

Hent de Vries, *Minimal Theologies: Critiques of Secular Reason in Adorno and Levinas*, trans. Geoffrey Hale (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005), xxxiv+720 pages.

This seminal and far-reaching volume does a great many things beyond what it promises, which is to compare the thought of Theodor Adorno and Emmanuel Levinas. In effect, it gives us a deceptively simple rubric—“minimal theology” or “theology in pianissimo”—under which what is most crucially at stake for these two philosophers, and for many other contemporary thinkers, can be analyzed and understood.

De Vries’s use of the word theology in his rubrics might at first glance be misleading. He is not claiming, in any standard sense, that God is at the heart of Levinas’s or Adorno’s enterprise. On the contrary, this is a work about politics, ethics, and the nature of human reason, with some forays into literary criticism. In addition to individual and comparative analyses of the two central thinkers it contains extensive discussion of Habermas, Derrida, and Celan. De Vries suggests in the preface that “minimal theology” is more or less equivalent to minimal metaphysics, and also inscribes a minimal politics and a minimal expression—as well, of course, as a *minima moralia* (xviii). Another function of the book, therefore, is to show us that what is sometimes called a “turn to religion” in contemporary thought is, at the very least, not in any sense a turn away from the political or the concrete. For in fact minimal theology is nothing less than the oscillation between same and other—or attestation and critique—that is the cornerstone of late 20th century philosophy. In Adorno, it manifests itself as a dialectical critique of dialectics, in Levinas as a phenomenological critique of phenomenology. What has been minimized in these structures is the promise of determination that forms the ground of attestations, of dialectical structures, of regimes, and of the idea of God. In turn, what has a little room to be itself is the particular—or the stranger—in all its indeterminacy.

Why talk about theology at all, then? Perhaps because it is under the idea of God that some of the gravest metaphysical errors have been made. Adorno and Levinas, at any rate, seem to think so, and when they come to address those errors they appear to believe they have to do so by setting up an alternative theology, a non-theological theology. To see why, we have to ask what the problem with theology

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is. Looking from the bottom up, we might say, with Horkheimer, that “solidarity with struggling, suffering human beings . . . tends to make one apathetic to metaphysical assurances” (*Between Philosophy and Social Science*. Trans. G. F. Hunter, et. al. Cambridge: MIT Press, 1995, 160). Here Horkheimer expresses the hoary problem of theodicy, the problem of the coexistence of human suffering and a benevolent divine. But, looking from the top down, a more foundational problem comes to light: metaphysical assurances, and notably theological assurances, tend to make one apathetic to suffering human beings. This formulation—in fact, radically different from the first—more closely expresses the political-theological problem of the 20th century: in short, those who are metaphysically assured are also prone to murder on a massive scale, or to produce forms of philosophy which, more or less wittingly, justify such murder. And while the old-fashioned theodicy problem (in any case long since rendered a logic game in the academy) is probably best solved with straightforward atheism, the new problem is not so easily done away with. For suddenly it is not a matter of a certain metaphysical assurance that we need no longer hold. It is a problem with assurance itself. And if our assurances continue today to provide the conceptual foundation and surreptitious legitimation of institutions and political practices, the political task of the moment presents itself as a rethinking of the nature of metaphysics and of theology.

How do we do this? It is not enough to say that after the events of the 20th century, there can be no more appeal to metaphysical (or social) norms. This position by itself is relativism, and is as irresponsible as the absolutist opposite. Levinas, at one point, discusses a passage from Vasily Grossman’s *Life and Fate* in which we are told that an idea of the Good is the problem; up against it, however, is not set a relativism, but the multiplicity of kindnesses human beings do for each other every day. But if we are to follow the thought through, we must ask about the source of these kindnesses, and how it is we recognize them for what they are. Both Levinas and Adorno speak of such acts as responses to a trace—but a trace of what? And how can this question be answered without reverting to the metaphysical assurance offered by the Good? This, according to de Vries, is the aporia at the heart of their thought. It is perhaps most briefly expressed in the line de Vries defines as the central insight of *Minima Moralia*: “Unrestricted goodness becomes confirmation of all the bad that exits, in that it downplays its difference from the trace of the good” (555).

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This is one way of describing the beginning of the task, which is nothing less than the rejection of the binaries foundational to traditional philosophy and theology. It is not the case, for Adorno and Levinas, that the opposite of the Good is an absence of goodness, or that the opposite of Being is nothingness; it is not even the case that the opposite of intentional reason is folly. We seek, in Levinas's terms, an "otherwise" to the normative claims of moral, ontological, and epistemological thought. One of de Vries most useful analyses concerns the way Adorno and Levinas reject a philosophy of unhappy consciousness in favour of a philosophy of bad conscience. Unhappy consciousness seeks happiness; it seeks its solution. Bad conscience cannot, in conscience, seek solution. Another description of minimal theology therefore might be a wounded metaphysics, one that remains aware of its scars and refuses cosmetic surgery, a vigilance that denies that the best address of insomnia is sleep, or of anxiety is heartsease.

In his opening pages de Vries throws us into an account of Habermas's attempts to find a non-polar philosophical ground in the wake of the death of metaphysics, God, and the author. Habermas's search for a reason that was neither objective nor subjective led eventually to a theory of communicative action that he strenuously kept distant from metaphysical sanctions; in this way he laid the ground for the statement of the aporia that concerns de Vries. Perhaps his main blind spot was that he refused to recognize it as an aporia. In his conception of communicative rationality, as in his politics, questions of difference are problems that should and can be worked out—the insight that the urge to work things out is the source of the problem in the first place is missing. Habermas thus gives us a route into an examination of Adorno, and yet ultimately he misunderstands him. Adorno's negative dialectics, which preserves critique as its final movement, remained in Habermas's view insufficient. But for Adorno, and later for Levinas, this insufficiency was the only expression of the truth. For though the truth lies in the critique, the critique only exists as a breach in the assertion. This curious, even tragic mode of existence is described by de Vries as a *tertium datur*. With this formulation, a denial of the logical principle of coherence, *tertium non datur* (p or ~p), de Vries works with negative dialectics, seeking to make the radicality of the position clear.

Minimal Theologies includes a great deal of detailed work unraveling the philosophies of Levinas, Adorno, and Habermas. Many

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parallels between the them are expounded and the comparison is facilitated at times with thinkers such as Blanchot, and at times with lesser known figures such as Schnädelbach. Straightforward issues that might seem to a novice inescapably to divide Levinas and Adorno are laid to rest. The notion, for instance, that Adorno is primarily a philosopher of autonomy is dealt with thoroughly; Adorno's autonomy represents the first movement toward responsibility, and, from a broader perspective, is a function of the drive to responsibility awoken by the suffering other—as it is in Levinas. That de Vries performs this exercise might suggest that his main method of comparison involves finding parallels in Adorno's social psychology to aspects of Levinas's ethical encounter. In fact he does not take this route, which also seems to me for various reasons unfruitful. Instead, the main thrust of the book's comparative analysis entails discerning a non-dialectical dialectics in Levinas, a structure of alternation between the cleaving extremes, *ily a* and *illeity*. The discussion of these structures as parallel, as well as simply in opposition, is, from the perspective of a Levinasian, quite bold. It requires some formalization of the structures, and de Vries also considers Derrida's further formalization in *Margins of Philosophy, Writing and Difference*, and elsewhere, which permits extensive exploration of the alternatives from the perspective of *differance*.

Both Levinas and Adorno have been accused at various times of negativity. Levinasians tend to claim that Adorno cannot fill in the positive content implied at the heart of his critique; critical theorists, and other politically-minded scholars, tend to claim that Levinas has no politics, since all he can do is show us what is wrong with totalities. One of the things de Vries draws out is the positive nature of critique itself; the promise of positive assertions is replaced by the promise, albeit minimal, on which the critique rests. The atrophied hope that remains after this reduction is profoundly paradoxical, since it is a hope that arises from the unqualified rejection of expectation. Adorno comes to his position on hope gradually, defining his ideas against Horkheimer's pessimism and Benjamin's utopianism. Eventually he sums the position up with the statement that “even to think hope forsakes hope and works against it,” and draws the uncomfortable conclusion for theology that “one who believes in God therefore cannot believe in Him” (610). In a similar vein, Levinas writes that “prophecy and ethics in no way exclude the consolations of religion, but . . . only a humanity which can do without these consolations perhaps may be worthy of them”

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(533). A hope that arises from a lack of hope, a prophecy from a lack of religion: this impossible thought is the only way to think God without adverse effects, and, for me, it is the profound core at the heart of de Vries's book.

This brings me to the only topic on which I wish to pose to de Vries a critical question concerning the relation between minimal theology and theology proper. De Vries argues that the roots of Habermas's search for an 'other' reason are found in his reading of traditional theology. He argues further that the theological rhetoric that crops up frequently in Habermas's ostensibly secular corpus is a flag hinting at an allegiance to aporia in an otherwise systematic body of thought. This suggests that minimal theology might have, in fact, a good deal to do with traditional theology. Nevertheless, de Vries insists that in Adorno and Levinas, we are dealing neither with the residue of an early confessional allegiance nor with a more or less cloaked religious sensibility. Indeed, minimal theology is, as de Vries insists at various points, not theology at all (cf. 594). But, given his analysis of Habermas's theological reading, I believe we can raise certain questions about Adorno and Levinas, and particularly about their Jewishness.

De Vries declares himself "critical" of "attempts to appropriate Levinas within the context of Jewish philosophy" (xix). He explains this by pointing out that "for all Jewish, Christian, or Islamic theology, as for every concrete, particular answer to the 'question of meaning,' there must *per definitionem* emerge a moment at which the process of argumentation comes to an end" (153). Thus, whatever Levinas is when he is at home, de Vries argues that at work he is a philosopher, and that "religious tradition cannot weigh decisively in an evaluation of the contribution of his figures of thought to a minimal theology" (351). Now, what de Vries says about Judaism, Christianity, and Islam is precisely what Levinas often says about theology. The problem is that for Levinas, Judaism is *not* a theology; rather, as he puts it in his first recorded statement to the *Colloque des intellectuels juifs* in 1957, it is a way of comprehending reality such that the interpersonal is valued above all else. What he means is that Judaism is a thought about ethics; it is open to ideas of faith and salvation only insofar as they are ethically inscribed; and it points to a way of life in which there does *not* emerge a moment when questioning comes to an end. Levinas might well be wrong about Judaism, but in this context his statement cannot be dismissed. For if this is what he really thinks, then he has no

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reason to leave his religion at home when he comes to work. I would in fact go so far as ask whether, for Levinas, the movements de Vries describes as minimal theology are not the defining moves of the Jewish tradition. And perhaps a similar argument could be made about Adorno, though I am not yet in a position to make it. I sense that it would have to rest not on the famous messianic moment at the end of *Minima Moralia*, but on the argument de Vries himself makes in chapter 12 that the prohibition of graven images is the root of negative dialectics.

The critique to which the book is most susceptible is not actually a critique of the book at all, but of the ideas expounded. Once the oscillation that defines Levinas's and Adorno's thought—and indeed our current philosophical condition—has been defined so clearly, the reader finds herself asking whether the little bit of promise left in a minimal theology is not like being a little bit pregnant. To be sure, it is. The trick is to keep it this way, rather than letting it grow into theism or resorting to terminal atheism. To keep one's theology at the state of "not yet" requires continual care, and, as the analogy suggests, a certain amount of philosophical violence. Yet, as a student of Levinas's work, I find myself seeking the moments where diachrony seems to take us beyond the oscillation between transcendence and immanence, into an otherwise that being that is not tormented or difficult. The otherwise than being is not the romantic play space of art or text that some have seen in it, nor, I think, is it merely the unreachable purity lying on the other side of the quotidian compromise that repeats and compounds the philosophical problem of dirty hands. For me, this speculation or longing has been sharpened and clarified by de Vries's superb volume.

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Peter Jonkers and Ruud Welten, eds., *God In France: Eight Contemporary French Thinkers on God*, (Leuven: Peeters, 2005), 227 pages.

With the publication of *Le tournant théologique de la phénoménologie française* in 1991, Dominique Janicaud decidedly brought to the forefront of contemporary continental philosophy a debate concerning the relationship between phenomenology and theology. Janicaud's well