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Response to My Critics

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Martin Heidegger observed in his inaugural lecture at the University of Freiburg in 1929 that the profundity of all fundamental questions lies in the fact that they call into question not merely the subject of the inquiry but also both the questioner and the act of questioning itself. To put this another way, any comprehensive explanation must be able in principle to account for the one who is giving the explanation and for the explanation itself, and any account that cannot do this disproves itself in the very act of its narration. Thus, if any such account does not make clear the nature of the narrator and the narration, it is suspect on these grounds and readers may reasonably ask for an explanation. Since I did not discuss or try to justify the methodology or the nature of the narrative that I employ in my book, it is not surprising that all three of my critics either explicitly or implicitly raise this as a question. Kirstie McClure perhaps poses it in the most straightforward fashion by asking about the character of my narrative, suggesting quite plausibly that it might be read as an account of the adventures of the divine predicate. Less directly, Tim Fuller seems to make a similar claim with his characterization of my position as middle Hegelian. Since I argue that in modernity the divine, as Tim Fuller eloquently puts it, is "absorbed" by the individual, it is certainly reasonable to ask what kind of account I imagine I am giving. Or to put it a bit more maliciously than my three interlocutors do, one might reasonably ask who I think I am. It seems to me that this is not only a fair question, but also a very penetrating one, and one that I must try to answer. I imagined my own goals to accord more with Tom Merrill's characterization of my thought as an attempt to bring about an encounter with the fundamental questions that underlie the basic assumptions we make about ourselves and our world. But to give no more explanation than this would hardly be satisfying. Moreover, since I complain at the beginning and the end of the book that we moderns need to pay a great deal more attention to the example of Oedipus and not forget who we are and where we come from, it is incumbent on me to explain myself and what I think I am doing more fully. I will try to do this after first attempting to clarify my argument and responding to several other questions my critics raise.

One of the central claims of the book is that the modern world comes into being as a consequence of and in reaction to the nominalist revolution against scholastic realism. This revolution brought about a profound shift in our

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ontology, that is, in the way we conceive of being. This ontological transformation, however, did not take place because a small number of metaphysicians sat down and reconsidered the nature of being. In fact, I do not believe that this is ever the case. This change in the way of looking at things was rather the result of a different crisis that was much more closely connected to the immediate concerns of human beings. Let me explain. In all coherent comprehensive accounts there is necessarily a connection between ontology and the nature or character of the various realms of being, what I call in the book (following Heidegger) ontic realms. There is in other words a necessary and reciprocal relationship between *metaphysica generalis* (ontology and logic) and *metaphysica specialis* (theology, cosmology, and anthropology) in any philosophical account. Fundamental changes in one ontic realm thus have a ripple effect as thinking attempts in architectonic fashion to establish coherence or consistency among the various realms of being, and with being itself.

I thus argue that the nominalist revolution that shaped modernity was not so much the result of a reflection on ontology or on the cosmos or human being, but the consequence of the transformation in the understanding of the nature of God that rejected the scholastic notion of the preeminence of divine reason in favor of divine will. It was this *theological* transformation that led to the transformation in the understanding of ontology and all of the other ontic realms as well. This is the reason, to answer Tom Merrill's thoughtful question, that the book focuses on the *theological* as opposed to the *metaphysical* origins of modernity. In its origins and in its development modernity is principally and decisively shaped by theological concerns within the broader realm of metaphysics. That modernity increasingly conceals and forgets this origin and connection does not make that beginning any less important. In fact, it may make the theological element in our tradition more powerful and dangerous.

This danger arises, as I see it, because this new understanding of God gives rise to an individualistic ontology that has serious repercussions for our understanding of man and nature. It is important to understand how radical this new ontological position was. Why do I say this? The ontological question, or the question of being, is not obviously an answerable question. As Plato defined it, it was the question of the one and the many. Later thinkers referred to it as the question of identity and difference. This question, in my view, is always pressing but is also ultimately unanswerable. We cannot think the one without the many, or identity without difference, and yet we can only think the one as opposed to the many, or identity as opposed to difference. It is thus impossible to develop a comprehensive account that relies entirely on either the one or the many or on identity or difference. (I should note in passing that this is the reason that I do not believe that the modern account that rests on this nominalist ontology can be "true" in any simple sense of the term, as Tom Merrill suggests.) I take the perennial character of this question to be demonstrated in Plato's *Parmenides*, and I believe it is a lesson we should also draw from the failure of nineteenth-century efforts

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to construct a philosophy of identity as well as later twentieth-century efforts to formulate a philosophy of difference. Neither was able to develop a coherent and comprehensive account. Nominalism, as an attempt to deny the one in favor of the many (and in its postmodern form as an attempt to deny identity in favor of difference) thus claims to know more than can be known, and, as a result, inevitably becomes entangled in contradiction.

Modernity, I argue, is constructed at its very core on the nominalist notion of radical individuality, and thus repeatedly and inevitably finds itself entwined in contradictions as it tries to make sense out of the relationship of individual human wills with one another, the individual human will with an omnipotent and thus predestining divine will, and the individual human will with a deterministic natural causality. In my book I consider three instances in which this contradiction appears, first in the debate between Erasmus and Luther on the freedom or bondage of the will, then in the dispute about the possibility of human freedom in the debate between Hobbes and Descartes in the "Objections and Replies" to the *Meditations*, and finally in the contradictions of the Enlightenment assertion of both human freedom and natural necessity that finds its foremost expression in Kant's Third Antinomy. Tom Merrill rightly points out the importance of this antinomy to my argument. I suggest in the last chapter of the book that the antinomy is both the culmination of a long tradition but also the central and guiding philosophical question of post-Kantian thought. In this respect, *The Theological Origins of Modernity* extends and helps to ground the argument I made in my earlier books *Hegel, Heidegger and the Ground of History*, and *Nihilism before Nietzsche*, both of which see the Third Antinomy as central to the development of continental thought in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

While I believe the philosophical argument in my book is relatively clear, its political implications are less visible. Both Kirstie McClure and Tom Merrill suggest that this portion of the argument is underdeveloped. This is undoubtedly correct, but this is not due to any sense in my mind that the political consequences of nominalism are ambiguous. The second chapter of the book, on Petrarch's invention of individuality, focuses on what I take to be the meaning of this ontological revolution for our understanding of what it means to be human. Working within the larger ontic framework that nominalism establishes, Petrarch constructs a model for the willful individual that becomes essential to the modern understanding of the human, an image of a willful being constructed, as Salutati, Pico, and later humanists clearly recognized, on the image of a willful God. This notion of individuality is given greater depth and interiority during the Reformation, and it is precisely this individualized and subjectivized self that emerges at the end of the Wars of Religion in the thought of Hobbes and Descartes as the modern self. It is a self that is no longer fallen but that possesses an innate dignity and the potential for unlimited power, a self with inalienable rights, a self that Kant argued must be treated as an end in itself, and a self that the later German idealists,

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such as Fichte and Hegel, came to understand as infinite or absolute. While the broader political consequences of the nominalist revolution are given less attention in this book, I believe they are relatively clear, and inform our understanding of sovereignty, rights, the idea that power is the end of politics, etc. I have spelled these political consequences out in much greater detail in my *Nihilism before Nietzsche* and in a number of other articles I have written over the past decade, including "Where Did All the Evils Go," in *Moral Judgment and the Problem of Evil*, ed. Ruth Grant (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), and "Sovereign Selves and Sovereign States: Political Theory for a New Millennium," in *Freedom and the Human Person*, ed. Richard Velkley (Washington, DC: Catholic University Press, 2007).

Today the rise of the modern notion of the self is generally explained not as a theological phenomenon, but as the consequence of a secular turn away from religion. This conclusion in my view is the result of an overly narrow understanding of religion that fails to recognize not merely the enormous variety of forms of religious belief and practice within Christianity, but also the concealed theological elements in the secular vision of the self and the world. When we think of religion today we are prone to think that religion must be based on scripture, and to imagine that there is a necessary contradiction or at least a problematic relationship between reason and revelation. Tom Merrill thus remarks that in my account of modernity Biblical religion seems to disappear and it becomes increasingly difficult to distinguish what I call religion from atheism. I admit that over time the Bible comes to play a smaller role in some forms of theologically informed thinking, and that to some what I call religion may seem to be identical with atheism, but as I suggest in my final chapter, I do not believe that a close analysis of liberalism, for example, can justify this conclusion, since at its core it embodies a faith in the sanctity of the individual which is unthinkable without nominalism and the humanist/Protestant understanding of spirit and incarnation. It is easy for the nonreligious to believe that any religious practice that does not conform to some preconceived model of what religion should be is heterodox or atheistic. And of course, many religious groups regard other religions that deviate from the one true doctrine they hold to be heretical. But when one examines different sects, it is hard not to be struck by the sincerity with which most people hold their religious beliefs. These beliefs include biblically based religions that extend from the textual literalism of Ockham and Luther to various forms of fundamentalism, but also less explicitly biblical sects, from Christian humanists such as Ficino and Erasmus to rationalist pantheists such as Spinoza and deists such as Shaftesbury and Emerson. It certainly matters a great deal in many instances whether one believes it is necessary to follow the literal text of the Bible or whether one believes in the power of the individual human mind, or in categorical imperatives, but all of these notions in my view are derived from what is an essentially nominalist faith and ontology.

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In the final chapter of the book, I try to show that modern secular society has its roots in the nominalist tradition I sketched in the earlier chapters. I recognize that this argument is at best a sketch, especially if one compares it to a more comprehensive argument such as the one Charles Taylor develops in *A Secular Age*. I argue in my concluding chapter that the current reigning explanations of this process either as the death of God and the rise of man (secularization) or as divine withdrawal and a corresponding diminishment of man (the *deus absconditus* hypothesis of Heidegger and any number of postmodernists) are insufficient. I suggest instead that this process is better understood as a process of transference. What I mean by this is the process by which the attributes and functions previously assigned to God are now ascribed to either nature or to man. On one hand, this produces the unshakable faith in the quasi-divine sanctity of the individual, which I discussed above, and, on the other hand, a belief in a universal natural causality that replaces the notion of a predestining divine will.

I recognize that this notion of transference has marked similarities to concepts in the work of Hans Blumenberg and Amos Funkenstein. In contrast to Blumenberg, however, I do not see these modern notions as the secular creations of self-asserting individuals, who are seeking to fill or "reoccupy" outmoded theological positions with concepts that have a radically different content and function. Rather, like Karl Löwith, I see them continuing to play much the same role. Blumenberg, it seems to me, accepts too uncritically the story modernity tells about itself and is not sufficiently cognizant of the underlying theological assumptions that modernity inherits from the world it seeks to overturn. My account of modernity is thus much less "Whiggish" than his, and is, I believe, thus better able to explain the catastrophes at the end of modernity that remain mysterious to him.

Let me now return to the question of the nature of my narrative. This task is made difficult by the fact that I do not believe that we understand ourselves as well as we imagine. It thus seems possible to me that my readers may understand me better than I understand myself. Both Tim Fuller and Tom Merrill suggest that my account is essentially descriptive and does not make any specific normative recommendation or appeal. They thus conclude that my narrative is, in Tim Fuller's words, "stoic" in attempting to reveal the truth of our situation in order to calm our fears and anxieties. It is certainly true that I do not want to tell people what they should think or do, although I believe that many who follow my argument will recognize that their normative outlook rests on foundations that are quite different and in many respects much less sound than they imagined. I would not be surprised if this insight affects some of them normatively, although I imagine that this effect will vary considerably from person to person.

In writing the book I understood myself to be pursuing a genealogical inquiry that would help us understand where we have come from, who we are, and where we might be going. Methodologically, I was and am convinced that this can only be achieved by examining the questions that underlie all of

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our thinking. Here I am obviously indebted to Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Gadamer, but I also see a strong connection to Collingwood's claim that all of our statements and theories have to be understood as answers to questions. This encapsulates a view that I hold very deeply. I recognize of course that this insight is also one of the principal axioms behind the methodology of Quentin Skinner and the Cambridge School of political theory that emphasizes the necessity for a careful historical analysis of the immediate context within which political philosophers live in order to understand the concrete questions that direct their thinking. Where I differ from this school is in taking a broader view of the context that the thinkers we examine see themselves inhabiting and the set of questions they see themselves addressing. Aristotle is certainly correct that thinking begins by confronting questions that are near at hand, but he also recognizes that thinking does not stop there, but moves on to a consideration of ever more distant, more perplexing, and more profound questions. I do not, however, leap to Heidegger's conclusion that it is only the highest question, and particularly the question of being, that truly motivates philosophy. In fact, I believe that most of the changes in our understanding of ontology are rather the result of facing fundamental ontic questions, that is, questions about the nature of God, man, or the natural world.

In facing these questions I believe we often find ourselves in a situation analogous to that of Oedipus facing the Sphinx. Our world seems to be slipping into an abyss, and we are consumed with anxiety, which leads us to find an answer that will give us something to hold on to. When we have such an answer, we stride forth from this *aporia*—often slaying anyone who raises the question anew—to put our new knowledge into action in our city. I know that for pragmatic reasons we need answers to these questions but I am convinced that we also need to be skeptical enough to recognize that our answers are always only provisional. We have repeatedly seen how dangerous conviction and certainty can be in these matters, and, as I point out in the epilogue to the book, how dangerous they are today as we confront radical Islam's faith with an ardent secular/liberal faith of our own. I would be happy if my book made us somewhat more skeptical about our moral and political commitments and a bit more inclined to a Socratic reluctance to believe that we understand ourselves, our motives, and our mission.

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