

# God, Being, and the 'End of Metaphysics'

Paul Ricœur's Hermeneutic Retrieval of Exodus 3:14

by Stephen Artner

This paper responds to the phenomenological critique of ontotheology enacted by Heidegger and developed by Levinas and Marion. It asks the question: is it possible, as these thinkers would claim, to speak of God without any recourse to the language of being? The paper defends Paul Ricœur's stance on the matter, namely, that even though the Heideggerian break between God and Being is definitive, nevertheless it is impossible to fully escape the language of Being when speaking of God. And yet in the face of the Heideggerian critique, Being must be understood in new ways. The conjunction of God and Being was an event in history enacted by the Septuagint translation of Exodus 3:14 from Hebrew into Greek, thereby yoking together Hebrew revelation with Hellenic metaphysics. Mindful of the Heideggerian and Levinasian critique, one must take care not to limit the divine name by applying an abstracting Greek metaphysics onto it, but on the contrary let the divine self-revelation in the Hebrew text add further layers to the already rich semantic field of meaning contained in the Greek notion of being. Thus, the death of the metaphysical God through Nietzsche, Heidegger, Levinas, and Marion has in fact opened up the space for a hermeneutic retrieval of the Hebraic *hyh* that will continue to add new meaning to the polysemy of being for as long as Exodus 3:14 is still read.

The conjunction of God and Being was an event in history, a contingent event enacted by the translation from Hebrew into Greek of the revelation of God's name to Moses in Exodus 3:14. Thus argues Paul Ricœur in his relatively little-known essay "From Interpretation to Translation."<sup>1</sup> In that act of translation and in its history of interpretation, the rich semantic meanings from the Hebrew root *hyh* became absorbed into the Greek *einai* (*ego eimi ho ōn*) and, later, into the Latin *esse* (*ego sum qui sum*), thus enriching the already overdetermined meanings of those metaphysical concepts. God and Being were hereby yoked together and remained intertwined for at least 1500 years.

Martin Heidegger's critique of ontotheology, prefigured by Nietzsche's announcement of the death of God, constitutes another event in Western intellectual history, one in which this marriage between Hellenic metaphysical thinking and Biblical revelation was finally severed. For Heidegger, philosophy must once again 'become Greek' and investigate Being

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<sup>1</sup> Paul Ricœur, "From Interpretation to Translation", in: André LaCocque; Paul Ricœur (eds.), *Thinking Biblically: Exegetical and Hermeneutical Studies*, trans. by David Pellauer, Chicago 2003, 331–364.

itself without the added accretions of Judeo-Christian revelation. Whereas Heidegger cements the divorce between God and Being on the ontological side, Lévinas and Marion do the same on the ethical and theological side.

This paper will closely follow Paul Ricœur's provocative thesis that even after the success of this phenomenological critique it is impossible to translate Exodus 3:14, and thus to think of God, without any recourse to the verb being. Every translation stands in a history of interpretation and translation; thus, there is no new translation of Exodus 3:14, no matter how inventive, that escapes the history of reception of the text. All of us stand at the end of a long history of the relationship between God and Being, and no matter what we think of that relationship, we cannot deny that it occurred or that the identity of the West was founded in large part upon that relationship.

That being said, Heidegger's critique is welcome because it reminds us of the 'gap in meaning' in the Greek and Latin terms for being. This gap can be filled, according to Ricœur, by returning to a better grasp of the Hebrew root *hyh* which they translate. Mindful of the Heideggerian and Lévinasian critique, one must take care not to *limit* the divine name by applying an abstracting Greek metaphysics onto it, but on the contrary let the divine self-revelation in the Hebrew text add further layers to the already rich semantic field of meaning contained in the Hellenic notion of Being. Thus, Ricœur leaves open the door for speaking of the relation between God and Being even after the death of metaphysics, though that relationship must now be reconceptualized in new and more Hebraic ways.



The conjunction between God and Being has been placed into question in recent philosophy at least since the work of Heidegger, in particular since his 1927 lecture *Phenomenology and Theology* and his 1951 lecture *The Onto-Theo-Logical Constitution of Metaphysics*. In the first of these lectures Heidegger argues that the domains of theology and of philosophy are totally separate. "There are two basic possibilities of science," he asserts: "sciences of beings, of whatever is, or ontic sciences; and the science of being, the ontological science, philosophy."<sup>2</sup> Heidegger argues that Christian faith "leads to a God who is not Being but a being, even if he turns out to be the highest being."<sup>3</sup> Since theology is a science of this highest being [*Seiendes*], and of the human relationship with God in faith, it is therefore an ontic science. Philosophy, on the other hand, is a science of Being itself. It has been common to say that there is an absolute gulf between religion and philosophy. Heidegger agrees that there is a gulf, but his reasoning runs counter to this common view. For him, the split between philosophy and theology is the same split as between philosophy and chemistry. Theology is merely *a* positive science, among the many ontic sciences. Philosophy alone investigates Being as such and thus is the only ontological science. Theology can have its place in human inquiry as a particular ontical science investigating this highest being, but it is and should be separate from true ontological inquiry about Being.

<sup>2</sup> Martin Heidegger, "Phenomenology and Theology", in: John D. Caputo (ed.), *The Religious*, Malden, MA 2001, 50.

<sup>3</sup> Ricœur, "From Interpretation to Translation" (see fn. 1), 355.

For Heidegger, there is no room in phenomenology for a new science of God or of faith. All prior metaphysics earns the ungainly label ‘onto-theo-logy’, since they amalgamate the dissimilar projects of ontology and theology. Whereas ontology seeks the “ground that is common to all beings as such,” i. e. the Being of beings, theology seeks the “highest being which accounts for everything” as its cause.<sup>4</sup> In conflating this highest being (God as first cause) with the common ground of all beings (Being), ontotheology creates an abstract God totally alienated from the lived experience of faith. “Man can neither pray nor sacrifice to this God,” declares Heidegger. “Before the *causa sui*, man can neither fall to his knees in awe nor can he play music and dance before this god.”<sup>5</sup> Philosophy must instead once again ‘become Greek’ and investigate Being itself without the added accretions of Judeo-Christian revelation. Thinking of Being while leaving behind any hint of Biblical faith makes room for a new post-Christian, neo-pagan, philosophical poetry that can capture a new sense of the divine. Any positive references to religion in Heidegger resituate religion in its Near Eastern sphere, divorcing Jerusalem from Athens and thereby enacting an “expulsion of Judaism and Christianity from the sphere of Western culture.”<sup>6</sup>

Heidegger indeed carves out a place for theology, but as separate from his main emphasis of ontology:

“Being and God are not identical and I would never attempt to think the essence of God by means of Being [...]. If I were yet to write a theology – to which I sometimes feel inclined – then the word *Being* would not occur in it. Faith does not need the thought of Being. When faith has recourse to this thought, it is no longer faith.”<sup>7</sup>

It is clear, then, that for Heidegger not only does Being not need the thought of God, but God also has no need for the thought of Being. Theology should ‘de-Hellenize’ itself by leaving aside metaphysical speculation on God, and philosophy should learn to become Greek once again and rid itself of the accretions of the Judeo-Christian tradition.

Heidegger’s critique of ontotheology is further radicalized by Emmanuel Lévinas on the side of ethics and by Jean-Luc Marion on the side of love and the gift. Both Lévinas and Marion agree with Heidegger that God should be purified of the concept of Being. They diverge from him, however, by objecting to his prioritization of ontology. Lévinas minces no words in his critique, calling Heideggerian ontology a “philosophy of power” and “a philosophy of injustice [...] which subordinates the relationship with the Other to the relation with Being in general, remains under obedience to the anonymous, and leads inevitably to another power, to imperialist domination, to tyranny.”<sup>8</sup> In opposition to ontology Lévinas proposes *ethics* as first philosophy, indeed, an ethics freed totally of ontology. As Ricœur glosses, “The face of the other conveys to me directly and immediately the message of Sinai: you shall not kill me! The face teaches, and it does so directly in an ethical fashion,

<sup>4</sup> Martin Heidegger, “The Onto-Theo-Logical Constitution of Metaphysics”, in: Caputo, *The Religious* (see fn. 2), 74.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 74.

<sup>6</sup> Ricœur, “From Interpretation to Translation” (see fn. 1), 357.

<sup>7</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Séminaire de Zurich*, French trans. by D. Saadji and F. Fédier, in: *Poesie* 13 (1980) 60–61; quoted in Jean-Luc Marion, *God Without Being*, trans. by Thomas A. Carlson, Chicago 2012, 61.

<sup>8</sup> Emmanuel Lévinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, Pittsburgh 1969, 46.

without passing through any prior positing of existence.”<sup>9</sup> When compared with ontology, ethics can seem like “a wasting away and a foolishness in being,” because “To be good is a deficit” in freedom and in being.<sup>10</sup> Yet in reality,

“Ethics is not a moment of being, it is otherwise and better than being; the very possibility of the beyond. In this ethical turnabout, in this reference [*renvoi*] from the Desirable to the Undesirable, in this strange mission commanding the approach to the other, God is pulled out of objectivity, out of presence and out of being. He is neither object nor interlocutor. His absolute remoteness, his transcendence, turns into my responsibility – the non-erotic par excellence – for the other.”<sup>11</sup>

God, then, for Lévinas, is the apotheosis of alterity. God is Infinity, the wholly Other, which can never be reduced to a concept or assimilated into the Same. Thus, God cannot be equated with Being. Being is the subject of ontology, and ontology reduces Infinity into a totality.

Jean-Luc Marion continues in the tradition of Lévinas by developing his notion of ‘God without Being,’ an attempt to ground theological thinking on the new categories of ‘love’ and the ‘gift’ rather than Being. Marion interprets Nietzsche’s ‘death of God’ as a critique of all former names of God, including Being, as conceptual idols. “When a philosophical thought expresses a concept of what it then names ‘God,’” he writes, “this concept functions exactly as an idol.”<sup>12</sup> In order to escape from idolatry when thinking of God, “one would have to manage to think God outside of metaphysics.”<sup>13</sup> Marion agrees with Heidegger that one must step out of ontotheological thinking, but he reorients the focus of such a move: it ought to be done “in the name of something like God and no longer of something like Being.”<sup>14</sup> For Marion, the first name of God is love, not Being. Love can give itself without having to establish first that it exists: the gift is primary. There are no constraints on love as there would be on an existing being subject to conditions of possibility. “Love loves without condition, simply because it loves; he thus loves without limit or restriction.”<sup>15</sup> In the end, Marion hopes to think God without the trappings of Being altogether. He and Lévinas both want to carve out a place for theology *within* phenomenology, unlike Heidegger; but they concur with Heidegger that there is no more place for metaphysical abstractions about God ‘as’ Being.

Surveying this development in recent phenomenological thinking may leave one with some lingering questions. First, does the Heideggerian and post-Heideggerian critique of ontotheology do justice to the metaphysical tradition? Does it truly warrant the epithet of ontotheology? Second, how can Lévinas’s and Marion’s renouncing of Being not lead to a total unintelligibility, a philosophy which cannot be thought at all? Is it even possible to

<sup>9</sup> Ricœur, “From Interpretation to Translation” (see fn. 1), 356.

<sup>10</sup> Emmanuel Lévinas, “God and Philosophy”, in: Emmanuel Lévinas (ed.), *Of God Who Comes to Mind*, transl. by Bettina Bergo, Stanford 1998, 69.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 69.

<sup>12</sup> Marion, *God Without Being* (see fn. 7), 16.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 37.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 37.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 47.

sever the link between God and Being in such a total way as these thinkers have urged? Paul Ricœur offers a fourfold critique of Heidegger's position. First, Heidegger's condemnation of ontotheology (as being a science of the highest *Seiende*, but not *Sein* itself) reduces the "history of metaphysics to its late scholastic version, which can indeed give rise to a confusion between *esse* and *ens* and thereby justify the definition of ontology as the science of *ens* as *ens*."<sup>16</sup> Such is the response of Étienne Gilson against the Heideggerian critique of metaphysics. Second, Heidegger totally ignores the counter-strain of apophaticism in medieval philosophy and particularly the Pseudo-Dionysius's care to situate the One beyond Being. Third, Heidegger ignores Thomas Aquinas's care to differentiate *esse* and *ens* and to situate the Act of Being above every being. And fourth, Heidegger ignores the fact that even Aquinas views the *qui est* of Ex. 3:14 as still inadequate compared to the inscrutable Tetragrammaton in Ex. 3:15. So in all, Ricœur concludes, "genuine Thomist ontology does not correspond to the defaming criterion of ontotheology."<sup>17</sup>

Ricœur also has a rejoinder for Marion and, by extension, Lévinas. Is it possible, he asks, for the Johannine phrase "God is love" to lead to thought at all without first passing through Exodus 3:14? And is it possible for theologians to "renounce every possible signification of the verb being" in favor of love and the gift, as Marion would urge, without committing a *sacrificium intellectus*?<sup>18</sup> How can one even talk at all without using 'to be' in one of its many forms? If it is possible, can this new talk of God based on givenness and love in fact make another "pact with Western reason" as a means of "inculturation into the Western sphere of thinking,"<sup>19</sup> a pact analogous to the old pact between Judeo-Christianity and Neo-Platonic ontology? But then in what way would this new discourse be any superior to the old ontotheology? Perhaps such a pact is not preferable at all. But then without such a pact, if Jewish and Christian thought do actually declare themselves "totally foreign to Greek thought, identified globally with the metaphysics of being," do they not "disenculture" themselves and consent to their marginalization?<sup>20</sup>

Ricœur, for his part, offers a third way between the scholastic view of God as Being and the phenomenological view of God without Being. He does so in his essay "From Interpretation to Translation," found in his book *Thinking Biblically* which he co-authored late in his career with André LaCocque. It is not his most famous book, nor his most famous essay, yet I propose that it is one of his most important and wide-ranging essays that speaks to the current moment in European philosophy of religion and surveys the history of over 2500 years of interpretation, integrating it into a coherent whole.

On the one hand, Ricœur accepts the critiques of Heidegger, Lévinas, and Marion as definitive and irreversible. They ushered in a new era of thought in which the identity between God and Being is no longer an obvious given. He is not nostalgic for scholasticism. On the other hand, Ricœur does not believe that God and Being can be entirely dissociated. To gain a deeper understanding of this matter, Ricœur does what he does best: he engages in

<sup>16</sup> Ricœur, "From Interpretation to Translation" (see fn. 1) 356.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 356.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 359.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 359.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 359.

a hermeneutic retrieval of what he takes to be the exact moment at which God and Being came to be joined together. This moment is the Septuagint translation of the Hebrew Scriptures, and specifically the translation of one verse – Exodus 3:14 – into the linguistic world of Greek. Just as Heidegger's critique marked a seismic break in the history of Western thought on Being and God, so too did the Septuagint mark another world-altering event in thought. The significance of this encounter between Athens and Jerusalem for Ricœur means that the relationship between God and Being is "historically contingent" and "speculatively fragile,"<sup>21</sup> as was seen in these phenomenological critiques.

Ricœur holds, however, that if we return to the original Hebrew and attend to the *conflict* of interpretations that emerged from this verse and its translations, we can allow the text itself to augment the already rich polysemy of *being*, *Sein*, *esse*, *einai* with broader Hebraic significances. Ricœur thinks that Heidegger's critiques have been salutary in that they have exposed a *gap* in meaning in the theological understanding of Being, and therefore of God. The canonical 'ontotheological' interpretation (the thru-line of Septuagint, Vulgate, Augustine, Dionysius, Anselm, Aquinas, major modern language translations) is not entirely wrongheaded as Heidegger, Marion, Lévinas might argue; rather, it is just *one of a multitude* of possible interpretations. To recover these other interpretations, let us follow Ricœur and return to the original text.

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*vayōmer 'ēlōhīm 'el mōšeh, 'ehyeh 'āšer 'ehyeh*  
*vayōmer, kōh tōmar liḥnē yiśrā'el, 'ehyeh šālāḥanī 'ālēkem.*  
 [Hebrew]

*kai eipen ho theos pros Mōusēn legōn Ego eimi ho ōn.*  
*kai eipen houtōs ereis tois huiōis Israēl ho ōn apestalken me pros humās.*  
 [Septuagint]

*Dixit Deus ad Moysen: Ego sum qui sum.*  
*Ait: Sic dices filiis Israēl: Qui est, misit me ad vos.*  
 [Vulgate]

*God said to Moses, "I am who I am."*  
*He said further, "Thus you shall say to the Israelites, 'I am has sent me to you.'"*  
 [NRSV]

Here is that verse which, along with the one immediately following it, constitutes what André LaCocque calls "the revelation of revelations." By far the most important word here is *'ehyeh*, which recurs three times within the span of this one verse. It comes from the root *hayah*, which can mean "be," "become," "come to pass," "happen," or "befall," among many

<sup>21</sup> Ricœur, "From Interpretation to Translation" (see fn. 1), 353.

other meanings.<sup>22</sup> One should note that most occurrences of this verb in the Hebrew Scriptures mean something closer to “become.” The second most important word is *’āšer*, which is the relative pronoun and can be rendered “that,” “who,” “which,” but also and interestingly “because.” Of note is the tripling of *’ehyeh* and the word’s different grammatical functions with each appearance. The first occurrence makes perfect grammatical sense, but the second is in the predicative position within a relative clause opened by *’āšer*. The third occurrence, in the second half of the verse, raises even more complications because the verb is treated as an appellative noun, the subject of the sentence.

The verb is in the imperfect tense, meaning that it denotes incomplete action. It is important to keep in mind that Hebrew only has two tenses: imperfect and perfect. These tenses do not denote time, as tense does in English, but rather aspect, or the status of an *action*. Imperfect tense denotes incomplete or continuous action, whereas perfect tense denotes completed action, both regardless of time (present, past, or future). The incomplete action-oriented nature of this verb should give pause to any translation that renders it in a static or essentializing way. André LaCocque offers some illuminating comments in this regard. In his opinion, the *hayah* here signifies something much more than a “mere copula.” Rather, it “signals a dynamic action, something like ‘to be with, to become, to show oneself [...]’ or even, when the verb retrieves its fundamental and full force, ‘to fall, to befall, to happen, to become (*cadere, evenire, . . .*).’”<sup>23</sup> The imperfect tense of the verb signifies its active and dynamic nature, as opposed to the Greek participial form which turns being into more of a characteristic – “I am the existing one,” “I am the one being.” LaCocque cautions contemporary exegetes of Exodus 3:14 not to “indulge in any ontological abstraction regarding Being, a sense that the root may have acquired much later when Jewish reflection came under the influence of speculative thinking from the West.”<sup>24</sup> The imperfect tense of *’ehyeh* drives his point home: “God says *’ehyeh* and the unaccomplished tense helps us see the action as a process. It is not a question of divine essence, but it is a promissory statement that God, as it were, ‘stands or falls’ with his people, and in the first place with Moses about to return to Egypt where a price is set upon his head.”<sup>25</sup> Thus, at least according to LaCocque, the *’ehyeh ’āšer ’ehyeh* is more a commitment of God’s fidelity to his people than a statement about his own essence.

<sup>22</sup> James Strong, *Strong’s Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible*, Abingdon 1961.

<sup>23</sup> André LaCocque, “The Revelation of Revelations”, in: LaCocque; Ricœur (eds.), *Thinking Biblically* (see fn. 1), 307–330, here 312.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 313. LaCocque certainly has in his sights Étienne Gilson, who popularized the phrase “the metaphysics of Exodus,” and famously derived from the Exodus passage the declarative statement “There is but one God and this God is Being, that is the corner-stone of all Christian philosophy, and it was not Plato, it was not even Aristotle, it was Moses who put it in position” (*Etienne Gilson, The Spirit of Mediaeval Philosophy*, Notre Dame 1991, 51).

<sup>25</sup> LaCocque, “The Revelation of Revelations”, 316. Richard Kearney takes up LaCocque’s perspective in his *The God Who May Be*: “So the Exodic name, we may now surmise, is *both* an I that is identical with itself in the past *and* a Thou that goes forth into the future. It reveals God as he is, at the same time as it commits God, and his emissary Moses, to an action of salvation. This is why the Name is both theophanic and performative [...]. In short, the nameless Name is not an *acquis* but a promissory note” (*Richard Kearney, The God Who May Be: A Hermeneutics of Religion*, Bloomington 2001, 28).

Ricoeur remains more circumspect about discarding the 'ontological' reading of Exodus 3:14. Is it really accurate to charge the medieval interpreters of this passage with 'ontological abstraction,' as LaCocque does? Ricoeur takes a more nuanced stance: "The paradox," he says, "is that the most audacious ontological considerations of the medieval thinkers stand in complete opposition to an 'abstract' or 'essential' conception of being, *precisely under the impact of Exodus 3:14*."<sup>26</sup> That is, the very act of translation that brought the Hebrew guest-word *hayah* into the Greek host-language as *einai* guaranteed that ontological reflection on *einai* would never again fall into vaporous abstractions. For the Church Fathers and medieval scholastics knew well that whenever they spoke of Being – *einai*, *esse* – they were also speaking of a person, the God of revelation.

That being said, there are still many routes that the medievals neglected to take in their interpretations and translations of this verse. Gathering up the textual work we have done so far, I can list here a range of possible translations of Exodus 3:14 that vary wildly in meaning from one another. To begin with, there is the traditional ontological rendering: "I am who am," "I am the one who is," or "I am that which exists." But the reverse of this is the more apophatic rendering: "I am who I am," with the implied "and you will never know who I am."<sup>27</sup> There is then the promissory rendering, which LaCocque and others have emphasized: "I am who I will be," "I will be what I will be," "I will be what I was," "I am who I will become," "I will be what I become," and many more permutations. Furthermore, there is the causal rendering: "I am because I am," "I will be because I will be," "I will become because I am," and so on. Finally there is even a modal rendering: "I will be who I could be," "I would be what I am," or "I am who may be."<sup>28</sup>

Rabbinical literature, as cited by LaCocque, also offers a trove of imaginative renderings of this verse that diverge from the standard medieval Christian translations. *Midrash Agadah* reads, "As you are with me, so I am with you."<sup>29</sup> *Shemot Rabbah* chooses "I who used to be the One is I who shall be the One."<sup>30</sup> The *Targum Onkelos* has it as "I am like the one with whom I am."<sup>31</sup> *Targum Yerushalmi I* renders Exodus 3:14b as "I who was, who am, and who shall be, sends me to you."<sup>32</sup> *Targum Yerushalmi II* (fragment) hearkens back to Genesis in its translation of 3:14b: "The one who says to the world [...] be! and it is; and who will say to it: be! and it is. [...] It is He who sent me to you."<sup>33</sup> And Rashi's paraphrastic rendering perhaps does the most in bringing out the resonance of the divine name as a promise to his people: "I shall be with them in this misery as I shall be with them in their slavery to other empires [...]"<sup>34</sup>

<sup>26</sup> Ricoeur, "From Interpretation to Translation" (see fn. 1), 335, emphasis added.

<sup>27</sup> This gloss is given by Jean-Luc Marion in conversation with Richard Kearney in: id., *Debates in Continental Philosophy: Conversations with Contemporary Thinkers*, Fordham 2004, 22.

<sup>28</sup> This last translation is of course how Kearney chooses to render the Divine Name in *The God Who May Be*.

<sup>29</sup> Cited in LaCocque, "The Revelation of Revelations" (see fn. 23), 327.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 327.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 327.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 328.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 328.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 328.



The Septuagint translation, in contrast to these rabbinical ones, opted strongly for the ontological interpretation of the verse, and it thereby definitively brought the God of Mosaic revelation into a unity with the Being of Greek philosophy. Ricœur stresses, however, that the translation of *'ehyeh* into *einai* is not a translation into a definite and univocal Greek notion. One needs only to look at Aristotle's famous line, "Being is said in many ways,"<sup>35</sup> for confirmation of this. Rather, this act of translation adds even more polysemy to the already equivocal Greek notion of being.

The Septuagint breaks the parallelism of the tripled *'ehyeh* for the first time: "egō eimi ho ōn. [...] ho ōn apestalken me pros humās." The translators convert the first *'ehyeh* into the Greek *eimi*, "I am," but they render the second and third instances of *'ehyeh* with the substantive participle *ho ōn*, roughly "the existing one," "the one being," or simply "the being." So in this shift from the Hebrew imperfect verb to the Greek participle, the *'ehyeh* has already lost some of its activeness and futural connotation and has been turned more into a trait or a characteristic with a definitive present tense. St. Jerome's Vulgate translation actually stays closer to the Hebrew by translating both the first and the second *'ehyeh* as *sum*, "I am," but it reverts to the relative construction *qui est* ("he who is") for the third *'ehyeh*: "Ego sum qui sum. [...] Qui est, misit me ad vos."

The upshot of these translations is that the ambiguous Hebrew *hayah* has been rendered into a formula. The name for God is Being: God is 'he who is'. Both the Greek and Latin terms, note, have shifted into the *third* person singular rather than the first person as in the original Hebrew. This adds quite a bit of distance to the name as compared with the Hebrew. However, both translations still do preserve the *masculine* singular form of the noun rather than casting it into the neuter *to on* or *quod est*, and thereby they preserve the personal aspect of the name. In Neo-Platonism we often hear of *to on*, *to agathon*, and *to kalon*, but we would never hear *ho ōn*, *ho agathōn*, or *ho kalōn*. Here already we see the Greek and Latin ontological concept starting to be influenced by the guest-word *'ehyeh* which they are hosting in their own tongues.

From the beginning, the LXX translation set up a marriage between Judeo-Christianity and Neo-Platonic philosophy. Ricœur argues that the key figure in arranging this marriage was Philo, a Jewish Platonist who took the Septuagint translation to be inspired. Philo interprets the *ego eimi ho on* as an extension of Platonism: "Thus, in Mos. I:75, [Philo] says that the opposition that separates the God of Israel from the false gods redoubles the opposition that separates 'what is' from 'what is not' and also what separates real being from mere opined existence."<sup>36</sup> Bringing in notions from the Platonic understanding of *einai*, Philo maintains that Ex 3:14 reveals God is not subject to *genesis*, becoming, and that he is eternally immutable, in contrast to everything else, which changes. Later thinkers like Augustine, Boethius, Anselm, and Aquinas agree.

Surprisingly, Philo also held on the basis of this passage that no proper name at all can designate God. How could he claim this? Because the Greek translation severs the semantic

<sup>35</sup> Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, trans. by C. D. C. Reeve, Indianapolis – Cambridge 2016), Γ 1003 a 33.

<sup>36</sup> Ricœur, "From Interpretation to Translation" (see fn. 1), 338.

link between Exodus 3:14 and the divine name in Exodus 3:15. In Hebrew, the etymological connection between the threefold *'ehyeh* and *Yhwh* was readily apparent: they both derived from the same root *hayah*. But because the Septuagint systematically replaces all instances of the Tetragrammaton with the word *kyrios* ("Lord"), the Greek translation does not convey this semantic link. Thus, Philo can understand Ex 3:14 as God revealing to Moses not his name but simply that he exists: "I am the one who is" is equivalent to "my nature is to be, not to be said."<sup>37</sup> This marks the beginning of the long dialectic between positive ontology and negative apophaticism, to be expanded further in the writings of Augustine, Pseudo-Dionysius, and Aquinas.

The second conduit between Greek philosophy and Judeo-Christianity, argues Ricœur, was the Johannine Scriptures. These canonical texts, written in Greek, explicitly brought revelation into the language and conceptuality of Hellenic philosophy regarding the vocabulary of being. John's Gospel and the Book of Revelation use the verb *einai* and apply it to the person of Christ: "Before Abraham was, I am" (Jn 8.58); "The one who is, and who was, and who is coming" (Rev 1.4). This second quotation undoubtedly offered a retranslation of Ex 3:14. The application of *einai* to Christ followed Christian thinkers through the Middle Ages and served to enhance and amplify their ontological reflections even further.

Ricœur moves on to Augustine, the authoritative Christian neo-Platonist of late antiquity. Augustine's exegesis of Exodus 3:14 is inseparably both philosophical *and* theological, as is all of his thought. He sees "no split between the *esse* of philosophy and the *ego sum qui sum* of Exodus 3:14a, inseparable from the *qui est* of 3:14b, but rather a marvelous consonance."<sup>38</sup> Augustine takes the ontological interpretation of Ex 3:14 as inherited from the LXX, Philo, and the Church Fathers, and incorporates it into his all-encompassing ontological system which synthesized Neo-Platonism with Christian spirituality. When Augustine says *vere esse* (true being) or *ipsum esse* (being itself), he means not just something that exists but Existing itself.<sup>39</sup> In *Confessions* XIII he writes, famously, "By the Spirit we see that everything which in some degree has existence is good; for it derives from him who does not exist merely in some degree since he is Existence [*qui non aliquo modo est, sed est, est*]."<sup>40</sup> Here we see Augustine drawing from the Latin translation of Exodus 3:14 to support his ontological-theological system. Because God is Existence, then whatever God may be, he must be immutable, eternal, and incorporeal. Immutability is the highest of those attributes. God, as Being, cannot change – a doctrine Augustine inherits from both Plato and Aristotle. God is *eternal*: in him there is no 'was' or 'will be,' only an eternal present. Yet even to say that God is Being is not to say that Augustine knows anything about God's essence. "The *qui est* gives no access to any *quid est*. Someone is not something."<sup>41</sup> The Christological interpretation of Exodus 3:14 through the Johannine texts complicates Augustine's picture, though. Immutability, eternity, and incorporeality do not seem to apply to a

<sup>37</sup> Ricœur, "From Interpretation to Translation" (see fn. 1), 338.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 343–44.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 345.

<sup>40</sup> Augustine, *The Confessions*, trans. by Henry Chadwick, Oxford 2008, XIII.31.46.

<sup>41</sup> Ricœur, "From Interpretation to Translation" (see fn. 1), 345.

historical enfleshed human person who at the same time claimed that “Before Abraham was, I am.”

Dionysius the Areopagite, known to us as the Pseudo-Dionysius, diverges from Augustine in that he locates God beyond Being. Whereas Augustine, fighting against the Manichees, places Being as the highest in the order of the spiritual quest, Dionysius “speaks of a beyond Being and calls unknowing (*agnôsia*) the least inadequate knowledge of God.”<sup>42</sup> He ranks goodness higher than being, following Plato, and asserts that goodness is “above all being.” The pursuit of the Good involves “repelling being,” as the seeker of goodness “struggles to find rest in the Good which transcends all being, in the sense of a denial of all things.”<sup>43</sup> Even so, for Dionysius *qui est* is valuable both as (1) “a name that negates, that eliminates everything that is not worthy of the title Being” and (2) “a name that affirms, that speaks positively of Being par excellence, Being itself, *esse ipsum*.”<sup>44</sup> For all of the Latin Christians, *qui est* admitted of no other interpretations than these two, the apophatic or kataphatic ways. Little effort was given to return to the Hebrew to see whether *hyh* might add even more meanings to readings of this verse.

Ricœur underscores two points here. First, none of the Church Fathers or the scholastics doubted that the revelation in Exodus 3:14 came from God and that it stood apart from any human language or philosophical speculation. Second, none of them entertained the notion that “speculation on Being would reveal to human reason the secret of the divine essence in the intimacy of its innermost nature.”<sup>45</sup> While the Fathers and the Scholastics thought of Being as the name of God, they always still maintained that Being was undefinable. They were influenced by the apophatic neo-Platonic tradition represented by Dionysius, who held that since the One or the Good is beyond being, it is thus beyond all intelligible ideas. Thus, one can never affirm anything about God. Instead, the only things that can be expressed about the divine nature are negative, that is, one can only say what God is *not*. Thus Thomas Aquinas in his *Summa theologiae*: God is not composed of body and soul or form and matter or essence and existence; he is not in a genus, he does not change, he does not pass away, he does not contain imperfection, and so on.

At the same time, apophaticism was complemented by the tradition of analogy, which held that one can in fact make affirmative statements about Being, given that those statements are “at the horizon of an elevation to the highest point of the most sublime titles and titles and attributes encountered along the road of not just rational speculation but also spiritual purification.”<sup>46</sup> For example, one can say something like “God is wisdom,” but only in an analogical sense: God is wisdom to such an eminent degree that he transcends everything we could mean when we say wisdom; he is ‘*hyper*-Wisdom,’ wisdom beyond wisdom. Already in this example we can see that even though apophatic and kataphatic discourse seem initially at odds, they mutually reinforce each other. On the one hand, before one can negate anything one must already have a positive conception in one’s mind

<sup>42</sup> Ricœur, “From Interpretation to Translation” (see fn. 1), 346.

<sup>43</sup> Pseudo-Dionysius, “The Divine Names”, in: Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works, trans. by Paul Rorem and Colm Luibheid, New York 1987, 73.

<sup>44</sup> Ricœur, “From Interpretation to Translation” (see fn. 1), 347.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 342.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 342.

about what one is negating, and one must know enough about what God is like (through analogy) in order confidently to negate something of God. Furthermore, a negative statement of God must be a "kind of overthrown affirmation" if it is not to be a purely privative negation<sup>47</sup> – for example, to say that God is not a stone is not to say that he is *less* than a stone; rather, in negating being a stone of God one must simultaneously affirm that God is infinitely more than a stone. On the other hand, whatever we attribute to God by way of elevating titles to the highest eminence is equivalent to negating what we ordinarily mean by those titles, as above with hyper-wisdom.

The Latin scholastics of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries were more eager to affirm the intelligibility of Being than were earlier Christian thinkers. Thus, Exodus 3:14 became more or less superfluous; it was used more as a secondary confirmation of their philosophical reasonings than as a starting point for thought. Even so, theological speculation on Being was still tied to Biblical interpretation of Exodus 3:14 and to the personal pronoun contained therein, "as though the question *quid est?* (what is God?) were still driven by the question *qui est?* (who is God?)."<sup>48</sup> Of all the medievals, Anselm of Canterbury stood alone in positing a definition of the divine essence: "something-than-which-nothing-greater-can-be-thought."<sup>49</sup> Anselm, the essentialist par excellence, moved from a prior understanding of God's essence to an understanding of God's existence: because it is greater to exist than not to exist, then God, that-than-which-nothing-greater-can-be-thought, must exist. Needless to say, this argument sidesteps any need for appeal to God's self-designation in Exodus 3:14. As Ricoeur notes, the other scholastics distrusted Anselm's 'short way' and instead held more closely to longer proofs beginning from sense experience and the fact of change and arguing to God as that which must exist to explain change and the existence of the physical world. Yet the scholastics knew these proofs only took them to a First Cause, not to the nature of God. One can only know *that* God is, not *what* God is. Thus, these scholastics were much closer to the earlier dialectic between ontologism and apophaticism found in Philo, Augustine, and Dionysius.

For Aquinas, *qui est* is the principal name of God, beyond all other names such as the Good, life, wisdom, and so on. In his *Summa theologiae*, question 13, article 12, he directly cites Exodus 3:14 to prove his point: "On the contrary. It says in Exodus 3.14 that when Moses inquired, 'If they ask me what is his name, what am I to tell them?' the Lord replied: 'Speak thus to them: "He Who Is sent me to you."' Therefore the name 'He Who Is' (*qui est*) is the most proper name of God."<sup>50</sup> We see here that Aquinas takes for granted the ontological interpretation of Exodus 3:14 – far from needing to argue for that interpretation, he instead assumes it as given and uses it as a basis for his own argument about the primacy of Being over all other names of God. Aquinas purifies Augustine's concept of the *ipsum esse* and described it as the pure Act of Being. He thus shifts attention to the 'existential' aspect of *esse*. Being itself (*ipsum esse*) is just that, the act of existence, so it is of

<sup>47</sup> Ricoeur, "From Interpretation to Translation" (see fn. 1), 347.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 348.

<sup>49</sup> Anselm, "Proslogion," in: Brian Davies; G. R. Evans (eds.), *Anselm of Canterbury: The Major Works*, Oxford 2008, 87.

<sup>50</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *The Treatise On The Divine Nature*, in: Robert Pasnau (ed.), *Summa Theologiae I*, 1-13, trans. by Brian J. Shanley, Indianapolis 2006.

course eternally in act and cannot change or come in or out of existence. Each being (*ens*) receives its being (*esse*) from God, whose essence is identical to Being itself (*ipsum esse*).<sup>51</sup> Yet, as Ricœur rightly argues, even though Aquinas argues for the identity of essence and existence in God, he still remains committed to apophaticism regarding the content of that essence. That is, *esse* still remains undefined. Aquinas's Five Proofs point to the fact *that* God exists, but not *what* he is.



As can be seen from Ricœur's survey of classical and medieval ontological thinking, the coincidence of God and Being was an event in thinking with a historical point of origin and trajectory. It did not have to happen this way, yet the interpretive decision of the Septuagint translators to read Exodus 3:14 as an ontological statement about God's essence proved definitive for millennia. But what if there were another event in thinking in which this convergence between God and Being becomes suspect, where the 'metaphysics of Exodus' becomes undone? We live now in a world after that second event in thinking, initiated by Heidegger and followed through by Lévinas and Marion. For all the virtues of the medieval conception of God as Being, it is undeniable that this 'God of the philosophers' was only tenuously joined to the biblical God, the God we can pray, sing, and dance to. "As for us, after the contemporary critique of metaphysics, we find ourselves confronted with the non-philosophical origin of God and his nonnecessity for philosophy," remarks Ricœur. "Suddenly, the expressions *sum* and *qui est* stand out in their splendid isolation."<sup>52</sup>

At the same time, however, is it possible to remove ourselves fully from all ontology when confronted with the 'revelation of revelations' in Exodus 3:14? Can we make any new translations of this verse without at all using the verb being? Ricœur believes not. In the wake of the phenomenological critique of ontotheology, new and inventive translations of this verse have indeed been proposed in recent decades, such as:

Franz Rosenzweig – "Ich werde dasein, als der ich dasein werde. [...] ICH BIN DA schickt mich zu euch."<sup>53</sup>

Martin Buber – "As the one who will always be there, so shall I be present in every time."<sup>54</sup>

Hartmut Gese – "Ich erweise mich als der ich mich erweisen werde."<sup>55</sup>

Newer translations still have emerged in the years since Ricœur's essay, such as Robert Alter's "I-Will-Be-Who-I-Will-Be"<sup>56</sup> and Richard Kearney's "I am who may be."<sup>57</sup> Ricœur

<sup>51</sup> On this see *Aquinas*, *On Being and Essence*, Toronto 1968, 57.

<sup>52</sup> Ricœur, "From Interpretation to Translation" (see fn. 1), 354.

<sup>53</sup> "I will be here as the one who I will be here. . . . I AM HERE sends me to you." (My translation.) German text cited in Ricœur, "From Interpretation to Translation" (see fn. 1), 361.

<sup>54</sup> Cited *ibid.*, 361, n. 47.

<sup>55</sup> "I show myself as the one who I will show myself to be." (My translation.) German text cited *ibid.*, 361, n. 48.

<sup>56</sup> Robert Alter, *The Hebrew Bible: A Translation with Commentary*, vol. 1: *The Five Books of Moses*, New York 2018, Ex 3.14.

<sup>57</sup> Kearney, *The God Who May Be* (see fn. 25), 37–38.

would point out that alternative translations like these still do not leave behind the verb being altogether. *Dasein* is a compound of *Sein*; "will be" and "may be" are forms of "to be." Ricœur comments that these translations

"restore the cultural, spiritual, and theological context of this verse and, in this way, make explicit what I have called the gap in meaning produced by Exodus 3:14. This gap in meaning does force us to think in another way about the verb being, but it does not force us to eliminate it from our translation."<sup>58</sup>

The ontological reading of Exodus 3:14 was just one of many possible interpretations of this infinitely fruitful verse, and if this path is now foreclosed to us by Heidegger, we can retrace our steps to the source and explore the multitude of others that have been forgotten. Perhaps we need not abandon being altogether; rather, we can let the Hebrew text break through our calcified notions of what being entails. Thus, the death of the metaphysical God through Heidegger, Lévinas, and Marion has in fact opened up the space for a hermeneutic retrieval of the Hebraic *hayah* that will continue to add new meaning to the polysemy of being for as long as Exodus 3:14 is still read.

Dieser Beitrag versteht sich als Antwort auf jene phänomenologisch grundierte Kritik der Ontotheologie, die von Heidegger vorgetragen und von Levinas und Marion aufgegriffen worden ist. Ist es möglich, wie diese Denker behaupten würden, von Gott zu sprechen, ohne auf die Sprache des Seins zurückzugreifen? Es soll der Standpunkt Paul Ricœurs verteidigt werden, dass der heideggersche Bruch zwischen Gott und Sein zwar endgültig, es aber dennoch unmöglich ist, in der Rede von Gott der Sprache des Seins völlig zu entkommen. Angesichts der heideggerschen Kritik muss die Rede vom Sein auf neue Weise verstanden werden. Die Verquickung von Gott und Sein war ein historisches Ereignis, das durch die Septuaginta-Übersetzung von Exodus 3,14 und die Zusammenblendung von hebräischer Offenbarung und hellenischer Metaphysik initiiert wurde. In Anbetracht der heideggerschen und levinasianischen Kritik ist darauf zu achten, den göttlichen Namen nicht durch eine abstrakte griechische Metaphysik zu verkennen, sondern im Gegenteil die im Hebräischen artikulierte göttliche Selbstoffenbarung durch weitere Schichten des bereits an sich reichhaltigen semantischen Bedeutungsfeldes des griechischen Seinsbegriffs anzureichern. So hat der Tod des metaphysischen Gottes durch Nietzsche, Heidegger, Levinas und Marion in der Tat den Raum für eine hermeneutische Wiedergewinnung des hebräischen *hyh* eröffnet, die der Polysemie des Seins so lange neue Bedeutung verleihen kann, wie Exodus 3,14 gelesen wird.

<sup>58</sup> Ricœur, "From Interpretation to Translation" (see fn. 1), 360.