
Ian Alexander Moore: Heidegger and the Problem of Metaphysics as Ontotheology

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Author: Ian Alexander Moore

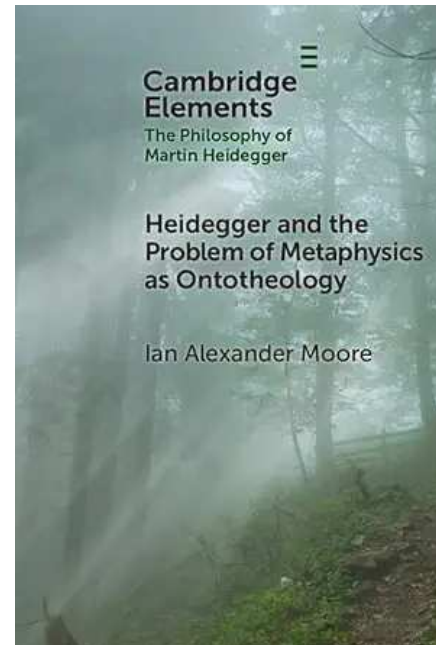
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Reviewed by: Alberto Zali (Scuola Normale Superiore, Pisa)



1. General Overview

Few interpretative labels have done as much work in twentieth-century hermeneutics as “ontotheology”. Since Heidegger began using this term in the early 1930s and then made it central to his account of the “essence” of Western metaphysics from the mid-1930s onwards, it has migrated far beyond Heidegger studies proper: into Derrida, Levinas and Marion; into debates in analytics philosophy of religion about classical theism; and into a general-purpose shorthand – sometimes wielded with more confidence than precision – for any philosophical or theological system accused of collapsing God into a concept. That the central insights of such a vast subject can be presented in just sixty pages is remarkable in itself. Yet this is precisely what Ian Alexander Moore accomplishes, as his contribution to Cambridge’s “Elements in the Philosophy of Martin Heidegger” series takes on the unenviable task of doing two things that are rarely done together and almost never well done together: reconstructing, with philological care, exactly what Heidegger meant by the term across four decades of shifting usage; subjecting his reconstruction to a sustained historical and logical test to see whether it can bear the interpretative weight placed on it.

The verdict, stated plainly in the book’s conclusion, is double-edged. Moore credits

Heidegger's critique with real diagnostic value: both as a warning against conflating being with any particular entity, and as a safeguard against what later thinkers (Marion, Westphal) have called theological and political "idols". But he also concludes that Heidegger's strongest claim – that metaphysics as such, across its history, is essentially and inescapably ontotheological – does not survive contact with the historical record. Three case studies (Plotinus, Aquinas, and Meister Eckhart) are collected to show that the tradition Heidegger claims to have exhaustively diagnosed in fact contains significant strands that elude the diagnosis. This work situates Heidegger's thought within a broader philosophical horizon, disclosing new perspectives on old questions for assessing its significance. Supplemented by a fifteen-page appendix cataloguing every occurrence of the term "ontotheology" in Heidegger's corpus and a substantial bibliography, it is a dense but tightly organised piece of scholarship. This review aims to show that Moore's critique opens up a problem that his reconstruction leaves unresolved: the desire that animates metaphysics.

2. The Structure and the Arguments

Let me begin with an overview of the volume's structure. Since each section contains a summary of its main claims, I shall confine myself to reconstructing only the arguments most relevant to my subsequent discussion.

In the introduction, Ian Moore proposes a useful tripartite framework for understanding the ontological levels at work in Heidegger's thought. He distinguishes between beings (*das Seiende*), beingness (*die Seiendheit*) and being itself (*das Seyn*). The distinction can be reformulated in terms of presence as what is present (*das Anwesende*), presence (*die Anwesenheit*) and coming-to-presence (*das Anwesen*). Moore reconstructs ontotheology as involving two interlocking moves: beingness is grasped, on the one hand, as whatever is common to all entities and thus grounds their intelligibility (the "ontological" side), and, on the other hand, as something understood by reference to a single highest entity that both exemplifies this commonality and causally grounds everything else (the "theological" side). Heidegger believes that this double structure never gets at being itself, to be conceived as a third, non-entitative dimension that makes the distinction between being and beings possible in the first place. Hence, his diagnosis of "the oblivion of

being” (*Seinsvergessenheit*) concerns the third and most fundamental sense.

One of the book’s core insights is that metaphysics, no less than being, is predicated in multiple senses. The first chapter (pp. 5-11) identifies four distinct meanings of metaphysics in Heidegger’s work. 1. A positive substantive sense, defined by the content of metaphysical inquiry: beingness *or* being itself. 2. A positive existential-formal sense, according to which *Dasein* itself exists beyond beings and is always already metaphysical. 3. A positive integrated sense, which brings together the first two meanings. 4. A negative substantiative sense, in which metaphysics becomes identified with ontotheology. The author argues that these different meanings cannot be reduced to a single positive focal sense. However, once the question of *Seyn* is bracketed, ontotheology emerges as the pivotal point of Heidegger’s destruction of metaphysics. The chapter concludes by distilling Heidegger’s mature understanding of metaphysics into ten concise theses, which concern the epochal character of metaphysics, the necessity of retroceding from metaphysical thinking, the identification of ontotheology as its unified essence, and the distinction between *Historie* and *Geschichte*.

Noteworthy is Moore’s discussion of the existential-formal conception of metaphysics. If human beings interpret entities in light of their being, then metaphysics appears to coincide with the hermeneutical structure of *Dasein* itself. Although Moore touches on this point only briefly, it raises relevant questions concerning the relationship between metaphysics and hermeneutics that demand further investigation. Equally illuminating is the reconstruction of Heidegger’s short-lived attempt to develop a positive form of ontotheology through the combination of fundamental ontology and metaontology in the 1928 lecture course on Leibniz (Ga 26). Following François Jaran’s interpretation, Moore suggests that Heidegger’s later, pejorative identification of metaphysics with ontotheology should be understood as a retrospective critique of this earlier philosophical project. The reason for this reversal lies in the inability of the project developed after *Sein und Zeit* to overcome the residual *Dasein*-centred, quasi-subjectivist perspective. This reconstruction is philologically sound. Nonetheless, it does not fully explain why such a conceptual shift became necessary, nor does it provide adequate criteria for assessing its legitimacy.

The second section (pp. 11-22) supplies the genealogy. Its first half traces Heidegger's engagement, in the early 1920s, with a lively debate among German scholars, chiefly Paul Natorp and Werner Jaeger, over whether Aristotle's *Metaphysics* coherently unifies its study of being-as-such (tied to *metaphysica generalis*) with its allegedly regional study of a highest, unmoved, immaterial substance (*metaphysica specialis*). Both of them opposed this second horn of the antinomy. The former maintained that ontology cannot be subordinated to one of its regions, since regions of being are incommensurable with being as such, and none, *qua* region, is superior to another. The latter also held that the two parts are incompatible and sought to resolve the contradiction "developmentally": the young Aristotle, still under the influence of Plato, had momentarily espoused the theological conception of metaphysics. While initially agreeing with Natorp on the ultimate exclusion of theology from ontology, Heidegger comes to consider theology and ontology as «necessarily related» (p. 16), referring to a *Doppelbegriff* that is constitutive of ontology as such (Ga 22: 149). Moore clarifies convincingly that Heidegger's concept of ontology grows directly out of his attempt to explain why the Greeks found themselves pulled toward a universal and theological science: an explanation he ties to the ancient equation of being with presence and to a desire for stability.

This desire for stability grounds the ontotheological enterprise, yet remains little more than an allusion. The same applies to metaphysics understood in its existential-formal sense, to which this desire properly belongs. While this is no fault of an *Element* conceived as a necessarily synthetic work, the point is still crucial. One may accept Heidegger's critique of ontotheology and say that his own philosophy remains entangled in the same ontotheological pattern or, as Moore does, show that at least some thinkers from the past escape the accusation of being ontotheological. But one might also question the meaning of the presence sought by ontotheology, and of presence as such together with the desire that underlies it. What is needed is an inquiry into the desiderative substratum of metaphysics: an erotic logic of metaphysics, so to speak, that can assess the judgment brought against it. To put it simply, metaphysics has as much to do with *interpreting* the good as with being. I will return to this issue later.

The second half of this section turns to Hegel, whose *Wissenschaft der Logik* is treated as the historical culmination of ontotheology: it is *simultaneously* a theology

and an ontology, insofar as God stands for the self-completing and all-comprehensive Absolute that comprises the rational determinability of every entity. Here ontotheology experiences the specifically modern addition of the thinking subject, yielding what Heidegger rather vividly calls “onto-theo-ego-logy”. This part is also instructive for its use of less familiar volumes of the *Gesamtausgabe*, most notably Ga 80.1, which includes the conference on *Hegel und das Problem der Metaphysik*, delivered in March 1930, whose drafts represent the first formulation of the ontotheological thesis. Hegel’s endeavour to know the infinite, as Moore highlights, is the natural enemy of Heidegger’s philosophical venture: by asserting the identity of being and thinking, the father of speculative idealism fails to recognise that this identity is already “cleared by being”. One might add that such awareness is already operative in the conclusion of *Die Kategorien- und Bedeutungslehre des Duns Scotus* (Ga 1: 411), at least on an existential level. Heidegger there proposes to overcome Hegel’s primacy of *theoria* and his understanding of the history of being in order to begin a new narrative centred on the concept of love. That his challenge to Hegel “is a challenge to the entire tradition of philosophy” (p. 19) is therefore valid, if anything, at a deeper level than Moore apparently supposes.

Section three (pp. 22-31) is the book’s systematic core. Drawing on the genealogy and scattered remarks across Heidegger’s corpus, Moore identifies twelve essential properties pertaining to one or both of the extremities of the ontotheological structure: wholeness, commonality, nobility, simplicity, genuineness, measure, grounding, unification, transcendental-transcendent totality, the essence-existence distinction, analogy, and the metaphysics of presence underlying them all. The properties of subjectivity, spirituality or teleology, by contrast, characterise only specific forms of ontotheology. These features, eventually, are assembled into a single ideal-form definition at the section’s close, which I reproduce in its entirety, excluding the author’s internal cross-references:

Ontotheology is thus “essentially”, “structurally”, and “constitutionally” a matter of determining the common, simple, essential, ground of all entities taken together – as one, as transcendental world – on the basis of a supreme or noblest, transcendent entity that exists most of all and most simply, in most

genuinely exemplifying this commonality and essence. Such a highest, foundational entity must be understood as a totality that unifies all entities (itself included) as a whole and as a cosmos, and that serves as measure by which all other entities are evaluated. The ontological and theological orders [...] are connected more generally by way of analogy. All of this is based on a metaphysics of presence that seeks stability (p. 31).

This taxonomy functions as the instrument the rest of the book will use to test particular thinkers. Before pursuing this line of inquiry further, however, it is worth pausing to consider the originality of Moore's treatment of analogy and its connection to metaphysics in Heidegger's understanding of the matter. For Heidegger, analogy is the device that binds ontology and theology together, insofar as it enables one to state «of what is not the highest that both is and is not in the way of the highest» (p. 30). The prohibition of analogy as the instrument of ontotheology is tangible in Heidegger's prohibition against interpreting the mystery of Being (Ga 9: 190): an attempt to resist unveiling what is meant to remain concealed and to be preserved in its difference. Moore returns to the question of analogy on several occasions, extensively in his discussion of Aquinas and in the section devoted to Heidegger's own understanding of being. As this subject is explicitly discussed by Heidegger only in a limited number of passages (Ga 49: 98, 188), this diagnosis is insightful and remarkably original.

The fourth chapter (pp. 31-33), by far the shortest, raises two problems concerning the intension of the ontotheological concept: the status of the whole and that of the divine. In the first place, is the whole to which speculative theology refers itself divine, or is the divine merely part of that whole? Moore argues that Heidegger here appears to conflate *cosmologia rationalis* and *theologia rationalis*. More radically, can something genuinely transcendent count as an "entity" commensurable with others? If God is truly transcendent, his mode of being cannot simply be assimilated to that of the entities he grounds; nor must God belong to the whole that he grounds or sustains. Moore regards this as a less problematic issue. It is arguably, however, the more relevant one, since it bears directly on the validity of ontotheology itself.

Instead, he directs his attention to the extension of the ontotheological claim, distinguishing a minimalist reading, according to which ontotheology denotes a historically contingent pattern recurring in certain influential philosophies, from a maximalist one, which regards it as an inescapable structure governing Western metaphysics as a whole. Even if Heidegger appears committed to this stronger thesis, he admits exceptions: philosophers who glimpsed other dimensions of Being, poets such as Hölderlin and Trakl, Meister Eckhart, and ultimately himself insofar as he claims to have taken a step back from metaphysics. Hence, the minimalist thesis seems the only defensible alternative.

The next section (pp. 33-51), the longest in the book, seeks to show that even this weaker claim cannot be sustained. Moore first surveys the substantial secondary literature that extended the ontotheological diagnosis to figures ranging from Anselm to Suárez, with Giles of Rome standing out as a confirming case: his account of God as the “principle subject matter” of metaphysics fits the ontotheological mould with unusual precision. He then develops three counter-examples: the doctrine of the “one” in Plotinus, self-subsistent *esse* in Aquinas, and the divine in Meister Eckhart – all of which were influential enough to put the minimalist reading into question.

The “one” of Plotinus, which is prior and irreducible to being, thought, and relation alike, escapes both the ontological and theological poles of the ontotheological structure. His philosophy can, accordingly, be described in henological rather than ontological terms as articulating a threefold distinction between sensible things (*ta aisthēta*), intelligible being (*to on, ousia*), and the one (*to hen*), envisioned as “beyond being” – whether functionally and anti-hierarchically, as in Reiner Schürmann, or vice versa as in Jean-Marc Narbonne. Yet the one, on which Heidegger maintains a deafening silence, remains fundamentally distinct from *das Seyn*: the former is stable, undivided, and self-sufficient, whereas the latter is variable, fissured, and dependent. One might therefore infer that only the one is genuinely transcendent: causality applies to it only accidentally, making it radically set apart (*kechōrismenon*), whereas Being is, to some degree, dependent on human beings (pp. 36-38).

Aquinas receives the longest and most fully developed treatment. Moore first reconstructs Heidegger’s objection to the *viae* as grounded in an Aristotelian

ontology that takes the presence-at-hand of worldly entities as its point of departure and thereby assimilates God to an entity within the realm of beings. In addition, Heidegger maintains that faith prevents medieval philosophers from philosophising freely and that, since God and creatures are supposedly ontologically commensurable, both can equally be known. Moore contests all three claims, most compellingly by reconstructing Aquinas' distinction between *esse commune*, which exists only as an intellectual abstraction from things, and God as *ipsum esse subsistens*, together with his non-univocal account of analogical predication. On this reading, Aquinas' metaphysics cannot simply be subsumed under the ontotheological schema: following Olivier Boulnois, it is instead characterised as "theo-ontology", where theology takes precedence over an ontology of *esse commune*. This reconstruction also shows that Aquinas' appeal to faith does not amount to fideism, since the former is continuous with a philosophical natural theology; if ontology is subordinated to theology, it is rational theology we are dealing with in the first place. Particularly illuminating is the concluding discussion of analogy, which clarifies how our knowledge of God stems from the world: the names we apply to God – wise, good, just, omnipotent, and so forth – are derived from the world and only imperfectly predicated of him, since God's essence is identical with his existence. One might add, however, that the movement need not be entirely one-way: once analogically referred to God, these names gain a fuller intelligibility that can, within the limits of human understanding, retroactively deepen our knowledge of the world.

This section also offers a salutary methodological critique of Heidegger's historiography: his dismissal of medieval philosophy as almost a contradiction in terms, and his tendency to identify *das Geschichte* with a predominantly Christian and German lineage while neglecting its Jewish or Islamic interlocutors. Furthermore, here one of the book's major virtues becomes particularly evident: Moore's extensive use of unpublished material provides a glimpse into the formation of Heidegger's historical narrative, most notably the 1924/25 seminar on medieval philosophy, on whose edition he is currently working (pp. 38-47).

Meister Eckhart closes the trio as a case Heidegger himself exempted from the charge of ontotheology. Moore reconstructs Eckhart's shifting formulation of God as beyond both "that-which-is" and "being", together with his paradoxical claim that

everything is God insofar as it is common, and not-God insofar as it is particular, as further evidence that the tradition contains genuine exceptions to Heidegger's rule. Heidegger discusses Eckhart in the context of a 1931 lecture on Aristotle, where he takes the medieval doctrine of analogy of being not as a solution to the *Seinsfrage*, but as «the title for the hardest aporia» in which philosophy has remained trapped (Ga 33: 46-47). Eckhart's own doctrine of analogy, as Moore shows, does not resolve this aporia by establishing a common measure between God and creatures, but instead radicalises an incommensurability: what is predicated of one cannot properly belong to the other in the same respect. Thus, if God is understood as *intellectus*, he has nothing in common with creatures who are then free to be called "beings"; on the contrary, if he is identified with being, creatures amount to nothing. Moore rightly emphasises that these oppositions are not just perspectival distinctions, but are «deployed in the service of releasement» (p. 50), whereby the oppositions themselves are ultimately dissolved. The parallel with Heidegger is suggestive, as releasement (*Gelassenheit*) will become central to his later thinking. Moore regrets that Heidegger fails to appreciate Eckhart's identity as a Dominican, Christian thinker. Yet the more fundamental question, in my view, is whether Eckhart's thought remains Christian in its philosophical outcome and not merely in intention. For Christianity promises not simply liberation from particularity into the undifferentiated unity of the divine ground, but rather a fulfilment of desire that does not extinguish desire itself. As Augustine puts it, in loving God one finds a "*satietas*" whence what clings is not torn away (*Conf.* X.6.8-9). In this respect, Eckhart's dissolution of singularity into the divine ground sits uneasily with the Christian promise in which the *personae* are not abolished, but loved (pp. 47-50).

The sixth and final chapter (pp. 50-61) turns to Heidegger's positive alternative, as developed primarily in his 1962 lecture on *Time and Being*. Being itself (*Seyn*) is portrayed as an inconstant, self-concealing, internally divided event (*Ereignis*), partly dependent on humanity for its manifestation and, strikingly, finite: a picture that Moore contrasts with the stable, self-sufficient absolutes of Plotinus, Aquinas, and Eckhart despite their formally similar three-tiered structure. Along with an unpublished draft by Eugen Fink, he claims that this emphasis on finitude is the true novelty brought forth by Heidegger. The second subsection is devoted to the theological side of this new and original thinking of Being. Moore indicates two non-ontotheological paths in later Heidegger: a way of faith, which keeps the biblical

Gods separate from the language of Being, though Moore acknowledges inconsistencies in Heidegger's formulations; and a way of thinking, concerned with phenomena such as the holy, divinity, and the gods, which gesture toward the mystery of being without claiming to ground it. Moore is explicit that an extensive evaluation of this alternative on its own terms lies beyond the scope of this volume.

Worth noticing is here the fact that Moore decides an antinomy left open within Heidegger's thought, namely whether the finitude pertaining to Being is to be conceived solely epistemologically, i.e. *quoad nos*, or also ontologically as *quoad se*. It is clear that, according to the author, the second alternative is the correct one, otherwise *das Seyn* would fall into the pattern of metaphysics as thinking a stable ground behind what appears to be becoming. Heidegger is more cautious, and he should be, since it is coherent with his veto to interpret "beyng" not to attribute any ontological predicament, only a phenomenological one to it. To put it otherwise, the fact that one cannot explain why *das Seyn* occurs in certain dispositions, or even occurs at all, does not necessarily mean that there is no such "why". To link it with the Epicurean swerve could be misleading, not only, as Moore points out, since the *clinamen* is an ontic property, but more importantly because it suggests the idea of mere chance. As if Heidegger were Nietzsche, who in his essay on *Wahrheit und Lüge* describes the earth as a haughty star that once believed itself to be the end of the universe.

This leads to a final consideration concerning the mutual dependence of Being itself and the humans or, precisely, the mortals. According to Moore, the appropriate response to the constitutive concealment of being itself is one of adaptively attuned acceptance: «the response should be one of acceptance, because the concealment of being itself can never be overcome», «and because the sending or giving on the part of being itself is ultimately beyond our control» (p. 56). Shortly thereafter, he specifies that the response is "adaptively attuned" because we should remain attuned to what being itself makes possible, without insisting on its permanence, and remain flexible toward the different possibilities of the future. I take it to suggest a broadly eudemonistic understanding of Heidegger's originary ethics, whence these counsels assume the character of a kind of *phronēsis* and their aim is, indeed adaptively, a form of serenity. Still, this sits uneasily with Heidegger's earlier insistence on the weight of existence, in relation to which any eudemonism is itself a

form of concealment; with his positive valuation of courage and, at times, of an *Urglaube* that enables us to stand before the truth (Ga 80.1: 247); and with his recurrent emphasis on sacrifices. I am not suggesting that Heidegger's ethics should thus be assimilated to Kantian "rigorism", not least because *Gewissen* does not carry the same meaning or function in the two thinkers. However, the more fundamental question concerns the kind of ethics at stake here. If this is an ethics derived from ontology, how is this deduction carried out? Or does the overcoming of ontotheology itself presuppose an ethical stance? This would lead us back not only to the metaphysics of *Dasein*, set aside at the outset of this investigation, but also to the agathological question of whether access to ontological meaning is ultimately dependent upon a prior orientation toward the good, an issue that recalls what Socrates called the "second sailing" (*Phaed.* 99d–102a).

The conclusion (pp. 61-62) strikes a balanced note, acknowledging the diagnostic and protective value of Heidegger's critique of ontotheology, while concluding that its central historical claim exceeds what the concept can sustain. It closes by surveying the divided reception of ontotheology: scholars such as Bultmann and Marion restrict its scope to a determinate stretch of the tradition, from late Scholasticism to Kant; others, including Derrida and Levinas, extend the critique further, and even against Heidegger's own enterprise. Moore ultimately presents his alternative to ontotheology as a useful way of «cultivating an appreciation for the mystery of being itself», while leaving «room for the Biblical God of faith».

3. Conclusion

What distinguishes this contribution is a highly effective synthetic capacity. Drawing together strands of French and Anglophone scholarship that have not always been in close conversation, supplementing them with substantial archival work, it offers a more careful and historically informed reconstruction of Heidegger's ontotheology than is often found in the secondary literature. Its strength lies particularly in the way it turns scattered and sometimes allusive remarks across more than four decades of lectures and writings into a systematic taxonomy and a set of precise claims, notably in the ten theses of Section one and in the ideal definition developed in Section three. The resulting critique of the scope of Heidegger's ontotheology thesis is difficult to dismiss precisely because it emerges from a sympathetic

engagement with the German philosopher rather than from a caricature. Eventually, as a model of how a philological reconstruction can be combined with philosophical criticism in a systematic form, the volume succeeds without falling into either Heideggerian apologetics or facile demolition.

A work as tightly constructed as this one inevitably makes criticism appear to come from without: where the argument itself reveals no evident internal fissures, objections may seem to rest on premises external to its own logic. This is all the more true here, because Moore compresses into relatively few pages a line of thought that could easily have sustained a book twice as long, and in a more expansive treatment many of the questions raised above might have received their own answers. Still, by way of conclusion, I would like to bring together the critical suggestions advanced throughout the preceding section. What follows, then, is less a set of objections than a series of theoretical prompts, intended to pursue questions left open by Moore's reconstruction: to think with Heidegger beyond Heidegger, as Moore himself does.

First, if the “desire for stability” draws thought toward the ontotheological determination of being, then ontotheology cannot be adequately understood without examining metaphysics in its existential-formal sense and what I have called its erotic logic. By this I mean that metaphysics concerns the interpretation of the good no less than the determination of being – or, more precisely, that the meaning and categories of being depend upon those of the good, a relation first articulated in Socrates' second sailing. Heidegger himself gestures towards such a logic as, in the conclusion of his study on Scotus, he contrasts Hegel's primacy of *theoria* with a narrative centred on love; yet this insight is never integrated into the diagnosis of ontotheology he later came to develop. One may, or perhaps even should, ask whether it is not tacitly and necessarily presupposed.

A second question concerns the analogical structure that binds together the ontological and theological poles of the ontotheological edifice. I suggested earlier that the crux lies in the intension of this edifice: whether what is genuinely transcendent can be called a being in a sense commensurable with the entities it grounds and hence be accessed via analogy. It could well be that the agathological question compels us to interpret being in its wholeness, only to return us to the particulars as particulars, now understood in light of the interpretative awareness

thereby acquired. This would, in turn, reforge the bond between metaphysics and hermeneutics while, in a certain respect, circumventing Heidegger's veto. Again, such a question is not entirely foreign to Heidegger, who, in the mid-1930s, occasionally linked *eros*, *agathon* and the inception of metaphysics (Ga 36/37: 296). It opens up new critical perspectives on the tension between the epistemological and ontological senses of the finitude of Being. Heidegger seeks to remain within the former, yet this very restriction seems to compel a determination of the latter.

A final consideration. A perspective that catalogues how many thinkers elude the charge of ontotheology risks establishing only a negative common ground: Plotinus, Aquinas, and Eckhart end up sharing little more than the fact of not being ontotheologians. This risk can perhaps be avoided by a perspective that interrogates both the legitimacy of ontotheology and the erotic logic underlying it. Eckhart brought this tension into sharpest focus. His dissolution of particulars into the undifferentiated divine abyss is hardly compatible with the Christian promise of a fulfilment that perfects rather than extinguishes desire, and that does not dissolve the person who desires. The question then is whether a critique of the overcoming of ontotheology can dispense with the agathological problem at all. We might begin with a few simpler questions still. What do we desire when we desire presence? And what, instead, when we do not? Is the former desire nothing more than an indiscriminate flight from the weight of existence, or does it demand an evaluation of its own? Ian Alexander Moore's book, in any case, gives us much to think about.

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