

Paul Tillich and the Plastic Being of God

Jeffrey W. Robbins

Before getting to my main argument regarding on the one hand the repetition of the charge of guilt against Tillich for engaging in onto-theology, and on the other, the repetition with a difference that Tillich's ontotheology was not necessarily a problem in need of overcoming, but on the contrary, a critical, contemporary resource for rethinking the being of God in terms of plasticity, I want to begin with a more general methodological point that I hope proves useful in our ongoing deliberations for the God Seminar.

Where might we find a thinking of the "new"? I do not mean to make a fetish of the new, as if the new is necessarily also improved. But when it comes to thinking about God, we are hard-pressed to find the new or the novel. There most certainly is the different. And for too long, or too often, theology has functioned as a straightjacket, tying the would-be hands of experimentation and discovery into the posture of rigid compliance. Too much aberrance has been disciplined and punished as deviance. And so it has been that the last fifty years—in concert with decolonization if not yet decoloniality, and with feminist, critical race, and postcolonial theory and deconstruction—has witnessed an explosion of differences. In the decade that spans from 1965-1975, we are told in prominent publications that "God is Black," "God is Dead," and "God is Red." It has long since passed when Mary Daly named patriarchy as the true religion of the West and articulated a way of doing theology beyond the conception of God the father. The God once championed for his impassivity and impartiality has since been drafted into the liberationist struggle for social justice and identified by his preferential option for the poor. The God of the Bible has been delinked from its Greek metaphysical ideation.

Make no mistake, these theological differences have had shockwaves that continue to reverberate. Not just new and different, but also different and creative. And by creative, I mean generative—giving birth to the new, and providing hospitable environs that have made contemporary theological thought more inclusive, more pluralistic and more diverse. So much so, in fact, that one cannot help but wonder at the timing of it all. There is no doubt that this flowering of differences has coincided with the end of metaphysics and the overcoming of ontotheology announced by Heidegger. A question we might ask is whether we might ascribe causation to this coincidence? To the extent that the problem of ontotheology is a problem that privileges identity over difference, wouldn't it stand to reason that the overcoming of ontotheology would dialectically reverse, if not deconstruct, the dyad.

I will reserve that question for later. For now, I also want to consider a different difference, one less beholden to the politics of identity, and on a more fundamental level, one less structured in accordance with the logic of identity and difference. For this alternative consideration of the “new”, I am inspired by what John Caputo has written about contemporary science—that not only is physics the new metaphysics, but it is also the new wonder. As such, it has “taken the very ground in which philosophy [and theology] is supposed to plant its roots—wonder and the imagination.” “Contemporary physicists,” Caputo continues, “are out-imagining, out-wondering, and out-wowing the philosophers,” they are producing “more stunning views of reality,” and the speculative findings of quantum mechanics are “outstrip[ping] the extraordinary events recounted in the Scriptures,” as “the theological ‘super-natural,’ and the mystical ‘super-essential’ are giving way to super-strings.”¹ Or consider what astrophysicist Neil deGrasse Tyson says of the update to the Carl Sagan “Cosmos” television series: “What you remembered most about ‘Cosmos’ is how it affected you not only intellectually, but emotionally . . . ‘Cosmos,’ at its best, takes some element of science and shows you why it is way more relevant to your life than you ever previously imagined.”² And so he captains the “Spaceship of the Imagination” through the expanses of the universe, showing the planet earth for the speck of time and space that it is.

From the starry sky to the moral law within, a shift in focus to the relation between the mind and brain might also reawaken our sense of awe. On this point I am speaking of the work of Catherine Malabou, of course. For me, the fecundity she has explored with respect to the concept of plasticity has been a nearly continuous shock of the new. In *What Should We Do With Our Brain*, she adopts a new materialist perspective to break down the dichotomy between the mind and brain and suggest a radical philosophy of freedom that extends beyond our thoughts and actions to the nature of our own biological self. The plasticity of the brain reveals the brain’s own capacity for self-fashioning. In *The New Wounded*, she checks her own enthusiasm by considering the case of brain damage. The suggestion is clear: by virtue of the brain’s capacity to make and remake the self, there is not only freedom, but also a radical vulnerability. The self that we are has the capacity to come to an end, to die an untimely death even as we go on living without memory, without access, and without an archive. In the case of severe brain damage or advanced Alzheimer’s, it is not that one merely forgets who they were, they become someone different. By virtue of the brain’s plasticity, there is not only the

¹ John Caputo, “Is Continental Philosophy of Religion Dead?”, in *The Future of Continental Philosophy of Religion*, eds. Clayton Crockett, B. Keith Putt, and Jeffrey W. Robbins (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2014), p. 23.

² <http://www.space.com/24955-new-cosmos-show-neil-degrasse-tyson.html>.

permanent potential for change and renewal, but also “the constant risk of destructive metamorphosis.”³

By this, we might see how this reawakening of awe is a recovery of the word’s original meaning: fear and reverence. Not to get too carried away with this path of thought, but we should observe how this traverses an alternative—more scientific? less religious?—path to Otto’s idea of the holy. What should be clear is that far from scientific reductionism, this is a richly nuanced and highly theoretical way of thinking that has significance not only for considerations of freedom and responsibility, for the philosophy of the mind and neurophilosophy, and as a species of the so-called new materialism, but also for the question of being, and as such, for the problem of ontotheology and for contemporary conceptions of God.

With that, I will now turn back to the main argument of my paper on Tillich and the plastic being of God. I have described Tillich as the last unabashed onto-theologian, and have argued that the radical Tillich is the ontotheological Tillich. Specifically, by taking Tillich’s identification of God with being-itself with the utmost seriousness we have the potential for a radical reconceptualization of the so-called problem of ontotheology. In short, by virtue of the concept of plasticity, we might say that God is not dead; rather, God has changed. *God is change.*

The Problem of Ontotheology

At least since Heidegger the problem of ontotheology has been (taken as) well established. John Thatanamil is certainly correct when he asserts that the problem of ontotheology has been the rubric by which “the postmodern critique of reason’s pretensions, especially with respect to thinking about God” has been understood.⁴

Consider Jacques Derrida here: in his first direct and extended foray into religion with his essay, “How to Avoid Speaking: Denials,”⁵ he famously differentiated deconstruction from negative theology and *différance* from God. While some considered negative theology as a way to bypass, if not overcome, the problem of ontotheology, for Derrida, this does not avoid the problem. Instead, negative theology only extends the metaphysics of presence by presuming a hyper- or super-presence to the divine. It is for this reason that negative theology’s mystical God beyond being is not to be confused with *différance*. On the contrary, negative theology is ontotheological in that it “saves” the name of God by locating the presence of God beyond being.

³ See Catherine Malabou, *The New Wounded*, p. 200.

⁴ Thatanamil, “Tillich and the Postmodern,” p. 290.

⁵ See Jacques Derrida, “How to Avoid Speaking: Denials,” in *Derrida and Negative Theology*, eds. Harold Coward and Toby Foshay (Albany: SUNY Press, 1992).

From this deconstructive perspective, therefore, Tillich's God beyond God is to be seen as a quintessential ontotheological gesture. Far from overcoming ontotheology, such a gesture only reifies the problem.

But Derrida and Heidegger go even further: not only is metaphysics inevitably and necessarily ontotheological and thus caught up on the metaphysics of presence, but theology too is necessarily ontotheological. To borrow the formulation from Heidegger: theology, unlike philosophy, *does not think*. Theology not only corrupts faith, but it is also a contaminant to pure thought. Theology and philosophy are "absolutely different."⁶ The difference between the two is the same difference as between thinking and science. Philosophy asks the question of being. It is a thinking of an indeterminate origin and end. Theology, on the other hand, is the science of faith. It proceeds by way of certainty as a self-explication of faith. It knows its end thought before it ever begins the task of thinking. It answers to a "God" who is the name of a limit, a limit that encloses theology in a circle of the same.

In this way, and as the problem of ontotheology is typically construed, religious faith must be distinguished and protected from theological thinking, just as philosophy must be kept separate from theology, for each speaks its own language.⁷ It is why Heidegger likens the notion of Christian philosophy to a "square circle,"⁸ an oxymoron that betrays a fundamental lack of understanding of both the nature of faith and the nature of thought. Once again, therefore, Tillich's philosophical theology is a violation of the strict separation between philosophy and theology insisted upon by Heidegger—a separation that has been largely accepted without question by nearly all those who have followed in Heidegger's wake.⁹

Finally, in case one were wrongly to conclude that this quest for a purity of thought as dictated by Heidegger comes only from the side of philosophy, we may look to the example of Karl Barth. Barth shared with Heidegger the basic concern with the dangers of the contamination of thought. For Barth, this concern resulted in a self-critical theology attempting to preserve for the Church the autonomy and integrity of the Word of God. By reading Barth in conjunction with Heidegger's unfolding critique of ontotheology we can discern a surprising similitude—surprising because Barth famously showed a "benign neglect" of currents in contemporary philosophy, often expressing frustration and distress over what he considered to be the spectacle of his

⁶ See Martin Heidegger, "Phenomenology and Theology," in *The Piety of Thinking*, p. 6.

⁷ For instance, in *The Piety of Thinking*, Heidegger writes, "We understand each other better when each speaks in his own language."

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 21.

⁹ This is the basic point of my *Between Faith and Thought: An Essay on the Ontotheological Condition* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2003).

theological contemporaries pandering to philosophy.¹⁰ For Barth, as is well known, the proper theme—or better, the proper subject—of theology must remain the God of revelation. Barth replaces modern philosophy's grounding in human consciousness with his own theological grounding in the subject of God. For him, the proper question for thought is not epistemological—"How do we know what we know?" Rather, it is exegetical—"How does God make Godself known to us?"

This brings us to the most profound irony of contemporary philosophical theology. Namely, it is Barth, more than any of the theological students or followers of Heidegger (consider here: Bultmann and Tillich, and also Gerhard Eberling, Ernst Fuchs, and Friedrich Gogarten), who realizes Heidegger's vision for theology in the wake of the critique of ontotheology most fully. Specifically, wittingly or unwittingly, independently or derivatively, Barth is the one who follows the prescriptive Heidegger offered to a group of German Protestant theologians that if a "proper theology" were to be written, the word "being" would not appear.¹¹ Barth resists it, even without naming the problem of onto-theology as such, because it constrains the absolute freedom and transcendence of God.

Tillich follows a different path. Whereas Barth's preservation (or is it a recovery?) of the purity of theology is achieved by a recovery (or is it a preservation?) of the personal God of biblical revelation—God as subject—the transcendent being of God for Tillich is expressed in non-theistic terms—God beyond God. In so doing, once again Tillich stands guilty as charged of the sin of ontotheology. In this case, the charge comes from the side of theology. Tillich has conflated, and thereby confused, what ought to be regarded as two distinct discourses. His is an ontological philosophy masquerading as a theology. And irony of ironies, though it is Tillich who imbibes from the Heideggerian well more than any of his other theological contemporaries, it is he who is most in violation of the direct prescription that Heidegger himself gives to the theologian. So we must ask: if the way for the theologian to avoid the problem of ontotheology is to write a theology without the word "being," then what, if any, possible defense of Tillich can be offered?

Race and Ontotheology

Before turning to Tillich's defense, there is still one additional concern that must be lodged. J. Kameron Carter has shown how over the course of his life Black liberationist theologian James Cone has increasingly drawn on Tillich as a way to counter the excesses of his earlier reliance on, and employment of, Barth. While Barth's

¹⁰ See Robbins, *Between Faith and Thought*, pp. 24-28.

¹¹ See Heidegger, *The Piety of Thinking*, pp. 59-71.

radically transcendent God initially provided Cone with the firm theological footing for his social protest against racial injustice, it has eventually come to be regarded as a “false start.”¹² Tillich’s dialectical theology of culture has been instrumental to an explicit shift within Cone’s own thought from what he has termed an “abstract revelation” to a more contextual theology that arises out of and directly addresses a concrete social situation. In addition, just as Tillich interprets Heidegger’s project at overcoming metaphysics as an existentialist task in the “courage to be,” Cone interprets Tillich’s notion of courage or struggle as black power. While Cone remains sympathetic and indebted to Barth, he ultimately comes to the conclusion that “although God is the intended subject of theology, God does not do theology. *Human beings do theology.*”¹³ For Cone, this means that there should be no pretensions to objectivity or universality when doing theology. On the contrary, theology is always already an interest-laden procedure. In this way, Tillich’s theology of culture provides a guide.

Carter accepts this methodological theological insight of Tillich’s insofar as it goes, but stops short of a full embrace of Tillich largely due to Tillich’s ontotheology. The ontological question of being underlies Tillich’s theology and helps to reveal its dialectical structure. That is because, “In our search for the ‘really real,’ in Tillich’s words, “the search for being-itself” or “for the power of being in everything that is,” the theologian is on a “search for ultimate reality beyond everything that seems to be real.” As Carter puts it, “The human pursuit of ultimate concern is a search to transcend *the* Finite. . . . It is eternity conquering temporality.”¹⁴ Specifically, it is Tillich’s “beyond” that raises Carter’s ire, and not only because it is a gesture of ultimate transcendence that would seem to contradict what Carter terms the “anti-Barthian nature of Tillich’s thought” that expresses itself in terms of a dialectical philosophy of life (a la Nietzsche), but more fundamentally, because it follows a well-established Christian theological pattern of anti-materialism, anti-historical spiritualism, otherworldliness, and abstraction.

To the extent that Tillich insists on the God *beyond* God, the theology that always already contains the answer to the questions that different cultures at different times and places and in different ways pose, and the sense of ultimacy that lies hidden in the passing phenomena of concrete human existence, then as Carter sees it, “it follows that cultures, history, and people groups have no lasting value in and of themselves.” Carter continues by linking this Tillichian gesture towards the beyond to the age-old,

¹² See J. Kameron Carter, *Race: A Theological Account* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 188.

¹³ James H. Cone, *Black Theology of Liberation: Twentieth Anniversary Edition*, (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2001), p. xix. Italics his.

¹⁴ Carter, *Race*, p. 183.

essentially Gnostic tendency within the history of Christian thought: "Like the historical Jesus who is overcome by the universal Christ and in this way realizes infinite unity, so, too, is it the case that cultures, histories, and people groups must be overcome." And just in case the racial significance of this is lost, Carter puts it to a fine point with his question, "Is this not an anti-Jewish philosophy of culture?"¹⁵

What we see here, therefore, is a different concern with the problem of Tillich's ontotheology. Tillich's ontotheology is a problem precisely because it participates in and reifies the very processes by which Christian thought has racially constituted the world. Put otherwise, Tillich's ontotheology is exemplary of what Carter terms "the theological problem of whiteness."¹⁶

A Defense of Tillich

Comparative theologian John Thatanamil offers the most thorough defense of Tillich against both of these charges: the charge of ontotheology and, by extension, the charge of ethnocentrism. He begins with the statement, contra Barth, that not every theological appeal to ontology is necessarily ontotheological, especially not if the theologian's ontotheological claims are "hypothetical and so vulnerable to correction."

Thatanamil must be commended for his defense. But it is at this point that we might twist Thatanamil's opening declaration slightly: *while it is true that not every theological appeal to ontology is ontotheological, it might also be said that not every form of ontotheology is necessarily a problem.* Thatanamil has gone to great lengths to insist that Tillich is not an ontotheologian, but perhaps this cedes too much authority to Heidegger's original analysis of the ontotheological problem. The result is a reactive, rearguard defense. While it may succeed in clearing Tillich's name, it does so only by demonstrating his palpability.

What if, instead, we came clean to the obvious: Tillich is an ontotheologian, at least of a certain sort. It is, after all, Tillich's theological ontology that is one of several aspects of his thought that sets him apart from his contemporaries. Consider the following: Tillich's formulation of the "God beyond God" has been read as preparing the ground for, or as a forerunner to, the radical death-of-God theologies of the 1960s.¹⁷ Tillich's remark that "God does not exist" has been employed to cut through the debates

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 188, 187.

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 4.

¹⁷ For instance, see the doctoral dissertation by Christopher D. Rodkey: *In the Horizon of the Infinite: Paul Tillich and the Dialectic of the Sacred* (Madison: Drew University, 2008). See also Richard Grigg, *Gods after God: An Introduction to Contemporary Radical Theologies* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2006).

over the so-called New Atheists.¹⁸ Tillich's theology of culture continues to serve as a model for the non-sectarian academic study of religion and has developed into what is sometimes referred to by the oxymoron "secular theology."¹⁹ Tillich's forays into the theological engagement with other world religions and the history of religion have been cited as a contemporary model for the burgeoning field of comparative theology.²⁰ Yet his theological ontology, which is at the very heart of his systematic theological doctrine of God, is somehow sidestepped or explained away.²¹

By this we are in a position to ask a different question: not whether or not Tillich is an ontotheologian, but the degree to which Tillich's particular ontotheology is amendable to change? Returning briefly to Carter's theological account of race and the way by which Christian identify formation has been racialized and thereby a prime contributor to the problem of racism in the modern world, recall the argument that it is to the extent that Tillich's theology is predicated on a "beyond" that his theology of culture actually amounts to an anti-Jewish, anti-material, and anti-historical theology of culture. While there is a certain relationality at work in Tillich ontology, by Carter's assessment it is only a relative relationality, a mere passing moment to a higher unity. In this way, the God *beyond* God not only claims a false universal but contributes to the Christian supersessionist problem by which religious identify formation operates according to a racial—if not yet racist—logic.

Carter's project asks "how the discourse of theology aided and abetted the processes by which 'man' came to be viewed as a modern, racial being."²² His answer is that "modernity's racial imagination has its genesis in the theological problem of Christianity's quest to sever itself from its Jewish roots." This severing is accomplished by the Christian spiritualization of the fleshly, material existence of Jesus' Jewish body.

¹⁸ For instance, see the blog post by Peter Rollins: "Dawkins, Dennett and Hitchens: The New Theists?" in *The Huffington Post* (March 10, 2013): http://www.huffingtonpost.com/peter-rollins/dawkins-dennett-and-hitch_b_2830963.html. See also, Jeffrey W. Robbins and Christopher D. Rodkey, "Beating 'God' to Death: Radical Theology and the New Atheism," in *Religion and the New Atheism: A Critical Appraisal*, ed. Amarnath Amarasingam (Boston: Brill, 2010): pp. 25-36.

¹⁹ For an example of how Tillich has been situated within the history of the developing field of Religious Studies, see Walter H. Capps, *Religious Studies: The Making of a Discipline* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), especially pp. 30-35. For a discussion of the notion of "secular theology" and its place within the academic study of religion, see two special issues of *The Council of Societies for the Study of Religion Bulletin*, (April 2008) vol 37, no 2, and (September 2008) vol 37, no 3.

²⁰ For instance, John Thatanamil, *The Immanent Divine: God, Creation, and the Human Predicament* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2006). See also, Capps, pp. 289-296.

²¹ Robert P. Scharlemann is the exception to this rule. See especially his *Religion and Reflection: Essays on Paul Tillich's Theology* (LIT Verlag, 2005).

²² Carter, *Race*, p. 3.

In Carter's words, "Christ did not assume a 'psychic body' but a material one." And not to put too fine of a point on it, Jesus' God was not a God *beyond* God, but the God of creation, of history, and of Israel. Jesus' Jewish, covenantal flesh is the key to redemption for both Jews and Gentiles alike. Carter invokes miscegenation, with all the socio-political implications this term implies. "Given this," Carter adds, "we must say that Christ's flesh in its Jewish constitution is 'mulatto' flesh. That is to say, in being Jewish flesh it is always already *intersected* by the covenant with YHWH and in being *intersected* it is always already *intra*racial (and not merely multi-racial). Its purity is its 'impurity.'"²³ In the place of the false universal of the beyond – which is a unity predicated on purity – Carter is suggesting a "unity-in-distinction," or a "discontinuity-in-continuity," by which the material existence of Christ's covenantal flesh reveals God's saving grace. The covenant liberates identity from the fiction of (racial) purity, which is why Carter proclaims Christ as a "linguistic liberation."²⁴

(Re-)Introducing Malabou

While working with much of the same philosophical archive as Tillich, Malabou's contributions to contemporary Continental philosophy have yet to be applied to Tillich, or to the problem of ontotheology more generally. Malabou uses the concept of plasticity in order to articulate a philosophical ontology of radical immanence. It is her realization of ontological mutability that prevents her ontology of radical immanence from closing in on itself as a totality. That is to say, so long as we understand being as change, the prospect for transformation need not be predicated on transcendence or radical alterity. Instead, the capacity, reality, or even inevitability of change is the being of beings – being's ownmost possibility. This is what Malabou means when she invokes the possibility for radical transformation without exoticism.

For my purposes here, I will discuss what she calls "the Heidegger change" in which she develops her fundamental ontological insight – which is, namely, how an ontology of change lies beneath and goes beyond Heidegger's famed identification of the ontological difference. To repeat, by attending to the concept of change throughout Heidegger's oeuvre, Malabou is able to show that this is a consistent insight that runs throughout Heidegger's career, from beginning to end, irrespective of the so-called Heideggerian turn. That is to say, both before and after his Nazi associations, whether in his development of his existential analytic and fundamental ontology during the period of *Being and Time*, or in his later, more contemplative, poetic works – and perhaps even unbeknownst to him all along – Heidegger's interests were driven by a sense that

²³ Ibid., p. 30.

²⁴ Ibid.

being as such is being *qua* change, that the very condition of possibility for the ontological difference is the self-differing made possible by an ontological mutability. Nothing is without change. Or put otherwise, nothing is prior or more fundamental to being than change. Change makes what is to be.

Before considering how this alternative understanding of ontology might be applied to Tillich we must first revisit the so-called problem of ontotheology. For Heidegger, the problem of ontotheology must be located within his larger project at overcoming metaphysics. The concern with metaphysics is how it conceives of being in terms of identity, and thus is forgetful of the ontological difference. Metaphysics has the character of ontotheology by its conflation of theology and ontology, and thus rendering what is different as the same. By this analysis, the problem with ontotheology is that it is at once both the most fundamental and the highest expression of identity. Being is hardened as the self-same. Even more, being is held up or set aside as an object of thought. Such is the comprehensive, totalizing gaze of Hegel's dialectic. Such is the idolatry of those who dare speak of/for God.

It is at this point that we must endeavor the intervention by Malabou: if earlier I insisted that the radical Tillich is the ontotheological Tillich, here I must defend the claim that the problem of ontotheology is perhaps least understood by Heidegger himself. This is the key to Malabou's radical reinterpretation of the significance of Heidegger's work—namely, by attending to the notion of change in Heidegger's work, this is the device whereby Heidegger himself is changed. Malabou's provocative suggestion is that there is a "secret agent" at work in Heidegger's philosophy, so clandestine that it remains radically unknown even—or especially—to him. *If change comes before, and is more fundamental than, difference, then Heidegger's project at overcoming metaphysics—which for him is the context by which the problem of ontotheology is rightly understood—is misguided at best.* It operates by a logic of identity (and difference), effecting a reversal, but not a way out from, the binary.

In short, *Heidegger misdiagnosed the problem of ontotheology.* He misdiagnosed the problem because he misunderstood—or simply missed—his most important insight into ontology. It is not, as he supposed, that he clarified the ontological difference and recovered the ontological question, but beneath both something more fundamental was at work. The word being was consistently evoked in connection with terms such as change, metamorphosis and transformation. The ontological difference was derivative to this ontology of change because it is change that makes differences happen.

Put in different terms more resonant with Carter's concerns with the theological problem of whiteness, the problem with Heidegger's analysis of the problem of ontotheology is that it belies a quest for purity. This is the critical argument I pursued in

my book *Between Faith and Thought*.²⁵ In this respect, I see Heidegger and Barth as flip sides of the same coin, each recognizing the limits of language and thought but still nevertheless taken by the desire for purity. In that work I appealed to Levinas' notion of the trace as a way to make clear that there are no pure actions or intentions, or that the ontotheological condition of thought renders any prospect of either a pure identification or pure differentiation an impossibility.

John Caputo is helpful here as well. Where I talk of Heidegger's quest for purity, Caputo speaks of Heidegger's mythological gesture that "takes the form of a myth of origins, of a Great Beginning, of a great founding act back at the beginning of the tradition, which gives flesh and blood—mythic form—to a philosophical insight."²⁶ Heidegger constructs a grand narrative of monogenesis, to which Caputo asks, "Why must there be *the* history of Being *and not rather* many such histories, a whole host of them, a proliferation of histories, which tell us many stories, so many that they are impossible to monitor and to organize into a grand narrative of Being's singular upsurge and decline?"²⁷ And lest one think this effort at thinking otherwise is merely semantic, Caputo gives a name to Heidegger's fatal flaw: "The fateful, fatal flaw in Heidegger's thought is his sustained, systematic exclusion of this jewgreek economy in order to construct a native land and a mother tongue for Being and thought."²⁸

Returning to Malabou once again, we may pose the possibility of a series of changes. She herself admits that even with the completion of her book on Hegel she had still not recognized the decisive shift it effected: from plasticity to metamorphosis.²⁹ It was only by virtue of her book on Heidegger, which came after her book on Hegel, that she was able to go back and recognize that her probing of the future of and for Hegel was really a question about the possibility for making change, for a way of affirming the dialectic without being trapped in a merely retrospective gaze or without reifying the perpetuation of the same, and for a radically immanent form of thought that still holds out the possibility for difference. It is this nascent thought that leads her to the interrogation of the Heideggerian concept of change itself, which gave even further clarity to her true question: *if her interest in plasticity was really a way at getting at metamorphosis then what Heidegger's metabolic ontology helps to clarify is that the fundamental question of philosophy is about transformation, and whether transformation is achieved by way of immanence or transcendence, or in Malabou's terms through ontogenesis or as a pure rupture. Malabou's views should be clear: the notion of the pure rupture is a dangerous*

²⁵ See Robbins, *Between Faith and Thought*.

²⁶ Caputo, *Demythologizing Heidegger*, p. 28.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 116.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

²⁹ See Malabou, *Plasticity at the Dusk of Writing*, pp. 17-29.

fantasy that plagues any and all quests for purity. "There is no outside," she writes, and then adds the important caveat, "nor is there any immobility."³⁰

By changing Heidegger, Malabou gives us a way to think otherwise: an "alterity without an outside," a "lack of beyond" that does not imply a lack of difference or the reduction of the other to the same. Put otherwise, we come to realize that *transformation—and not transcendence—is the origin of alterity*. There is no messianism here, but neither is there a need for this pure figure of the wholly other or of the absolute future. There is *no messianism, but only metamorphosis*. That is because not only do we have the capacity to change, but our very being is change. Once again: this is "a radical transformation without exoticism."³¹

The Radical Tillich

By the preceding, we have been presented with at least two ways to rethink the problem of ontotheology and by extension two ways to remember and reclaim the radical Tillich. There is miscegenation. And there is metamorphosis. Both are figures of the reject.

In spite of his suggestion that Tillich's theology of culture is in effect an anti-Jewish theology of culture, Carter nevertheless appreciates the appeal of Tillich's reconstrual of transcendence for the development of black liberation theology. Tillich redefines transcendence as a self-transcendence in the existentialist guise as the quest for authenticity and the "courage to be." This existentialist moral fortitude provides a schema for articulating black power and resistance. But as Carter sees it, this language of courage comes with a cost—namely, Tillich's reconstrual of transcendence is an immanent transcendence predicated on the immanence of being. Further, this immanence is total. Even God is housed in being, albeit as its ground. So conceived, the threat of nonbeing is an existential threat, and the quest for authenticity requires the overcoming not just of one's anxiety by way of courage, but the overcoming of finitude itself. The irony Carter seems to be suggesting is that by Tillich locking himself into immanence of being he is that much more beholden to a beyond.

By this reading, Tillich is no radical theologian at all. On the contrary, he is a theologian of culture who in actuality sees no lasting value in cultures. He is an existentialist thinker of finitude whose work is animated by a quest for transcendence. Recall Carter's words, ". . . it is the case that cultures, histories, and people groups must be overcome: that is, they must exhibit courage in order to be liberated into the

³⁰ Ibid., p. 44.

³¹ Ibid.

infinite of their existence."³² In this way, as an ontotheologian par excellence, Tillich's identification of God with being contributes to the total erasure of difference.

But *with a changed Heidegger we might also hold out hope for a changed Tillich*. Or better, by unleashing the secret agent of change onto Heidegger's conception of being and the problem of ontotheology, we might be in a better position to appreciate how Tillich's ontotheology is both radical and contemporary. Carter makes the mistake of reading Tillich more in Hegelian than Heideggerian terms. As Malabou has shown, the two together may be read as a "transformational mask," with the face of the one rendering the other more or less visible. Like Hegel, Tillich's notion of transcendence can be characterized as either a self-transcendence or an immanent transcendence. In both cases, there is a radical immanence at work. The question is whether this radical immanence constrains God, and correlatively, places a limit on, or immobilizes, being.

By Tillich's identification of God with being, we may now say that God is change. The God beyond God is a plastic God. As Malabou has written of plasticity more generally, the characteristics of plasticity include the capability of receiving form (of being changed), of giving form (of making change), and of explosion (of transformation and metamorphosis). In this respect, Tillich's ontotheology is not a problem. Nor is his radical immanence. On the contrary, these are productive, if not necessary, conditions for conceiving of miscegenation and metamorphosis.

Ontotheology is a mixed discourse. The ontotheological condition of thought recognizes the ethico-political significance of thinking on the border. Thinking ontotheologically is a rejected way of thinking that nevertheless gives birth not so much to something new, as to something old, something impure. A miscegenated form of thought does not reject the reject, but instead it rejects the misguided quest for purity in the task of overcoming.

Likewise with metamorphosis, the traditional reading of the problem of ontotheology is concerned with how it establishes an artificial limit, establishing a determinant floor (being as ground) and ceiling (God as the highest being). So conceived, ontotheology sets us in a trap of radical immanence wherein there is nothing beyond and thus no hope for change. The longing for transcendence typical of the theological gesture is nothing more than the effort to escape the trap of the ontotheologian's own making. As such, it is the ultimate alienation: liberation is predicated on an impossible infinitude. And it is a fundamental self-contradiction: radical immanence betrays a secret desire for transcendence.

But what if, as Malabou insists, there can be "radical transformation without exoticism," that just because there is no outside does not mean there is immobility? Instead, difference is made by way of a self-differing, by the strangeness and otherness

³² Carter, *Race*, p 188.

that lies within. We are not just capable of change. But we necessarily and inevitably change because being is change, because to be is to change. This profound insight into the ontology of change goes all the way down and all the way up, from being as ground to God as the highest and most complete expression of plasticity.

Combining Malabou's ontology with Tillich's ontotheology, then, we may say: The identification of God with being means that God is seen as the very being and source of change. This claim does not rest on the hope for the impossible, but instead is grounded in the very nature of our being. Once we no longer regard ontotheology as a problem to be overcome, but as the necessary condition of thought, radical theology may put aside once and for all the misguided quest for purity and affirm the divine in the impure, the polluted, the reject and the flux. In so doing, we may announce the death of the moral-metaphysical God defined in terms of being otherworldly and unchanging and proclaim a new faith in a plastic God forever bearing the marks of the wounds of history while still retaining the possibility for change.