constructs an existent God that has the 3-Ds of finitude: difference of identity, duration of time, and distance of space. Because identity depends on negation vis-à-vis an other, a language-constructed God is necessarily finite, relative and incomplete. As a subject-object construction, identity is

demarcated and limited by the forms of language that involve limiting boundaries recognized by Derrida and horizons recognized by Husserl. Regarding the duration of time, God is constructed as something that exists while “now” but not “then” or while “then” but not “now.” Regarding the distance of space, God is constructed as something that exists at “here” but not “there” or at “there” and not “here.” God’s relative identity denies absolute wholeness of *tout autre* and appears in the finite history of time and geography of space.

This raises the old apophatic problem addressed by Pseudo-Dionysius: how to name the unnamable or think the unthinkable without introducing dualisms such as subject/object, self-other, or finite/infinity and secular/sacred. The current framing of the problem starts with Heidegger who takes up Husserl’s phenomenological inquiry “to things themselves,” which prompted Hannah Arndt [1:152] to say, “Heidegger never thinks ‘about’ something; he thinks something.” “God” cannot be thought about and closed as an object of a thinking subject; “God” can only be thought and opened to further exploration. The experience of a conception or perception of “God” is not God but about God as a referent-object the construction of which involves essence-constructing predicates.

Heideggerian thinking of the divine oblates the subject as well as the object, involving what Buddhists call *anattā* or no-self. Phenomena continuously arise, abide, and cease as things themselves are experienced; the rest is empty. There is seeing but no seer, hearing but no hearer, feeling but no feeler, tasting but no taster, smelling but no smeller, and to return to Heidegger’s point, there is thinking but no thinker-subject or object thought about, not in pure Being. The primal subject is unknown and empty, as is the ultimate referent.

The problem of signifying God is expressed by the ancient Zen master Dayang [9:165]: “Release a blackbird by night, and it flies covered with snow.” A blackbird at night cannot be seen, not unless illuminated by snow or words. But of course the snow falls away when the blackbird flies, as words fall from their referents.

3. Against Theology

Postmodernists make their careers by considering every statement or expression to be deconstructible. They assume that, if symbols are finite and inadequate, so also their referents must be. Natural or divine referents are considered to be no different than the language that represents them, which is idealism running rampant.

According to Derrida’s semiotic thinking, “God” is a bad signifier-sign and a bad signified-idea, and neither has a validating referent. Postmodernism has come to reinterpret all religious texts and symbols, including the Bible, including symbols of religion – the Star of David, Christian Cross, Islamic star and crescent, intra-faith symbols and identities. Their avowed purpose is to recognize *différance*

and restore genuine faith in religion. John Caputo [2:159] explains:

Deconstruction is a blessing for religion, its positive salvation, keeping it open to constant reinvention, encouraging religion to reread ancient texts in new ways, to reinvent ancient traditions in new contexts. Deconstruction discourages religion from its own worst instincts by holding the feet of religion to the fire of faith, insisting on seeing things through a glass darkly, that is, on believing them not thinking that they are seeing them. Deconstruction saves religion from seeing things, from fanaticism and triumphalism. Deconstruction is not the destruction of religion but its reinvention.

Is deconstruction really a blessing and positive salvation for religion and theology? Without doubt, much language-based reality deserves deconstruction, especially the traditional metaphysics of Plato and the ontotheology of the Scholastics, to say nothing of common sense knowledge, whereby its *may a*-like veiling should be stripped away to reveal primordial immanent reality and its nature. But excessive deconstruction strips language-assigned essence and degrades it to constructed-appearance at best and concocted-illusion/delusion at worst. The remainder becomes a ghost-without-garb, a wisp for an image and a trace of a word. By denying ties to referents that otherwise could be a semantic foundation or ground, deconstruction accords with Derrida’s famous statement, “Nothing exists outside the text.” [7:49]

To be sure, even many postmodernists are uneasy about a text with nothing outside or beyond it; they equivocate about the meaning of “nothing,” “text,” “beyond,” as philosophers are prone to do. Yet they go on to accept the prevailing theory that meaning is only textual with little or no correspondence with referents outside the text.

Granted most signs or signifiers and their relational statements or expressions are admittedly limited and inadequate representatives of their referents. However, even as Derridean traces, signs are still necessary to point and guide, especially for theology that has no material referent. Without signs, words, and rules of reason, faith has no direction or way of knowing whether it is focused on the authentic or contrived, good or evil, or that which is worthy of love or rejection, justice or injustice. Such determinations of authenticity, goodness, love, and justice are matters of the head as well as the heart, matters that are determined by linguistic/logical rules.

Unlike most religious images and testaments, divine manifestation or revelation emanates from referents not subject to deconstruction. Derrida acknowledges that an initial experience of receiving the grace of God is not constructed and therefore is not deconstructible. It becomes deconstructible only when embodied in a discourse: “If it is given, let’s say, to someone in a way that is absolutely improbable, that is, exceeding any proof, in a unique experience, then deconstruction has no lever on this. And it should not have any lever. But once this grace, this given

grace, is embodied in a discourse, in a community, in a church, in a religion, in a theology. . . then deconstruction, a deconstruction, may have something to say, something to do, but without questioning or suspecting the moment of grace.” Why this exception? “The possibility of the grace is not publicly accessible. And from that point of view, I am really Kierkegaardian: the experience of faith is something that exceeds language.” [10:39] Here again is the distinction between initial discovering and subsequent inventing, with Derrida himself acknowledging the limits of deconstruction.

Deconstruction can be viewed in another way, not just of deconstructing divine-referring words but of simply penetrating language-constructed essence to reveal divine experience. While word-signifiers are constructed and therefore constructible, their referents are neither constructed nor deconstructible. They simply are – obviously so for material referents, but also so for ultimate referents such as God. Deconstruction applies only to linguistically constructed signifiers, not to their referents. Such distinction is usually ignored in the postmodernist rush to deconstruct suspect metaphysics and theologies whether of dust or divinity and to deny that referents themselves have meaning, again idealism running rampant.

Derrida suspects the adequacy of all language – especially Platonic/Cartesian essence, also Christian theological substance and ontological arguments about essence and God. But at the same time, he admits to the possibility of “the other, which is beyond language and which summons language.” So deconstruction can be positive, even in the hands of the self-avowed atheist Derrida who equivocates and embraces most of the early Christian mystics – Saint Augustine, Meister Eckhart, St. John, Teresa of Avila, and others who first dared to deconstruct the Gods of their day and passed through the emptiness of doubt to seek the God beyond, who knew not what they were seeking but knew how to seek.

Finally, the deconstructive method itself is limited by being a logocentric construction that is subject to deconstruction. How is it possible to clear away or penetrate thought without constructing yet another layer or covering of logocentric thought? The problem has been phrased variously: how to *destruck* metaphysics and unconceal being, to use Heidegger’s terms, without creating another metaphysics or how to unfold and open without refolding and again closing to use Derrida’s and Deleuze’s term; in theology, how “to rid God of God,” to use Meister Eckhart’s phrase. The very concept and exercise of deconstruction requires deconstructing itself.

4. Against Ontotheology

With the traditional ontotheology of the Scholastics primarily in mind, postmodernists have explicitly ejected ontotheology (including the twentieth century ontotheology of Paul Tillich). Three Americans are prominent – Merle Westphal, John Caputo, and Mark Taylor.

Westphal [15:6,7] issued the call of “overcoming ontotheology.” He complained that, in affirming a likeness between being and God, ontotheology wants to “at least peek over God’s shoulder” and “refuses to accept the limits of human knowledge.” Of course, a deconstructed God has no shoulder, no existence, no language-constructed essence. But does such a God have being, not that based necessarily on formal testament and prayer and therefore deconstructible but based on total “Being” as described by Heidegger? For Westphal, this is not a possibility, not for the limited being of humans at least; he cites Derrida’s near-omnifarious statement, “There is nothing outside the text.” He adds that theology or ontotheology has no eternal knowledge and religious practice, no eternal now, and that theological texts are not grounded on anything outside: “If there is anything, such as God or justice in itself, that might be said to be outside the text, saying that or anything else about it would bring it within the text. This is the Kantian point that we have only a phenomenal language for talking about the noumenal world.” [7:194]

Derrida [3:16] might agree with Westphal’s point that all is inside the text, but still look for something outside the text. In fact, he refers to “the other, which is beyond language and which summons language.” By relying on the suspect metaphysics (of being restricted to phenomena/noumena) by Kant, Westphal ignores further questions. What kind of nontextual being or entity might be outside the text? What could be this other that is not just dormant but that is actually summoning language? How might this other be accessed and revealed, as an open possibility rather than a closed impossibility?

Caputo also carries the banner of Derrida’s disclaimer about nothing outside the text. Again, deconstruction is used to strip God of name and voice and to jettison God or the divine out of being and into inaccessible nothingness. Caputo [5:147] insists that being and God cannot be linked; so any ontotheological homage to the God is idolatrous: “We must always and endlessly criticize the idols of ontotheology.” Despite his talk about postmodern openness, he closes the door about the possibility of a link between *ontos* and *theos*.

Caputo [3:88-11] quotes Derrida to say that *différance* “inscribes and exceeds ontotheology,” and goes on to join ontotheology with negative theology that is the dualistic exercise of having to affirm to negate and so is rife with “hyperousiology.” Caputo [3:7] places *différance* in a kind of in-between realm that is above being but below the divine, a kind of inexorable purgatory that accords with Derrida’s description of *différance* that “has neither existence nor essence. It derives from no category of being, whether present or absent . . . It includes ontotheology, inscribing it and exceeding it without return.”

This refers to the old beaten horse, surely beaten dead by now, of traditional ontotheology that started with Plato’s eternal ideas, the Scholastic notion of *ousia* or substance, and persisted through Descartes. Still with Kant, being is limited to essence or phenomena and divine presence is disregarded

as mysticism, with transcendence confined to meaning intuited from noumena and consistent with a priori categories. Like Kant, Caputo still confines ontotheology to an exercise of language-constructed essence, still stuck in the old idealist rut that limits being to essence. He fails to consider that, while God has no essence of naming, something divine may still have the presence of being.

Like Westphal and Caputo, Taylor [11:6] fetes the death of a theistic God: "Deconstruction is the 'hermeneutic' of the death of God"; it results in "the sacrifice of the transcendent Author/

Creator/Master who governs from afar." Fair enough; the Gods of theistic religion need deconstruction and sacrifice, indeed deserve it as Nietzsche insists. But here again is the postmodernist dualism that God must be either present and contrived or absent and excised, admitting to nothing in-between or transcendent that might result from an extended understanding of divine being and transcendental praxis. A self-described "a/theist" in his book *Erring*, Taylor [12:344] prefers to excise God as an absolute altarity: "The absolutely different and wholly other cannot be translated in any language. To the contrary, this altarity inflicts an incurable wound upon language. Always open, the wound lays between the lines it (impossibly) both supports and undercuts."

Taylor's alterity in his book is not just otherness as befits *différance*, but also is a non-translatable, wholly other that inflicts an incurable wound on language. In excising God as a completely different, non-worldly alterity beyond all being, Taylor is not just ana/theist, he is an anti-theist, anti-deist, anti-everything that would seek out the divine. Caputo [3:14] makes a similar criticism: "*Erring* does not stay on the slash of undecidability but makes a reductionist argument against God, thereby reducing the ambiguity of a genuine a/theology and turning *différance* against God." Of course, the same complaint may be levied against Caputo's own notion of an absent God that is an impossible possibility.

In discussing naughtness, Taylor [13:36] dismisses ontotheology: "It is necessary to think that which is neither being nor nonbeing. Within the closed economy of ontotheology, the naught that eludes the alternative of being or nonbeing is even less imaginable than the nothing that is the opposite of everything." Naughtness is not just less imaginable than dualist being/nonbeing; it is not imaginable at all, except as an absolute nihilation and deconstruction-gone-virile against being itself. While being may be interactive with nonbeing, nothingness or emptiness, being itself cannot be nihilated, not if we are here to consider it. Being remains, minimally as a kind of spirit or presence of the divine that is accessed through neo-ontotheology – no slashes needed.

To sum up the postmodernist critique toward theology in general and ontotheology in particular: God has become increasingly remote, starting with the Christian universalizing and depersonalizing of Yahweh, the enlightenment and romantic attacks, and leading to the

familiar modernist issues about divine infinitude, non-existence, and wholly other. The postmodernist God is even more remote, indeed exiled, excised, absented, the result of excessive deconstruction inspired by Derrida. Such a God is just another word inside a text grounded to nothing outside, not even to a possible Godhead, God beyond (the name of) God, or a divine presence, and is separated from human being and experienced by *différance*.

5. Neo-ontotheology

Caputo [6:9] admits to propounding a "weak theology." He likes it as the underdog against "strong theology," which is theistic theology. In *The Insistence of God*, he complains, "The strong standard version belongs to the sovereign order of power and presence and favors a grammar of great omni-nouns and hyper-verbs." In contrast, weak theology "is content with a little verb like 'perhaps,' which can do no more than interpret or intercept . . . focusing on the 'how,' not the 'what,' on little prepositions, not big propositions." He goes on to say, "Weak theology operates in that spooky, shadowy order of the event," from where the "insistence" of God emanates and calls.

The "insistent call of God" is made in the name of God, but Caputo puts the "of" in parentheses to indicate God possesses no names or traits, which is not surprising because his deconstructed God is absent and not to be found. Is there anything theological here about a spooky call from no identifiable caller? Without doubt, the name of "God" is a powerful symbol and psychological calling; but here we are only calling ourselves, much like an Old Testament prophet talking to himself when spending too much time under the sun. Mindful of this problem, Caputo still attempts to hold onto the call, a minimalist call that says nothing meaningful and come from no source or referent, because of deconstruction run amok.

Caputo's call is little more than groundless mysticism. He could seek such calling in being, in the calling or manifesting of the immanence of being, in the natural laws and order of the world. Meaningless calls with no referent, if I am to have any, are not theological. How else can I know that any call has any connection with anything real? Usually, when I hear mysterious, haunting calls coming from no one present, I pursue a psychiatrist, not a theologian. Without some validation and verification, God is a spook of one's own making.

In the middle, neo-ontotheology is both weak and strong regarding *ontos* and its relation to science. It is weak in the sense that, while the natural or given laws and rules of immanence are discovered and plainly observable to experience, their constructions are recognized to be invented and therefore incomplete. The natural theologians and most scientists of the seventeenth/eighteenth/nineteenth centuries leaped to the conclusion that the laws that they invented and constructed were the same naturalistic laws that they

discovered and that the logic of Aristotle and Aquinas provided a complete perspective of God's world. We now know that they held simplistic scientific notions such as isolated cause-effect, necessary sufficiency of cause and subject, a naïve positivist/objectivist perspective, and supporting spiritual notions of essence such as Platonic ideas and Thomastic substance. Due to the incompleteness of language, the laws discovered are not the same laws that are invented and constructed; validation remains a matter of interpretation; larger con-texts and infinite dependent conditions are involved. Theology should be skeptical of scientific positivism as well as theological theism and open to methods that include ana-logic, hypothetical constructs, and hermeneutics.

A second weakness is the difficulty of transforming from the primary experience of immanence and/or secondary experience of essence to the tertiary experience of transcendent presence. Heidegger [8:333] speaks of transforming from "being in what-is-in-totality" to "the totality of what-is." It requires extraordinary awareness of immanence and contemplation of what can be divine presence, which is an elusive, spiritual awareness known by the reflective scientist about intuition and practitioner about religion. Can an event of nature actually be the divine? Pantheists think so, as do panentheists, pandeists, or even deists. While disagreeing over whether a creating or causal God is needed, they agree that evidence of any divine origin or presence can be found in the natural, experienceable world of matter, life, and mind.

A third general weakness results from reductionism, which is limited deconstruction, for the purpose of seeking openness and universality. It is both a method, as described above, and also a practice in the form of contemplative prayer and meditation. Sounding almost Buddhist and following Heidegger, Derrida and Caputo insist that texts, in being disconnected from their originary referents, are empty of language-constructed essence much as is the desert, and that this emptiness can be realized through prayer. For the most part, exclusive of near-certain and apodictic knowledge, this is true and is a powerful leveler of traditional theological testaments.

Yet neo-ontotheology is strong precisely because of "*ontos*," the nature of which has become revealed best by science, as evidenced by the Periodic Table of Elements or the Standard Model of Particles. Despite Zeno's arrow of finitude never quite reaching the target of infinitude, science moves ever closer to revealing natural order and certainty. And, there are the apodictic rules and propositions of mathematics, geometry, logic, and ontology that have proven to be powerful tools in the discovery of natural laws. Through science, we are learning more all the time, and what we learn, even in the behavior of subatomic fermions and bosons of quantum physics, is increasing predictability and constancy.

This is not to say that everything can be known about the natural laws that would manifest the presence of God or the divine, which is a red herring claim by extremists. When

isolated through experimentation, natural laws are remarkably predictable and reflect natural certainty and order. Certainly, the laws of science constructed by humans are not the same laws of nature that reflect divine order. So not every everything is certain, but not because of the natural disorder and chaos claimed by postmodernists. The world is complex; the seemingly simplest action actually involves a vast, interdependent complexity of physical/biological/mental/logical laws and rules, which isolated are universal and certain but when integrated become contingent. We might win big at Las Vegas or beat the stock market, but it is as much the result of luck as of accounting for the unaccountable complexities; so plenty of vital things remain contingent enough to keep us hopeful and humble.

Recognizing and building upon primal concepts and apodictic knowledge is a strength of neo-ontotheology. Even the most extreme deconstructive and nihilistic philosophies depend upon some first, primal, or foundational concepts and principles, a simple point made by Aristotle. Although the f-word of most postmodernists, the foundation of middle theology is the ontotheological trinity of *ontos*, *theos*, *logos*, and each has served as a foundation for various metaphysics, ontologies, and ontotheologies. It starts with the manifestation of immanence that (unlike postmodernist metaphysics) is ordered by laws and understood by rules.

Neo-ontotheology also seeks openness on the strength of an ontological foundation; otherwise being is lost as simple nonbeing, or speaking biblically as "a formless and darkness void" before God created order and meaning. Openness is not affected by subjectivist callings that cannot be validated and verified by others and so is solipsistic and closed. The insistence on validation and verification may sound objectivist and materialist, but it results in the recognition that being has a substance of endless interdependence and inherent emptiness, thereby opening extensions of known existing laws and rules.

In sum, neo-ontotheology is both weak and strong; it recognizes an event neither of a shadowy promise from nowhere nor of a summoning testament from on high. Instead, it recognizes an event from down low, starting with the immanent laws and essential rules that make its order and meaning possible and extending through the realization and contemplation of presence. It draws from both sides. Taking from weak theology, it deconstructs God having a finite existence. Taking from strong theology, it contemplates God outside the text, made possible by being extended beyond the text.

Regarding faith, the question is faith in what – the call or the law? A weak theology means a weak faith, which is an antidote to the abuses of strong, theistic faith but which offers little positive to live by. Neo-ontotheology provides faith with an ontological foundation that can be validated and verified. It supports faith because it applies to actual things that are manifest in accordance with laws of order and rules of meaning. Unlike the nebulous callings and haunting spooks as the only remnants after deconstruction gonewild, such laws and rules are validated for what they are and

verified for the practical certainty they may be.

6. Ontotheology as Neo

Is some kind of postmodernist ontotheology possible, which recognizes *différance* and uses deconstruction? Can it connect the human and divine realms, equivocal rather than univocal to be sure, but reveal an analogical structure between the finite secular and infinite divine?

When most postmodern theologians see the word “ontotheology,” they go blind and see no more. But ontotheology is a complex of three words that when re-viewed can re-open the way of a neo-ontotheology. All ontotheologies reflect, consciously or otherwise, the old Greek meanings of *ontos*, *theos*, and *logos*. Neo-ontotheology derives a perspective distinct from the others, a perspective that has borrowed from modern theologies, identified a praxis, drawn from Buddhist emptiness and interdependence, and wrestled with postmodernism.

Regarding *ontos*, neo-ontotheology recognizes that being is not confined inside the Derridean text, because immanence and presence are pregiven to the constructed essence of the text. Immanence already provides the bio-physical foundation for the construction of the essence of text. It supports panistic or naturalistic faith, pointing at a natural yet meaningful being before conceived and finitized in consciousness and, to speak soteriologically, before defiled by self-consciousness, sin, and karma. Being is a window to the divine of God that is seen after the covering curtains of essence are pulled away.

Neo-ontotheology recognizes a “ground” or “foundation” of laws and rules that account for order and meaning. The natural laws of immanence and rules of thought support the constructed experience of both perceptual and conceptual forms, now especially evident through the findings of twenty-first century science and cosmology. This is not the being of Platonic metaphysics that provoked Heidegger or of logocentric meaning that provoked Derrida; nor is it the chaotic being of postmodernists. It starts by recognizing the order and meaning of natural immanence, followed by the construction of essence and realization/contemplation of secular/divine presence and it rejects the negative/atheistic/agnostic belief that nothing can be known about the divine.

Most postmodernist theologians conclude that God will be forever absent. As the Chinese became more civilized and sacrificed straw-dogs rather than real dogs, postmodernists now prefer to sacrificethe straw-gods of traditional ontotheology without seeking the real God, perhaps for the same reason that the sacrifice of real dogs and gods is too traumatic; as Nietzsche suggested, it is better to kill the god that we created and leave it at that. Referring only to the traditional ontotheological proofs of Anselm and Hegel, Taylor [14:12] can state with dogmatic finality, “If the ontological argument is in any way inadequate, ontotheology inevitably fails.”

Regarding *Theos*, every age has its peculiar narrative and zeitgeist of receptivity that can open new understandings but at the same time close down other understandings, a continuous closing and reopening. And the new is not always more prescient than the old. The ancient Greek “*Agnostos Theos*” was the non-theistic “Unknown God” denounced by Paul in Acts 17. The Greeks still acknowledged “*Theos*” as a possibility, and its original meaning of a ubiquitous watching matches up with the phenomenology of a conscious “*ontos*.” Today, with more open-mindedness, it could refer to a haunted and haunting residue of what is deconstructed and put outside the text and yet as presence then filters back through and imbues the text inside, thereby dissolving inside/outside dualisms as done in process theology.

Regarding *logos*, the method and logic of neo-ontotheology is mostly postmodernist. But its praxis of method also includes practice, which is neglected by academic theologians, especially the philosophical-minded postmodernists. Practice is exemplified by Buddhist meditation that presents the aporetic notion of the pathless path and gateless gate by and through which nirvana is attained. The taking of the eight-fold path only succeeds when the gate and other props disintegrate. The way to nirvana has no gate, no text; there is only the unmarked, in-between way through which the possibility of *ontos* and *theos* is realized and contemplated.

Neo-ontotheological *logos* uses Heideggerian *destruktion* and Derridean deconstruction to penetrate the essence of language and clear the way for both presence and faith wherever they lead. It applies deconstruction especially to the logocentric re-presentations of experience, including religious narratives and theological accounts of God, even gates and paths, still recognizing that the natural facts of immanence and universal principles of presence are not constructed and therefore not deconstructible. It would appear to fall in with negative theology, but it neither negates nor affirms, not subverting but rather guiding faith out beyond the boundaries of texts.

In addition to deconstruction, neo-ontotheology draws upon postmodernist methods that include the hermeneutics of Schleiermacher and Gadamer, “weak thought/logic” of Vattimo, and “theopoetics” of Caputo. It recognizes the *différance* between the infinitude and transcendence of being and God and the finitude and limited essence of human language and thought. It also recognizes the transcendence of the overlapping components of being, as have the Buddha, St. Augustine, Thomas Merton, and contemplators/meditators throughout the ages and cultures.

7. Being and Divine

Is it possible to say, “Being speaks divine”? Granted that the proposition is stark and ungrammatical; the verb “speaks” is intransitive, indicating that being does not act on divine and divine does not act on being; they are simply there, passively not actively. Their relation is not temporal or

causal in which one follows the other. But the reverse statement “Divine speaks being” means they have an overlapping and integral relationship. Without being, divine would not be experienceable, and without divine manifested through universal laws and rules, being would not be possible, not as experience that would be orderly or meaningful.

Traditional ontotheologies start with presumed self-evident statements about *theos* and then use a logic of *logos* (typically syllogism) to demonstrate the supposed *ontos* of *theos*. The reverse procedure of neo-ontotheology starts with statements about the nature of *ontos* such as its universality, order, and primordially, then uses the logic of *logos* to proceed to demonstrate the *theos* of *ontos*. The latter is experience-confirmed and more open to what *theos* can say and mean, especially now given insights from Eastern and postmodernist thought about the deconstructed possibilities of *theos*.

Neo-onto-theo-logy advances a “neo” or new, postmodernist-tempered “*ontos*” or being, to relate to “*theos*” or God or divine, by use of *logos* that includes analogic and other praxis. Perhaps such terms should be deconstructed and trashed altogether, as urged by the postmodernists. Suffice it here to say that many centuries of wisdom have used and linked the subject matter or referents of each of the three terms, admittedly with much confusion and error, but not all need be the hyperousiology of orthodox reason and traditional belief. “Neo” applies to each of the three terms and their linkages.

The task here is to relate “*theos*” to “*ontos*” as the underlying foundation that represents all experience about the world whether perceptual or conceptual and whether noumenal, phenomenal, or transcendental. *Ontos* is the *a posteriori* basis for *theos*, which reverses the traditional ontotheological understanding that *theos* is the *a priori* foundation for *ontos*.

Neo-ontotheology allows for originary sources and ultimate referents that lurk beyond the horizons of the given world, hidden but there nonetheless. To push the point, it allows for a parallel of the postmodernist possibilities and potentialities that result from deconstruction and that lay on the back side of realities and actualities, but always as extended being. While ultimately wrapped in mysterious, such possibilities and potentialities need not be haunted as suggested by Derrida or spooky by Caputo.

Most postmodernists reject ontotheology because of linking “*theos*” with a theistic “God” and then use either term as a convenient target for negative theology or outright atheism. They forget, or never knew, that the original Greek *theos* means a ubiquitous watching, which matches up with “*ontos*” that is also ubiquitous and omnipresent. And *theos*, especially *agnostos theos*, agrees with the postmodernist view of God as an inconceivable spirit or force; or put another way, it refers to a presence or spirit such as Derrida’s other that is deconstructed and put outside the text and yet appears to filter back through boundaries to imbue the text inside. The original meaning upholds the Hebrew

prohibitions of the false gods of the First Commandment and craven images of the Second Commandment; it supports the mystical notion that any God-name objectifies and essentializes a false God. Such can be the subtleties of neo-ontotheology, but all this past and potential mediating between strong and weak is lost in the contemporary disputes between traditional theists/deists and postmodern atheists/agnostics.

Neo-ontotheology can help avoid disputes about real and false Gods and about Gods of “isms” by dispensing with god-talk and referring to the divine. It brings positive focus to the presence of being as the ground or foundation for experiencing authentic, primordial divinity. It recognizes that any affirmation is in some sense apophatic, yet heeds Derrida’s caution of substituting another layer or folding or covering of logocentric thought; so it must constantly deconstruct its own constructions, which is done best through the nonacademic practice of contemplation or meditation.

Presence is ever-present and manifest everywhere, not just inside us as subjective-minded idealists believe or not just outside us as objective-minded realists believe; instead, it is with us (*mitsein*), to be connected or not, to be realized and contemplated or not. Divine presence appears to be at the end of the line as an extended, long-distance (eternal) line, as a potentiality that is realizable as an actuality.

Westerners usually recognize presence to be secular and known through consciousness simply described as “high” or “sublime” or to be divine and known as the “holy spirit” or “divine grace.” Traditional ontotheologies link being and the divine through logic and/or revelation, but logic/reason/language fall short and revelation lacks evidence of valid/verifiable experience. The task for neo-ontotheology is to recognize a presence of being that is divine as well as secular and that is not dependent upon revelation or other speculation. It recognizes a being-based, divine presence that is manifest and open to valid/verifiable experience.

8. Conclusions

The theistic God of traditional theology and ontotheology was badly wounded by Kant, Hegel, and Nietzsche in the nineteenth century, then subjected to Barth, Tillich, and other twentieth century theologians whose operation of cutting out the defiled forms of secular existence all but killed the patient. Postmodernists contend that God was never alive and present to begin with, denying even a eulogy.

How should theology respond? I have argued here that it should bury the traditional theistic God and move on to examine what survives as possibly divine, as supported especially by scientific findings that reveal a world of order and meaning. In the wake of rampant deconstruction, it should revise being by re-examining natural immanence and essence constructed as perception and re-affirm secular and divine presence that is outside the text but transcendent and real nonetheless.

Heralding the death of God, most postmodernists hesitate to call themselves theologians. Yet, curiously, they continue to use the term “God” to key their negative theologies – Thomas J.J. Altizer, John Caputo, Carl Raschke, Robert Scharlemann, Mark Taylor, Merold Westphal, to name a few of the Americans. Some still look for a possible coming, like Caputo who slumbers in postmodernist narrative but keeps one eye open. Postmodernists find only what praxis they bring, which is invariably ironic, cynical, paradoxical, apophatic, aporetic, as exemplified by Taylor’s attempted sidestepping of atheism with the slash of “a/theism” or his abstruse, disconnected negatives in the book *Nots*. It is nowonder that their “God” is boiled dead like Gilles Deleuze’s grotesque Lobster-God.

The postmodernist age is passing. It was sparked by the Enlightenment to burn away theology and metaphysics. But the fire got out of control, burning up not only the intended overgrowth but the valuable foundations and structures of all living knowledge, including the apodictic axioms and postulates and scientific laws and equations that are manifest in immanence. Just one nondeconstructible law and rule should give pause for reconsidering a divine presence that is absolute, universal, infinite, and eternal, even though it does not portray a theistic God that is personalized and interpersonal. Both the weak theology of the psychic call and the strong theology of testament-based revelation yield to the middle theology of a being-based divine presence of universal laws and rules. What better test, which entails validation and verification, can there be?

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