

The Afterlife of God

Dr. G.V. LOEWEN

Department of Sociology, STM College University of Saskatchewan

Email: gloewen@stmcollege.ca

Abstract

Sacred concepts are portable across other metaphysical barriers by virtue of their adherence to the aura of the sacred itself. The concept of godhead has survived mode of production shifts as well as alteration in their attendant symbolic systems. Though we structurally inhabit a worldview that is anti-transcendental, it is well known that as a subjectivity the idea of god remains dynamic. God is both dead and yet continues to exist. This paper explores the implications of such a duality containing both the residuum of faith and the perhaps both bleaker and yet liberating knowledge that the gods and those like them are merely historical artifacts. It is the 'artefactual' nature of what species of the sacred may be said to be still living in our own time that is of the utmost interest, for genuine culture rests not only upon its structures and institutions, but as well upon people's beliefs, which may or may not be accounted for by official political, historical, or scientific discourses. Inasmuch as these beliefs may collide with the 'facts', we may forward a plausible explanation for much of the conflict in today's world.

Key Words: *Afterlife, God, Metaphysics, Nietzsche, Weber, Anti-Transcendentalism.*

Introduction

We are living in the time of the afterlife of God. As such, there is an odd surreality to our visions. We might think we should by now, after more than a century, be able to either shrug our shoulders at the 'God is dead' declamation, respond with a 'so what' of our own. And this not so we can keep the belief alive that God or the gods remain living in the same old way that they were once imagined doing, but so that we can either make a decision to move on without them – after all, they may have left us first – or that we can understand their presence with the same grace and hope we often give to our own. Why, if we continue to either have faith or hope or at the very least, a curiosity that even may be framed in a scientific manner, concerning the possibilities of our own afterlife, should we turn around and deny the same thing to God or the gods? No, this is clearly a form of resentment speaking in us. If we recognized the death of God and at first felt liberated because of it, we also gradually gained as well as sense of resentment about it. That is, we the living. God gets to die but I have to live on. And now, I might ask, with the death of God what am I living on for. Nietzsche is absolutely correct to state that with the death of god, the death of Man cannot be far behind. Perhaps by now this too has occurred and we are only beginning to recognize it. Maybe we as well are living in the time of the afterlife of man. Certainly we are on the cusp of altering our definition of what it means to be physiologically and even cognitively human. The old human may soon be dead, just as the 'old god' of morality, or whatever it was that he was said to represent – and definitions no doubt vary considerably on this point, both historically and theologically – is already. This too may in part be a function of resentment, most especially that to the fact that I must die, even as a prosthetic god I cannot live on indefinitely. Or can't I? Between stem cells, cybernetics and other synthetic replacement parts, why can I not construct my own earthly afterlife; a life after the original and much more fragile human life has run its course? It is *this* idea – that we may gain all the mythical privileges of an afterlife and yet not have to

die; that our 'souls' can not only be made immortal in this life but that we can even allow ourselves to have a soul, though for this express purpose only and not necessarily as part of our ethics or conscience (who will be able to become immortal in our world of inequality and capital and who will not?) – that drives the astonishing feats of medicine, prostheses of genetic organism and cybernetics alike, and the personal engineering of devices that extend the senses in all directions. We want to live on without having to face the question of what occurs to life as it lives on. We desire mortal immortality.

Problem

If God is dead but still exists, what is the character of his existence, and why do the vast majority of people around the world still at least pay public lip service to the idea that the gods remain with us in some kind of conscious form? "Still today, decades after the death of God for Western philosophy, myth lays claim to be a discourse that does not require to be demonstrated, counting on self-evidence, a last remnant of sacredness after a long eclipse of the sacred." (Passerini 1990:50). Perhaps it would be all the more apt to say 'remanent' rather than mere remnant. It is something that haunts us, appearing in visitations rather than visits. The *subito* of the first, the unknowingness of the perceiver, the utter difference in its form, smacks of the uncanny. Visiting someone as another living being is a day-to-day routine affair. It has the character only of the mundane life. It is somewhat difficult for us today to imagine a culture where visitation was itself mundane, but such cultures existed all over the world until very recently. These were the societies of the social contract, and within this contractuality, nature and super-nature were also intimately involved. The world of spirits and the world of men were not only contiguous, sharing a spherical border with one another, the one enveloped in the other and also in a reciprocity with its mate – the soul here was passed back and forth between the two worlds without evaluation or even much delay – but could not exist without each other. Perhaps it was the advent of the concept of the afterlife as an extended period or even a permanent rustication that was the wedge that drove these worlds apart, ultimately resulting in the world of humans no longer able to believe in the existence of any other kind of world.

This is certainly much the case today. Visitation is considered an effect of a cognitive failure, even a derangement. The messiahs and prophets of other modes of production would be cast as lunatics by our own standards of conduct and right thinking. Vision is something one gets from the telescope. And in no way should we be seen as impugning such visions as we do get. They are equally wonderful - and perhaps all the more astonishing because we did not invent them – as were those religious in nature. But it is just *this* sentiment, the sense that there was something spiritual about nature itself, that there was the 'religious in nature' that we have forsaken, or, that has forsaken us: "If religious faith were like some particular illusory belief, whose erroneous nature was only masked by a certain set of practices, then it would collapse with the passing of these and their supersession by others; as perhaps certain particular beliefs about magical connections have." (Taylor 1989:403). Though it is quite reasonable to say that it is in religious behavior that human beings make these connections, the 'magic' of being part of a community is not, in fact, entirely lost on us, as anyone who has faced the challenge of living alone will tell you. We cannot then make the strict claim that ritual and action in the world are mere covers for the absence of authentic belief. 'Works and faith' may go hand in hand, but their apparent *de facto* separation also works its way back into faith. We cannot continue to live in a community without giving something back to it. We do so in good faith, the faith that tells us that not only will our contributions be taken by others in equally good faith but that these others will respond to our actions in the world by continuing to welcome us as part of who they are, as one of the constituents of their self-definition. All of us must have at least this kind of faith, even if it is no longer directed up and away to some other force or figure that is patently non-human but retains some kind of human interest. Perhaps this continued notion of interest, as a projected self-interest is also a necessary part of contemporary faith. This is why the pure atheist can be imagined as the 'ugliest man', for he dismisses the action of faith altogether: "The atheist is the one that reveres nothing; he will appear on Zarathustra's mountain as the ugliest man. [] The atheist for whom everything is permitted as the strictest and most spiritual formulation of Christian morality!" (Lingis 1989:67). In his negation of the truth, he

finds himself at once claiming to have discovered the truth of truths and yet no longer knowing why he believes in a truth at all, nor yet why he is able to believe. Just as atheism is a religion that includes within its beliefs the denial that it is a religion – as if religion and the idea of God were inextricable; any cursory examination of the history of ethnographic records will tell us otherwise, and if one persists in stating that atheism generalizes the persona of Godhead as a gloss for *any* force higher or larger than human beings, one would have to suggest that atheism rename itself as naturism or scientism since the faith in *these* higher forces remain cardinal to it – the atheist finds himself in the uncomfortable position of self-denial. He has discovered, if anything, that there is an anti-Cartesian position also at hand; ‘I don’t think, therefore I am not’.

But since the atheist remains stubbornly human – and perhaps it is here that we can reinsert the coming sense of non-human consciousness that may be at hand in the form of a cyber-organic sentient mechanism; these beings might become the first real atheists in the sense Marx was thinking of as someone to whom the very idea of God could not occur – he then must find a way to explain away this humanity to the rest of us who are trying to find a way to explain it. To do so takes him on a surreal journey where desire, anxiety, and general human feeling seem to be in the way, instead of things that are on the way, to becoming human: “Whenever we seriously judge something to be wrong, strong feeling necessarily accompanies the judgement. Someone who does not have such feelings [] has missed the point of morality altogether.” (Midgely 2004:105). But perhaps the atheist also strives for, not immorality, because this is a function of what is said to be moral, but amorality or even a Nietzschean ‘non-morality’, the concept he made famous in his 1871 essay on ‘truth and lie in the non-moral sense’. Well, amorality is commonly associated with those who seem to lack a conscience. But this is an error of casual language. Only animals are amoral. Human beings who behave like animals are still immoral because they remain fundamentally human even if they have departed from most of the bonds that allow us to be human together and thus become more than our own individuated humanity could ever accomplish. It is the continued recognition of this kind of ‘more’ that in its absence distinguishes the psychopathic criminal, perhaps, from even those lawbreakers who have developed codes of honor and duty of their own and are loyal to them, such as organized crime syndicates or terrorist organizations. The one who is closest to amorality would never understand the necessity for confession, say, or the idea that a truth can be told apart from one’s desires or immediate perceptions: “Confession does not consist in making known – and thereby it teaches that teaching as the transmission of positive knowledge is not essential. The avowal does not belong in essence to the order of cognitive determination: it is quasi-apophatic in this regard.” (Derrida 1995:39 [1993]). That is, it names and unnames itself at once. Its apophasis retains the order of morality and even thus anti-morality in order to remark upon it, put it under erasure – it lingers there, just as does God, in a remanant-like state, ready not to visit us but to ‘visitate’ – so that any ‘knowledge’ that could be said to have been divulged in this way cannot be pinned down as a truth or as something knowable in itself: it has at once masked itself under another guise, that of the confession of the confessional. So the *amoralist* is someone who has no knowledge of himself and thus cannot be held accountable for his actions. And indeed, with insanity as a category of para-being in modern legal statutes, we do not in fact hold such people accountable for their actions as moral vehicles. We only seek to protect ourselves from the possibility of their continued actions. Just as Gide’s famous ‘immoralist’ sought to defy or mock the established institutional order by simply acting against it whenever the opportunity arose, the moralist too knows her actions as a form of truth ahead of time, that is, knows why she is about to do something and also knows in part at least, if it is in the right or tending towards the wrong, pending local definition and actual outcome. The amoralist has no such knowledge, and thus all of his acts are a kind of confession of the absence of self-understanding.

Anti-Problem

What then of the non-moralist? Nietzsche’s shadow is not ugly, but it is a little difficult to fully distinguish its features. Here, we must assume that the one who appears to be non-moral - or ‘extra-moral’ as the incomplete and misleading English translation of the 1871 essay sometimes has it; not unlike the catcher

but equally misleading ‘use and abuse of history’, another famous essay of the following year – does so in order to institute, or at the very least, insinuate (incipit Zarathustra!) another in its place. The new gospel of the overman would be one such optional replacement. Like the one who traversed the wire, we other rope-dancers cannot be assured not only that we will not fall, but also that there would be anyone to witness our demise. When we do ultimately fall off the torus of living being and perhaps pass onward to some other form of consciousness, those who remain in our stead tend not to entirely hold onto either an immoral or a non-moral position: “Even in atheistic countries Christian or other religious practices are admitted alongside the otherwise political and secular ways of honouring the dead. Even if we must regard this as a temporary concession appropriate to a stage of transition, it is none the less very revealing.” (Gadamer 1996:66 [1983]). The witnessing of human finitude may make us wince, but we still present ourselves to it in a manner that has some certitude, unlike those who through happenstance alone gawk at the rope-dancer and then move on. And just as we might think we are honoring not only the dead – not of course as dead, *per se*, but as one who has lived as we yet live – but also various religious traditions that remain alive through their practitioners more than through their believers, we also honor the pedigree of religious thinking in general. Jung mentions that the Epiphany is actually an ancient Pagan festival, and the monstrous forms related in the book of Revelation hail from beliefs quite distant from the nascent Christianity and ‘cannot be explained in its terms’ (cf. Jung 1959:104-5ff [1951]). The current states or even the statuses of our beliefs – traditional, customary, ritualistic, public but not private, external but not internal, or what have you – cannot be used to judge either their historical gravity or their ethical profundity in terms of the cultural evolution of the human species as a whole. We tend to see only the surfaces of things to this regard. Symbolic forms ‘function’ at a variety of levels. They certainly appear as the glad-handedness of faith communities in terms of being able, as a member, to assume that your compatriots are heeding similar notions of what it means to do or be good in the world, or how one honors the recently dead or venerates in a different way the ‘majesty’ of death. Yet they also are at work beneath the surfaces of these fascia, like the course of water that gets into everything and everyone: “It is a known fact that the ‘functional’ gods of religion eventually become functions of consciousness. [] The progressive development of consciousness assimilates the functional gods, *who go on living* as qualities and capacities of the conscious individual...” (Neumann 1970:326 [1949], emphasis mine).¹ The afterlife of God in this sense may be framed as the conscious state of affairs overtaking that unconscious. In this situation, we have ourselves to think things through and know that we are not only still reliant on such symbolism and mythic metaphor, but have also made it more real in that we can call it to the fully wide-awake consciousness of the everyday life, and not have to make pilgrimages to specifically sacred sites or geographic destinations where the abode of the gods exists. We have moved from a topography the sacred to a topology of the sacred.

Jung gives us a further and more famous example than the Epiphany, and one in which this process of existential motion from historic to the chthonic to then finally as a mnemonic is fully realized; “The fish symbol is thus the bridge between the historical Christ and the psychic nature of man, where the archetype of the Redeemer dwells. In this way Christ became an inner experience, the ‘Christ within’.” (op. cit:183). What then is this form of memory but the knowing that what lies within us is immortal and redeemable. This kind of redemption can often seem alien to us today, especially when the word has migrated into contractual use within the realm of commodities. One can ‘redeem’ coupons more ably than one’s soul. Yet it was the rebel who called upon the socius to become a neighbor and to thus redeem himself in this way, through the acts of a good faith that lies open to the other. No authority figure that stood within what had been could have accomplished this motion. “The advocacy of the canon of values inherited from the fathers and enforced by education manifests itself in the psychic structure as ‘conscience’.” (Neumann, op. cit:173). Not all forms of authority stand positioned in this way, however. Famously, Weber saw ‘charismatic’ authority as the force that not only stood up against the tradition and the symbolic institutions thereof, but also because of the dialectic that originated in this questioning of traditional authority, initiated one of the great world-historical dynamics, a major trope both in literature and in myth. It may be that each new generation is possessed of the sense that *something* must be changed, no matter if such an alteration

represents no real revolution but more an adjustment. Indeed, one might venture to say that this is both the safest and in general the most functional manner of changing society for the common benefit of all. However conservative this may sound to youth, it is clear that all successful changes to social orders come about because the old guard eventually is won over to a certain extent. They can see enough of themselves – whether as persons or persona, Neumann mentions that this is irrelevant (cf. *ibid*:174ff) – in the new picture to get behind it, no doubt after some haggling and complaining. It very much matters whether or not their successors exist in larger numbers than they themselves, as was the case of the ‘baby boom’ in the mid-twentieth century in North America, and also whether or not, as youth age into positions of power and privilege, these new helmspersons are willing to chart a course not so dissimilar to the one’s set by their parents. That they most often do so Weber called ‘routinization’, and it is easy to see why this otherwise clunky English gloss was chosen to translate Weber’s original term. But this concept can be used in an even more profound setting. It also describes one of the key differences between myth and thought. Mythic narratives are set in the routine language of the everyday. Though their content may be fabulous or phantasmagorical, their action, plots, characters and motives are quite familiar to the listener, and can be accessed through his own experience of daily life and his biographical datum. The conflicts amongst the gods or other forces, the fates and the afterlife, destiny and tragedy, all were larger than life analogies to the challenges human beings faced within their own local and mortal settings. Not so philosophy: “Myths, unlike history, were originally narratives trying to express all that and to do it in a pleasant form. More pleasant, according to Plato, than *logos*, the tool of philosophy.” (Passerini, *op. cit*:49). To this day, people who read, read fiction. Stories are what capture the imagination of most, and simply because they are not exactly real in no way suggests that they bear only a fleeting resemblance to reality. What they do not force the reader to do unless she chooses to do so is *analyze* that reality and her place in it. The lonely textual alternatives of authors such as myself are no match for the enduring human interest in the narrative form. No matter how convivial philosophy might be made, thinking requires the reader to work, as if there is not enough of that in the world already! But this is also precisely what the messiahs and prophets imagined that we should be doing. Their formula was generally more successful, especially over the short term, than was philosophy’s. The reason is simple; they portrayed the changes they wanted people to think about allegorically, by the construction of new narratives – that of the ‘good Samaritan’ is one such famous one from Christianity – and the presentation of a new version of heroism – the ‘neighbor’ as a mode of being and not as a socially sanctioned social role, for instance. In doing so, an entirely new world is opened up and redefined: “With this, everything becomes clear. The lone god, the new God, is what we call the universe. This is the only thing that exists. For the Greeks, ‘god’ is a predicate.” (Gadamer 2000:91 [1998]). People could identify themselves in these new narratives, in spite of the differences in content that they presented when they, as they necessarily must have done, compared and contrasted them with the stories of their childhood and of their culture history. In the famous parable, where Jesus eventually exhorts his audience to ‘go and do likewise’, the new neighbor figure stops and helps a very marginal character by the side of a road, someone whom others would not shake a stick at. On top of this, there is also a latent sense that being of the Samaritan ethnicity would make it unlikely that one could even be ‘good’, in this way or others, hence the added qualifier to this new hero’s identity. Today, even though the metaphysics and the explanatory territory of the then new religion have been overtaken by science and our ideas of consciousness have been disenchanting, we still refer to those who engage in helping others with no sense that they get much of anything out of it as ‘Samaritans’, dropping even the qualifier ‘good’. Whether or not there remain any actual Samaritans, living in Palestine or nearby, who can claim that they are the successors of those ancient ones, one of whom is described in the gospels, is entirely beside the point. Many later interpreters of the gospels lent them a sense that their contents were also to be taken seriously as an ethics. This is important, because ethics was defined as a department of philosophy, and it was Aristotle who made the first move to dissociate it from metaphysics as a separate project of thinking and a separate, though related, aspect of human consciousness. These interpreters, “...were rational in their outlook, but they had a religious inflation instead of the rationalistic and political psychosis that is the affliction of our day.” (Jung, *op. cit*:84). Such an editorial, if one may call it that, is not quite justified. The Gnostics and others were groups of thinkers, and thinkers in any day and age are not at all representative of the whole of

their cultures. Indeed, in order to claim to be one, at least as a recognizably social role, no matter of how little general value and certainly almost no value to a market, ancient or modern, one had to set oneself apart from the going rate, 'political' or rationalized as the case may be. So it is not the case that our ancestors were more generally amenable to starting philosophical conversations than are we. We sometimes might imagine this to be the case simply because history has bequeathed to us their records, the records of the literate and the privileged, and not the case studies of the billions of ordinary folk who back-dropped every cultural scene going back to the origins of agriculture. Thus we have a very small and poor sample of all that history actually could represent, all that *happened*. On top of this, we have only a partial sample of the elite thoughts of most ages, and this problem of representation only begins to become ameliorated in the West by the Renaissance and only in certain specific regions for some centuries beyond. This *partiality* – in both senses of the word; we have a fragment of the whole and we are also loyal to it due to its very presence amongst us, a keen-eyed well-spoken voice of the dead – sometimes betrays both our logic and good sense. Nevertheless, what we do know about our past is almost seen as sacred, which is why the destruction of archaeological sites is considered to be a war crime, on the order of a crime against the entire species, to whom these artifacts and sites rightfully belong.

Discussion

This attitude toward the past, the more reverent the more distant from us, is also a variable that plays its part in the enduring notion of the afterlife, whether or not one grants a god to have this characteristic as part of his or her nature. With the rise of irrigation monopolies in the Near East and their attendant and ascendant archaic empires, all of those people of whom there exists no record are said to have thought their leaders to be quite literally gods on earth, which is where the later religions like Christianity get their characterizations: "People spoke of him as 'God', and this is not [] a 'fine phrase' merely, but a symbolic fact." (Neumann, op cit:149). This figure was also himself original in the sense that he was 'uncreated', unevolved and came from no other place but his very own. This 'ipssissimosity' combined the autochthony of the local sense of ground and thus also being grounded, as well as authenticity – there can be only one original (yet another mythical trope borrowed by modern advertising): "The first, true, one god does not move but rather rests in himself because he is none other than the universe and is the predicate that the universe deserves." (Gadamer, op. cit:92). One's very-ownness also is its own by virtue of owning the cosmos. The cosmos means order, but the One *is* order. The cosmos is ordered but the One *orders*. The most commonplace phrase in our contemporary service sector is either a direct mimicry of this sense of giving and taking or some kind of paraphrase of it: "May I take your order?" or even the more generic 'May I help you' are ubiquitous today. Even here the Heraclitan admonishment might be said to appear. The Gods remain present in a consciously symbolic or rhetorical form. This is part of their afterlife. That we can be as gods not only prosthetically through object realm technology, as we saw, within certain crucial limits, in the previous chapter, is yet further extended by our reliance, most often commercial and contractual, upon other living fellow-humans like ourselves but with generally less good fortune. At the very least, their age-gradedness belies their possible social status in some temporary manner, as most service sector workers tend to be youthful, and indeed, specifically female youth is sought after to perform these roles and thus garner various remunerations, taxed and untaxed, for their appearance on this usually transient stage. Taking one's 'order' then implies that we are able to mimic the place and power of the gods or God, the original power and creative act, for that speaks to us as the voice and source of all cosmogonical narratives. The beginning of a special night out, the ordering of a meal in a personalized context of the ritual of the communal feast – and even here, as with funeral rites the sumptuary character of the wedding banquet retains its cosmogonic apparatus, for after all, the ultimate act of that evening is the sexual union between the divine partners producing the offspring, the life of consciousness that will inhabit the young universe of the newlyweds – also 'orders' what is to come, whether the number of courses or pending further events and interactions. The politeness, however rhetorical, of the one who serves is tantamount to supplication, even sacrifice, as we know that wait staff do not perform their roles lightly given that they are hoping for the best tips. All of this suggests that we are kings for a day: "Once the king is included in the divine

drama, mythological processes begin to reveal themselves as psychological ones. The process finally takes the form of psychic unification and psychic transformation.” (Neumann, op. cit:251). Of course, once the night is over and the new day begins, we might retain few of the honorifics that had been ours just hours before. This usually does not bother us, however, because we are now wrapped in the rapture of human affections, and these hold our rapt attention for the time being, and perhaps for a lifetime, though this too is now seen mostly for what it is, yet another myth.

Naming ceremonies are yet another context where the afterlife of the gods continues to preside. We look for or imagine personality traits that then can be denoted by personal names. We check the ancestry of one’s family name to see if it suggests anything to us. We wince if we adopt someone with a name that somehow is aesthetically foreign to us, or has negative connotations or associations. Joshua, perhaps the most famous name in Western Christian history, means something to do with the fish, hence the cartouche like logo that Christians display in the most unlikely places, including the trunk lids of vehicles. But here too the afterlife of the gods represents itself. A convivial remnant is always in the offing for believers, and one need not feel haunted in any of the usual somewhat disconcerting senses by using the ancient logos in this or that mundane manner. Jung speaks of ‘Joshua ben Nun’, a legendary Khidr figure that is the son of a fish (cf. op. cit:111).ⁱⁱ What one may say of the naming ritual one may say of the interpretation of history. It is mythic ‘thought’ that links them together and makes them complicit. Portelli suggests that ‘history can tailor the desirable to what is given’, and in this sense the entire history of the one who is named to be a certain kind of figure – perhaps, the next god on earth, as Nietzsche exhorts to women, ‘may you be the mother of the overman’ – is unfolded in the act of creation. So too, in subsistence societies with high infant mortality rates, the first real name is not given until the child is up to four years old and is thus much more likely to survive until adulthood where the names will change in an existential manner yet again. The very conception of history is shot through with the idea that it is *not* set in stone. Morality, yes, but not history. We even have developed the commonplace sense that what has happened may be judged as going awry and thus it should be set right. Further to this, it is just as obviously up to us to do just that: “While uchronia claims that history has gone wrong – and has been *made* to go wrong – the commonsense view of history amounts to claiming that history *cannot* go wrong – and implicitly, what is real is also good.” (Portelli 1990:152, italics the text’s). So in essence, what is being claimed here is that the wrongness found within a certain series of events has been placed there by forces external to the world-historical dynamic, whatever its nature, because the internal clockwork of the timepiece that records and speaks to us of history is itself inviolate. That is, it cannot sabotage itself. From this we get the sense that what the outcome of historical events is in the present is not only real but, if history has not been tampered with, also part of the good in the same way the we saw Plato understanding the good as the calculated direction driving natural forces. Such forces do not have a history as such; they merely have a development and a direction. Should history too then be thought of as a mode of being ‘supernature’?

This is hardly a new idea: “The idea that God designs things for the human good took the form of a belief in good order of *nature*. Providence was understood in general terms: it was reflected in the regular disposition of things.” (Taylor 1989:272, italics the text’s). Environmentalism of all kinds reclaims and maintains this idea. It is always human beings who are the saboteurs of nature, just as some of us take on the villain’s role with regard to history. Uchronia at a biographical level certainly could be dismissed as neurotic wish fulfillment, but it includes more than this when viewed symbolically. It too is part of the afterlife of the gods, for it seeks to appeal to the supernature of the designer of history to adjust what some of us have interfered with. The ultimate challenge for all uchronic leanings is the confrontation with personal death. One may have already died a few times during one’s lifetime and thus become ‘immortal’ in the Nietzschean sense – we do realize as we age that who we once were was not always who we were and certainly not who we are at present, and that this too will change, giving us a sense that a lifetime contains a number of actual *lives* – but we still must face the fact of understanding that there is a finite limit to the process of rebirth. Hence the notion of the afterlife in which rebirth is merely the liminal moment of a cosmogony that announces itself through the shadowy visitation of death. It is a radical and perhaps even a

little romantic announcement, much like an engagement or the emotions at weddings and funerals alike, but it holds its own history to itself with great persistence, and is breeched not even by our rational and technological surroundings and perhaps even discourses: “But if it is true that even this scientific Enlightenment, like that of the ancient world, finds its limit in the ungraspability of death, then it remains true that the horizon of questioning within which thought can approach the enigma of death at all is still circumscribed by doctrines of salvation.” (Gadamer 1996:69 [1983]). And this soteriological intent works both ways, as it were. God’s perfection, we are told, hinges on Man’s ability to perfect himself through being the goal of creation (cf. Neumann, op. cit:119). For if the creation of God does not carry itself through to its fruition, then the creator himself has only himself to blame, though later on this idea was reinterpreted as being a function of the free will given to human consciousness by the creator. At the same time, the distance between humans and gods begins to grow right at this point. The advent of free will, even within a strictly theological context, was the beginning of the end of the living God. God’s death throes begin here. The ‘scientific enlightenment’ merely marked the funeral procession of a being already dead but, as we have argued, not yet gone.

But if this solemn and unknowing procession undertakes the death of creation and as well the idea of creation – the Romantic movement resurrected this idea with regard to both art and the artist, and this, in spite of its rather ridiculous quasi-religious overtones, continues to be the most commonly held view of what an artist’s ‘purpose’ is, yet another testament to the afterlife of God – it also ironically ‘created’ something new: “The infinity and silence of this new universe beget anxiety because they bring with them the uneasy sense that mankind may be only a tiny and meaningless freak within nature. The malaise has been with the modern consciousness ever since, and the enormous increase in our technical powers has not dispelled it.” (Barrett 1979:122). This assuredly is one response to the individuated social reality that at once desires community and does not quite know how to perform it, all the while imagining that it was somehow better performed by our predecessors – an suggestion that has little evidence to support it – and at the same time desires the autonomy of free thought and will. The latter desire is assuaged through technology, as we have seen, the use of which produces certain freedoms such as that of mobility and various creature comforts. Could not the former also be assuaged, not by technology, but by the enduring if subaltern presence of the knowledge that the desire for human community is an authentic mode of being for us? That is, to have the sensibility that to live only as an individual is to live in the absence of part of our humanity is to also realize that we often experience this absence and that there should be means to assuage it. Barrett’s malaise is only half the story here: “Rather than being pushed off into a realm of inaccessibility, transcendence reveals its proper status as a force *within* the human career, as forceful and as ‘present’ as the startling realization of intersubjectivity: the appresented reality of the Other as a being like me.” (Natanson 1970:146, italics the text’s).

Out of the common sense that my desires may well be present to the consciousness of the other is produced a notion of the transcendental. This experience – I am interested in the welfare or the intents of another, I can respond as well as ignore her desires but I must *do* something in the face of not only her presence but also her will – does not replace the gods on earth, it continues in their absence, in their distance from us. It is, more than anything else, their legacy to us as well as their historically laden task left for us to work through. But we work through this task primarily with one another and not by ourselves. ‘Transcendence’ begins at home. It seeks what is not at the moment present to us. Yet it also provides the means of making things present, and this includes the creative genius that constructs a technology that might not merely alienate us but also destroy us. Is it possible, that despite our differences and our anxieties regarding the presence of the other – I might well wish the world were more like me, and every writer who speaks to the other desires to at least open a conversation with otherness in this way – the technology we have invented to protect ourselves from him is also an expression of our desire for a world that is unlike the one we currently have? Even our most grotesque arsenals make this demand upon us – to change the world or die.

Conclusion

And this change is an example of transcendence. And since all forms of transcendence as a ‘force within us’ are resonant with the full presence of the afterlife ‘within’ this life, we are pulled to recognize the presence of something other to ourselves already and always calling us to immanence. One part of this story is alienation, but this is the passive aspect of modern humanity. The active part of our self-understanding, the part that reaches outward instead of merely dwelling inside our acknowledged limitations, is the part that seeks to transcend itself. It still has every reason to desire this, if not to be able to quite accomplish it in the fullest sense. Even so, it has the power to bracket out its ultimate limitation in order to accomplish the living task that life presents to us: “...since no reckoning with death is possible, and since death can never be overcome, this forgetting of death is never a real forgetting or overcoming, but rather constitutes life itself. Thus the whole investigative genius of man presses forward into an incalculable future, or rather, beyond every calculable and incalculable future into the experience of transcendence.” (Gadamer 1996:157 [1990]). The power of the presence of an afterlife *is* the future. It is something that is not known in the same way that the present or the past can be known. But its ‘existence’ as a postulate based on experience is of the same character as the existence of an afterlife that has been posited by a tradition. Traditions are the human experience writ large. Persons have biographies, cultures have histories. There is as much or as little reification in both, given the play of mortal memory in the one and that of politics and fashion in the other. It is not even enough to suggest that what follows the living-present is like an afterlife because the idea behind this traditional concept is of something that occurs or follows what we now know as life and living-on. No, for us, the afterlife is the future in its most broad sense. That it cannot be empirically known before it occurs provides the analogy with the conception as viewed through the lenses of a society where God was not yet dead. But since God and the gods have already matriculated to the afterlife, our task is follow them in our own human way, our ‘transcendence’ dictated by the reality of having to make a future together. Indeed, one might suggest that the afterlife only ‘occurs’ as it were, once one passes into it, just as does the future. God, in dying and yet continuing to exist, now also has the capability of resonating through all that surrounds us. Just as we imagine that the soul has a presence that the body cannot duplicate, the living god – beholden as he was to his earthly life and to his heavenly abode alike – is not as portable and transfigurable to our modern consciousness as is the one who is dead. We tell ourselves that we return to nature, ashes to ashes and the like, precisely because our gods have already returned there and now speak to us from this diffuse vantage point. But their message is the same as it always was – save yourself and humanity from your own self-made menaces: “The infinite theater of nature now replaces the infinite gaze of God as the theater in which the being, the significance, and the worth of each life is maintained unrestrictedly.” (Lingis, op. cit:172). Why is nature seen as infinite in the first place? It is because it bears the mark of creation for us. It quietly murmurs the message of consciousness, even though for the time being we understand that we are empirically alone and can only hear our own voices echoing back to us from vaster and vaster distances as we continue to reach out to the stars. But the very fact that we reach out is the ultimate attestation of the human desire for community and for self-understanding. To know the cosmos is to know ourselves. It is also to know what it means to be a being that can forget things and find replacements for them: “Once metaphysical ideas have lost their capacity to recall and evoke the original experience they have not only become useless but prove to be actual impediments on the road to wider development.” (Jung 1959:34 [1951]). But such ideas do not lose these capacities on their own. We either continue to use them in our architecture of being – pediments rather than impediments – or we transform them into new materials. But the task remains the same. It is true that “One clings to possessions that have once meant wealth; and the more ineffective, incomprehensible and lifeless they become the more people cling to them.” (ibid). But it is also true that just as often, and just as willingly, people slough off the impedimental dross of hollow idols – we often do so by recognizing that which is holding us back from maturing as persons first and foremost, and this realization gradually spreads to others and is spread back to us in turn – because we are aware, even in our clinginess, that we are dependent upon them in some negative manner. Even most addicts recognize that theirs is but half a life, living out its dangerous half-life with the warning that others should not come too

close. The radiation of the negative is not lost on us. We may lose various ways of being; cultures and their gods come and go. What we do not lose is either the will to the future, forward-thinking, projects of action, phantasms and plans of all kind, as well as the knowledge that such may have unexpected outcomes, that the future is 'not ours to see'. It is life after life, but it almost always occurs in spite of its present impenetrability. The experience of the future becoming the present and then being consigned to something that had occurred, both empirically and existentially, is living proof that the afterlife remains a viable place of consciousness.

ⁱ Thus Neumann almost immediately gives the example of the Greek Gods who, though they no longer exist as a pantheon either literally or figuratively – though they keep showing up in contemporary advertising and, in a very Nazi like way, as 'models' for hygiene and aesthetics – or as 'living forces', they have been 'broken down into other facets of society: "They exist as contents of consciousness, and no longer - or only in special cases – as symbols of the unconscious."' (op.cit:328).

ⁱⁱ See also 114 for a list of the major tropes of Christian mythic narrative as encapsulated in the fish symbol; we are also told that the age of Pisces has about 135 years left to in terms of the astrological procession of the 'Great Year'. Perhaps at that time a new religion will also have appeared and Christianity will be marginalized in the way the Judaism, the belief system of the age of the Ram, eventually was.

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