

## Review on 'Heidegger and Philosophical Atheology'

by Peter S. Dillard

Josh Harris\*

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*Heidegger and Philosophical Atheology* is another rigorous and well-researched addition to the impressive array of books in the Continuum Studies in Continental Philosophy series. The author, Peter S. Dillard, is a self-avowed defender of the Scholastic tradition of philosophical theology, and the argument in this book is clearly driven by such an approach from the outset. He defines 'atheology' as the rejection of the notion that 'the universe is created by a metaphysically independent Creator' (1). Thus, insofar as Heidegger's critique of the metaphysical tradition extends to this basic theological commitment, he is an atheologian. The central argument of the book, then, is a Scholastic critique of this *Heideggerian atheology*. It is Dillard's contention that Heidegger's later philosophy proposes a view of contingency that ultimately leads to a contradiction.

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Secular readers should not be tempted to discard Dillard's argument on account of its outright appeal to orthodox Christian theology. It is metaphysics—not historical theology—that is the subject matter of this book. The first chapter deals primarily with Heidegger's early work on Thomas of Erfurt and John Duns Scotus, highlighting both his critique of psychologism (the idea that subjective judgment has direct ontological implications) and his affirmation of the Scotist concept of being that is common to all things, but "prior to any categorical conceptualizations" (p. 15). This early Heidegger has not yet imagined the anti-metaphysical implications of his later work because he is content to accept the "independence of thought from language" (p. 21).

Next, Dillard delves into the heart of Heidegger's "atheology of Appropriation," which will eventually set the stage for Heidegger's view of contingency. Whereas the early Heidegger understands thought and language to be independent realms, the mature Heidegger attempts to bridge this gap towards "the goal of a univocal, phenomenologically rich account of being"—one that does justice to the interrelated nature of thought and being (p. 26). In order to do this, Heidegger keeps the Scholastic transcendentals (truth, goodness, unity), but recasts them as "historically disclosed transcendentals" that are given by "Appropriation [*Ereignis*] that sends both time and being" (p. 36).

Dillard then contrasts Heidegger's atheology of Appropriation with the Scotist argument for the existence of God. Scotus uses two traditional Scholastic premises in a modified way:

1. An infinite number of causes cannot exist.
2. That if a First Being exists, it exists necessarily.

From [1], it follows that the existence of a necessary First Being is possible. This is because a necessary First Being *could* be that which solves the infinite regress. Then, from [2], it follows that the First Being is actual. This is because, as necessary, the First Being is either actual or impossible—and its impossibility has already been ruled out by premise [1].

Heidegger's atheology responds to this argument by rejecting the idea of a First Being altogether. For him, the existence of a necessary First Being is impossible because "it is impossible for the sending of being to be caused" (p. 52). In fact, this impossibility is the impetus behind Heidegger's coinage of the concept of Appropriation as an absolutely contingent, non-metaphysical sending of being. For him, the history of being "might have happened in another way or not at all" (p. 51). It is this final point that Dillard will critique in the final chapters, which come to a climax in his "refutation" of such a view of Appropriation.

Heidegger's atheology is ultimately an account of nothingness as the answer to the question, "why are there any things at all?" For Heidegger, "nothing causes, sends, or explains the history of being. It just happens" (p. 88). Dillard's argument is an attempt to show why this view ultimately leads to a contradiction.

1. If it is possible for absolutely nothing to exist, then nothing is possible.
2. If nothing is possible, then the actual history of being is not possible.
3. But the actual history of being *is* possible—because it is actual.
4. Therefore, by *reductio ad absurdum*, it is not possible to affirm Heidegger's position that it is possible for absolutely nothing to exist.

While there is no doubt that Dillard's argument is as highly creative as it is tightly argued, it is difficult to imagine that students of Heidegger will be "convinced" by such a refutation. After

all, any metaphysical critique of a non-metaphysical philosophy must by definition have great difficulty “hitting its mark,” so to speak. It is also strange that Dillard only seems concerned with the early and later Heidegger, leaving *Being and Time* (1962) almost completely out of the picture. These points notwithstanding, however, there is tremendous value in Dillard’s argument insofar as it shows the great extent to which the precision of Scholastic metaphysics is very much relevant in contemporary continental philosophy. It may be, in fact, that this refutation does more to present a convincing apology for Scholastic metaphysics than it does to discredit Heidegger’s philosophy. Even if this were the case, though, it would not diminish the significance of Dillard’s achievement in this book.

## References

Dillard, P., S., 2008. *Heidegger and Philosophical Atheology*. Maidenhead: Open University Press. UK: Continuum International Publishing Group Ltd.

Heidegger, M., 1962. *Being and Time*. Translated from German by J. Macquarrie & E. Robinson. Harper Ltd.

