

Research Article

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Enervating the Divine: Seeking New Intuitions about God from a Time of Pandemic

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Abstract: The COVID-19 pandemic has upended our planet in ways that could not have been foreseen. Yet even as the world has shifted, the “worlds” of our conceptual habitations have not, and this is particularly the case with regards to religious beliefs. It is from within this context that the present study seeks clarity. Beginning at the beginning, the paper sets out from a re-examination of the foundational creation myth of Western societies, and argues that a more careful reading of the actual presentation of that account, along with some situational explanations, results in an understanding of divinity that stresses neither omnipotence nor omniscience. The article then transitions to the importance of the notional in grounding and generating social behaviors, employing phenomenological and psychological research and analytical methods. Intuitions are seen to be central in the personally based methodology undertaken, and the conceptual–perceptual brace of the notion/event is offered as a theoretical construct. Finally, an attempt at application is made through a return to the earlier explication of a reduced idea of divinity, and subtle gestures at possibly resulting ethical calls are given. Although the virus has taken charge of our lives, and although even God/“God” might not be in absolute control, the “world” is yet ours to (re)make.

Keywords: behavior, corona virus/COVID-19, creation myth, intuition, notion/event, religion, weak theology

1 En-handed: Thinking God/“God” differently via a closer reading of Genesis 1:1–2

It is an issue of control. Of not having control, of wanting control, of the illusion of control, or of the desire – deep seated, unacknowledged, a bit embarrassing – to want to be controlled, to give up one’s own control, to release, let go, relinquish. A pandemic certainly does take over, and such emergency situations offer governments more excuse for exerting power than any wet dream of authority could muster. Yet the present study will not concern itself with these external pressures – against which it is naturally all too easy to chafe – but rather with the interior, with the self-manipulating elements that we tend to neither confront nor even to recognize, but which nevertheless cast long shadows on the mental and behavioral elements of our everyday. The ideas we hold which build their realities, acting the sculptor in a God–Adam dyad. In our context of beliefs and conceptions amidst the ever-threat of illness, it is these internals that carry the real weight of control, and so to examine them let us return to the beginning, to the beginning of beginnings, to “In the beginning.”

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First though a word on the methodology to be employed below: As we (re)turn to Genesis and its opening account of creation, that most Biblical of “big bangs,” we must preemptively ready ourselves lest we remain closed – blinded – to the text as it is, as it only is, to the text purely as text. Far too many years of instruction, (en)forced interpretations, and an over familiarity with “what is there” have combined to stultify the popular imagination and, together, have resulted in the production of a *what ought to be read* instead of a *what is read*. Furthermore, and our argument will hinge on this, that very *what is read* – if properly re-read and not reflexively read-into – beautifully morphs into a *what *can* be read*, and thence applied, and therefrom (again, so we shall argue) to a liberating viewpoint amenable to a praxis fit for our times: for the pandemic but also beyond. Thus, I ask the reader for a full *epoché* (a “tabling,” a “bracketing”) of the verses, the myths, the traditions: everything we think we have heard.¹ Out of this “tabling,” this mental setting aside of that vast preceding, we will seek to build from what we therein find, working in a constructive manner. Ours is not a systematic theology, does not attempt such, and indeed is not even a try for a theology *per se*: this is a speculative investigation of what might be from what has perhaps not been noticed. The journey will be more literary than logical; though for that no less analytic. Let us see where it takes us.

In a fascinating look at this culturally central story, one which still maintains a deep influence over our notional approaches to life despite hardly anyone (and we would wish even fewer) believing it in a literal sense, Catherine Keller has highlighted the frequently overlooked wording of the first (of two, actually) Genesis creation accounts, and how it – and other early Semitic foundational myths – picture a deity existing initially not alone but amongst other materials, and then using them, taking what was already there, to forge the heavens and the earth (and thus – very importantly – not first conjuring the ingredients to work with as contemporary orthodox accounts of *creatio ex nihilo* have it).² This easily bypassed facet of the (let us label it) uncreated-mélange-near-to-God may in itself be enough to catch us off guard, and so prior to teasing out the ramifications of the subsequently shifted perspective that this anterior miscellanea calls for we shall glance at the text in question (which even in the English translation is enlightening when one pauses to take note of its specificities). Here are two versions of the relevant passage (Genesis 1:1–2), the first from the Tanakh, and the second from the New Revised Standard Version:³

¹When God began to create the heaven and earth – ²the earth being unformed and void, with darkness over the surface of the deep and a wind from God sweeping over the water –

¹In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, ²the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters.

Thus, we seem to have as already present and lying around close to God/“God,”⁴ without God’s/“God’s” having done anything at all (i.e., God’s/“God’s” having done nothing *ex nihilo* because there was no *nihilo*; there were instead a small number of *materiā*, of “is”-es right there, “in the beginning”): (1) the earth as unformed/formless, (2) the deep, and (3) the water/waters. Admittedly, the terms “void” and “the deep” are vague and negative enough to at least hint at something along the lines of “empty space,” but even so they are not of the same order as the “out of nothing” vacuum we tend to imagine when reading or thinking on Genesis today out of the fog of the conventions we have been taught (if we bother to read or think on it at all, rather than complacently leaving the abstraction posited in the back of our minds like a semi-dormant seed whose roots have grown but stem has not sprouted).

¹ With many thanks to Edmund Husserl for showing the way in this probative program; Husserl, *The Essential Husserl*; and Smith, *Husserl*.

² Keller, *Face of the Deep*; for a further informative exploration of ancient Hebrew imaginative thoughts, “horizons,” and “worlds” in the phenomenological senses see also Kugel, *The God of Old*.

³ Respectively: *Tanakh: The Holy Scriptures*; and *The Go-Anywhere Thinline Bible with the Apocrypha*.

⁴ That is, using the quotation marks/double inverted commas to indicate the God-figure, the conception as presented; we will later suggest a re-figuring of this abstract that is lighter on the “being” side yet heavier on the “interactive,” hoping thereby to conjunctively shift the ethics which tend to result from the metaphysics.

This is, though, naturally not simply a case of the orthodox versus the “with” just suggested, and other interpretations remain possible: one might, for instance, take these verses as referring to a process, perhaps an unfolding of creation from out of the divine in stages (and, as we will relate, the ancients too appear to have had a processional reckoning in mind, although one aligned with the “with” above). A hermeneutic like that would only mismatch ours in its “unfolding out of” – which is too close for comfort to *ex nihilo* – but not in its step-by-step; otherwise I think it is compatible. Another option might be that of *The Apocryphon of John*, where verse two’s “sweeping wind” is said to refer to the working of a “divine mother” who receives a “voice” and with it “the man and the son of man” are unconcealed.⁵ This latter is a good example of the longstanding tendency to read into this text (or, for that matter, any text) what one may wish to find, and thus from it we take note and care but must hurry on because what is pertinent to the case we wish to make is that there are at least strong reasons, based purely on the expression of the passage – just the words, no more – to think Genesis’ author (or rather: authors, redactors, editors, etc.) operated from the notional standpoint of picturing extant non-God/“God” substances as co-existent with the divinity prior to the creative act. It is this which calls most strongly for explication.

By taking these verses purely at their apparent and most direct, moreover, we are emphatically *not* thereby implying finitude for the envisioned God/“God;” probably some people at the time of this book’s composition and its preceding oral narrations did take God/“God” that way, while others (one would think a larger grouping) did not; at present we simply stake out no position whatsoever as it does not relate to our study (another element we phenomenologically “table” in order to stay focused). God/“God” could well be infinite and yet use materials that God/“God” did not fashion; where those materials came from and whether such were/could be similarly infinite is another detail beside the point of our labors. Again, we “table.” The target here, then, is simply that the “vacuum” imagery we tend to assume (presume) *vis-à-vis* the creation story as “obvious” is anything but, and we think that way purely as a result of having been inculcated to comprehend in that specific manner. In our next section, we shall come back to this crucial operation in more detail, to what it means to have this idea (any idea) as a reflexive and automatic intuition, to be encumbered by this notion as fount from which we act – and all too often without the slightest awareness of when or why. For the moment, however, we note merely that in holding this *ex nihilo* kernel there is generated in us a certain picture of God/“God” that the ancients – the very providers of these foundational myths – did not share.

This understanding, furthermore, the one formed by our modern orthodoxies, in turn gives rise I think to a dangerously disinherit cognitive position: although we may wish to be controlled – and a God/“God” that snaps magic fingers and births *whole* from *naught* certainly allows the comfort of ceding one’s responsibility fully over into a prostrated submission – we desperately need to take control, to take up our collective fate and no longer leave it “in God’s hands” the way we may have been told to do. This necessity – again we stress – looms forcefully despite and because of what the *ex nihilo* viewpoint with its (buried and mentally unacknowledged) juxtaposed implications of absolute power, foresight, and authority might encourage. Millions upon millions have been infected by the virus, and millions have died. We do not have the luxury of hoping for the best; what we can and ought to do daily within this pandemic have demonstrated that reality roundly, resolutely, and most tragically.

Let us follow the trail where it leads. We return now to our re-shifting of the creation, for only once its pre-surrounding ingredients have been properly cognitively registered will we be in a position to transform that out of which we think, and hence behave. The ancients, in their accounts of cosmos-making, also seem to have considered that the process was a lengthy one (as remarked above; the “days” signaled were indeterminate and not of twenty-four hours), and that it took any number of attempts to get it right (or anyway “right enough” – surely we cannot call this world fully “right”). Even these details are striking in their effects on the creation story, and already bear stunningly immediate repercussions; we will therefore need another glance at the abstracts our ancestors (literally and/or culturally so) maintained before unpacking the applications in more measure in what follows.

⁵ Pagels, “Exegesis of Genesis 1 in the Gospels of Thomas and John,” 485.

A first concomitant is that if God/“God” did not create out of nothing, if God/“God” was forced to make use of what was at hand and to do with it what God/“God” could, and if God/“God” moreover made mistakes along the way and needed to re-do this and that until finally deciding that “indeed, it was very good” (Genesis 1:31 in the NRSV – but once more: “good” yet not “perfect”?), then omnipotence is an inappropriate affixation to our conception of the divine. Not only that, but given the very same considerations, omniscience as well: complete foreknowledge would not admit of the need for do-overs and re-workings. Again, this is no comment on infinitude, nor even on being-hood, we keep our “table” set (*epoché*) and our focus narrow. How have we though, for centuries now, missed these points on a not-all power, a not-all expertise? In this declining to appreciate what is actually *in* Genesis we have failed to perceive the immediately following results as well, and hence have not altered our thinking: we have stayed stuck with the received *ex nihilo* and its perforce tandems of omnipotence and omniscience; this is to our detriment, or so we shall try to proffer. There are important impacts for the question of theodicy here too, and in that of course pandemics. God/“God” remains “greater” than the materials used on this conception, surely (the actor over the acted-upon, the bearer over the borne), but yet if God/“God” is not omnipotent, not omniscient, then things might happen that God/“God” does not wish to, situations could go awry, and God/“God” may well not be able to do anything about it other than to try, try, try again; only this time the unformed, the deep, the waters which God/“God” has to hand are us – and we may not oblige.

We hear a faraway (yet inner) ethical call; but lest we get too far from ourselves in exploration we remember to again get back to ourselves; that is, to keep our sights on ourselves and not attempt to take God’s point of view – which is obviously impossible. The phenomenological methodology we are engaging is, additionally, not directed towards such. Our effort is a self-reflective, an experiential one, and thus as befits our study we shall henceforth plunge within, attempting a discovery of what happens to us via these ideas we hold, of what our ideas do to us and make us do. We have learned that the *ex nihilo* conceptual posit may not actually be descriptive in view of Genesis as it actually reads (in its “light”), and that what is descriptive may – and this shall be expounded greatly – give us far better ways of notional approach, means which in turn might help us to be of more benefit to one another in the environs wherein we find ourselves. As to these situated worlds, we have already intimated that we may be quite surprised to learn how very little we really know, how very far we move while assuming we remain in place, and how very consistently we miss what is right before our eyes.

2 En-minded: The command and reach of unexamined concepts and intuitive judgments

William G. Lycan has written on the mode of consciousness to take certain phenomena mentally as being “physical,” but which definitionally would be more fitting if categorized with the notional, labeling such internal experiences (i.e., the consciousness’ “takings-as”) with the term “intentional inexistents.” Such are tokens, representata, which when we engage with mentally we describe them to ourselves as “things,”⁶ and – in thinking on these in this manner – are affected in ways that we otherwise would not be. Lycan gives the example of the sky, stating that: “no one thinks that there is any nonexistent *physical thing* up there. But I contend that there is a nonexistent physical thing up there: It is an illusion. Vision represents ‘the sky’ as an object. Poets write about it. Visually, the sky is *a canopy*, or the *vault* of heaven.”⁷ Although I very well know that “the sky” is not a *thing per se*, that it is rather a series of layered gases, and that my physical perception of it (separating out one’s mental comprehension for the moment) is additionally dependent on my species-based and particular ocular organization and functioning, I do not in fact

⁶ Lycan, *Consciousness and Experience*.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 189, note 9, accompanying the textual discussion on 152–3; emphases in the original.

know this phenomenologically (the mental steps back in): which is to indicate that I do not experience such in my times of conscious awareness upon which “the sky” acts. I perceive it in my human animal fashion, am emotionally affected thereby, and carry on functionally; I think and behave as if it really were an object, a canopy, a vault, responding automatically and very rarely, if ever, taking the time to analyze whatever more scientifically apposite information about “the sky” I may have. Since my experience is thus, the ideational landscape that is spread establishes a psychological reality which for me is perhaps more “real” (because felt and acted upon) than the empirical (observable) facts of the matter. This presents a very interesting alternative to what we may wish to accredit as “real,” and given the potential importance for praxis it will be returned to (and stressed) in our study below.

The concept, therefore – and to stretch our intellectual limbs here a bit – is not only ensconced, it is grounding and generative, contributory to every “world” building (that is, the perceptual framework from an embedded positioning) within a lifetime. The antecedent abstractional posit (of creation, of God/“God,” of whatsoever) held in the mind expresses itself smoothly and effortlessly, contributing to and even causing action in one’s total environment. Due to how I think (that blue dome above my head is a “canopy,” a “vault”) my functional comprehension takes on a particular structure, and such then becomes the confines from without which behavior flows. Although I may be informed otherwise (“No, no, that blue dome is a series of layered gases, you see ...”), unless a replacement abstractional posit(s) is established as deeply or deeper than “the sky” = “canopy” cognate then practically speaking nothing will change for me regardless of the accuracy and/or efficacy of the explanans. My perspective will simply carry on, and it is from out of that perspective (worldview, embedded “world” in which I live) whence total praxis is born. In other words, I only “see” what I think, and only think what has already been lodged within, and therefore respond to my environs quite limitedly for the simple reason that I will not conceive of further options. Operative interactions such as this I have termed “notion/events;”⁸ and in having now introduced the necessary elements I hope to relate the foregoing to our concern with the “what” and “how” of comportment during times of suffering and stress: this pandemic, others, but so too generally.

A notion/event takes its potency from the manner and degree to which the conceptual determines the perceptual as just outlined, to how an idea that is held expresses not only itself in manifestation, but also its comprehensive corollary life formation in the interpretative scaffolding that is thereby provided. This is an interplay, a self-fulfilling prophecy if one will, wherein the felt-as-lived and the lived-as-felt unfolds experientially as being, in the words of Jean-Luc Nancy, “less a sensuous world than an intelligible world of markers, functions or uses, and transivities – in the final analysis less a world, perhaps, than a milieu, an *Umwelt*.”⁹ The notion construes the event (however manifested, and whether merely of the everyday variety or of utmost significance; we use “event” here very broadly), and thus “notion/event” is written with a slash rather than a dash to (I hope) sufficiently indicate the two-way weaving of these facets rather than a pure relationship of cause and effect; in the intertwining of each a notion can, and perhaps more frequently does, lead to the event, but so too can an event disrupt the notional and result either in a shifting, refurbishing, regeneration, or other transformation of the root abstract. It is possible that I am so thoroughly shaken by being taught that the sky is a series of layered gases that such becomes a *satori* sparkling for me, an instantiation of awakening, a strike of enlightenment. Receiving said instruction would be an event that led to a new or altered notion, and that same notion would then extend its influences to future expressed behaviors. In Husserlean terms we might call this a redrawing of “horizon”-al boundaries, and indeed all this shows how really prescient his theoretical construct of one’s “life-world” was.¹⁰ The cloistering of potential action described by this tight interplay of notion/event is especially the case, it seems to me, if for whatever reason(s) we neglect the conceptualities we inhabit and simply operate on the intuitive

⁸ For a deeper analysis of this hypothesis of “notion/event,” see Oberg, “Facing a Form of/Formed God;” and Oberg, *The Christ is Dead, Long Live the Christ*. For more on the root metaphysical argument involved (albeit in the context of a substantive self), see also especially chapter six in Oberg, *Blurred*.

⁹ Nancy, *The Muses*, 18; the reference here is to Husserl, and on the particulars concerning *Umwelt* and the related (arguably more important) *Lebenswelt* see Husserl, *The Essential Husserl*; Smith, *Husserl*.

¹⁰ Husserl, *The Essential Husserl*; Smith, *Husserl*.

judgments and involuntary, effortless, highly efficient preconscious (i.e., non-aware: unanalyzed and primarily unnoticed) decisions that much psychological research has revealed are the primary generators of conduct. The automaticity of these processes is the really crucial element here, and since it will be appreciated how much of an impact this plays in the unfolding of notion/events we shall have to sketch what the results have indicated.

The explicatory picture from these experiments has it that any given input or datum filters its way through the brain's responsive processing and – there! – an action follows, pre-(absent) rational analysis, straitjacketed by emotion, evolutionarily built to quicken response time and thereby aid biological thriving. Even should we take notice of what we are doing – and how often, truly, do we? – any subsequent reasoning on such would too be affected by and filled with the initial and affective influences that this system first yielded.¹¹ This is a two-tiered model of cognitive coursing: the core being the intuitive consequential response to sensory input (externally provided or from within the organism; the latter, e.g., organ or muscular signals to the brain), and the secondary that of the sometimes employed, often not, laborious rational analysis (i.e., stopping (everything) to think: cost/benefit, prediction, calculation, etc.). A ready example would be noticing something not immediately identifiable on the sidewalk ahead: one will have a first reaction of the fight/flight or approach/avoid sort, and – possibly, certainly not necessarily – a further reaction of asking oneself what to do and putting in some energy and effort before responding. As Jonathan Haidt, whose work in this area has proven foundational, put it: we are each of us emotional dogs with rational tails¹² (the intuitive-emotional [the primary level] being almost the whole, the rational [additional level] the addendum). For a creature who operates only on an amygdala and limbic system, sensory influence may produce nothing but the materially given (that first tier in our model), yet that is naturally not the cosmos of a human animal, whose sensory apparatuses are both external and also heavily internal (in each for physical data but also conceptual), and for whom metaphysical assumptions will bear “real” physicality (à la of the formation considered above and introduced by Lycan's “internal inexistent”), shaping and directing the concourses of one's existence (tying in again with one's “life-world” and with the notion/event). How one comprehends establishes how one behaves, and this comprehension is often so deeply buried that it hardly ever enters awareness, thereby too avoiding any reasoned examination. The notion/event is located just there, expressed in the inhabited world even if unnoticed by the mind, and although the ontology of this theory might be in doubt for some, the ontically profoundly substantive nature should not. Abstracted posit = perceptual understanding = intuitive and emotional judgment = basis of (source for) action. Whence the rational?

The reader at this point might be thinking that while this is all very interesting (or maybe not), what does it have to do with the circumstances of a pandemic, or even with the social world more broadly considered? Precisely this: It is out of one's established ideascapes from which the fountains of each other-denigrating assertion of “freedom” to decline a facial mask, every Takbir (*Allahu Akbar*) uttered in violence,¹³ or any of a fathomless number of disregarding moves and intolerances flow – and do so reflecting a clear conscience. One does not doubt oneself, the “rightness” of one's automatic assertions, since – founded in the unexamined, preconscious as they are – these determinations are “perfectly obvious” and therefore not requiring of justification. One's previously mentally accepted conceptions aided in forging the intuitions and emotions upon which one now lives, and having become a part of the brain's reflexive functioning, dissent or dismissal are simply no longer under consideration – one does not act, one *reacts*, and there is neither time nor space for detailed assessment. Add to this the toxicity of us/them

¹¹ Haidt, “The Emotional Dog and Its Rational Tail;” Haidt, *The Righteous Mind*; see also Kahneman, *Thinking, Fast and Slow*; Tversky and Kahneman, “Judgment Under Uncertainty;” Greene, *Moral Tribes*; Gazzaniga, *Who's In Charge?*; Ramachandran, *The Tell-Tale Brain*; and Damásio, *Descartes' Error*.

¹² Haidt, “The Emotional Dog and Its Rational Tail.”

¹³ I wish to strongly note that this is an exclamation of praise, and only in a tiny minority of situations is it used in the highly negative ways made infamous in recent decades by physical attacks on strangers. However, I think that the application of the psychological mechanisms involved does still appertain to these incidents. What we are after here is an understanding, not a finger pointing.

tribalistic identitarian concerns (grievously often linked with God/“God”) and the recipe is a frighteningly unhealthy one; an individual built from the inside out, ideas inculcated and ingrained, kneejerk to the point of being unquestioned, the non-thought into action, again and again. The double helix of the notion/event is seen now as a singularity with its ever-stacked expression of constitutive elements, erupting in unison in a life’s embedded complexities. We can well imagine the repercussions that might result from a biological framing of this sort, and sadly need only check the news to discover the veracity of what we guessed. A return to those foundational ideas, the abstractional posits which underpin core mental layering, appears the only hope for a “soteriological” solution. “The sky” must be revealed.

Thusly, in summation, here is what the psychologists and cognitive scientists have been revealing: The notions that we adhere to, whether by default (i.e., resulting from acculturation, education, upbringing, etc.), or by purposive choice (i.e., following reflection or being convinced by another’s argument) become inoculated within one’s mental attitudes towards the environment in which one is lodged, forming the background, the setting, the stage upon which life is enacted.¹⁴ We are thus equipped with thickly distorting lenses, universally comprehending through the warped filters of our assumptions, and since the brain functions in the (almost entirely) involuntary and preconscious (absent active awareness) manner outlined – preceding even the chance to stop and think – the consequence is that the outcome has *come out* before a rational breath might be taken. The intuitive and emotional bases that have functioned so well in promoting organism survival through an efficiency of judgment, economic usage of energy, and swiftness of action tend to perform in the social world as either common givens, the what-goes-without-saying of any particular people and place (between, that is, individuals who share such, typically from having experienced similar structures during formative years), or as offensive mismatches, the how-dare-you of an interaction gone awry (between, that is, individuals who do not share such, and find the other’s action(s) inappropriate or worse). Cultural conflict is one aspect of this, but the levels engaged go all the way down to you and me bumping into each other in a crowded train – and then I sneeze, and here we are in a pandemic. The battle lines were already drawn before that fateful malefaction, and now they have been crossed. You will react smoothly and instinctively, without rational thought entering the scenario until after the fact (until? rather *if*, and more likely never), your intuitions having antecedently decreed the outlines of the determination made, and your body moving – in whatever fashion – in perfect reflection of those mental diktats. Hence the notions that we have, they build us, they are/become notion/events, they make that which we do (in our own eyes, through our own perspectival frames) “only natural,” “fitting,” “what any good person would.” An other (other-than) who might be (or appear) other-wise falls well outside the concerns of this self(-centered) tribunal; comeuppance or defiance is “to be expected.”

3 En-worlded: How purposefully shifting our deepest intuitions about God/“God” may help us interrelate, and especially in times like a pandemic

Let us return to Keller and her re-creation of our ideas on creation. We have indicated how a closer reading of the text upon which so much of our Western cultural space has been built could lead to a view of God/“God” that is not quite the sovereign we have heretofore imagined; instead this God/“God” is more interactive, more dependent, a tiny portion more similar to us, and – dare I suggest – a great deal more

¹⁴ The nearly inexhaustible degree to which a person’s birth-default situation shapes selfhood is, in my opinion, Martin Heidegger’s greatest contribution to Husserl’s work, expanding “horizon” to “world” and pursuing the implications of a deeper penetration of embedded conditionality, something we might perhaps abbreviate as emphasizing an “able-to” over a more strictly Husserlean “does;” see Heidegger, *Being and Time*, especially sections 13, 18–21, 38, and 43; see also, for an overview and rather straightforward synopsis, Sembera, *Rephrasing Heidegger*, 107–8, where “falling” in the “inauthentic mode” is discussed (this is Sembera’s take on what is typically translated “thrown”).

approachable, at least in a conceptual–perspectival way, if not in an existential way (matters about which, we remind the reader, have been entirely “tabled” in our constructive and phenomenological methodology). A “reduced” divine conceived along these lines would move us towards what John D. Caputo has termed a “weak” theology, one centered on the call of God/“God” and what that might indicate for the manners and forms of our societies and institutional structures.¹⁵ If God/“God” is not like what we have traditionally taken God/“God” to be like – if God/“God” might be thought in ways we have not (for many centuries now) thought – if God/“God” is not to be taken as omnipotent and neither omniscient – infinite perhaps, transcendent and/or immanent still, only less “mighty” – and if this puissance and epistemology further hinges not only on the circumstantial forces of probabilities and randomness but also on what we as individuals choose to do, then we might determine ourselves to be more akin to partners with God/“God,” working together to try and accomplish some good.¹⁶ Such opens many ethical (re)potentialities.

This is a God/“God” who may or may not entail a being-hood but who certainly does evoke a whisper, an historical rupture (a puncturing through; but in that not of necessity explosively – revolution can creep), a force or nudge or nuance that pushes us together and prods us (as Emmanuel Levinas would remind¹⁷) to genuinely “face” one another, to “see” the other for what she is and we are. If more of us were comprehensively attuned along such lines, if such were our intuitions and automatic world (“world”) perceptions, we might find our reactions to the pandemic becoming significantly transposed from where they stand now. Religion rests on faith, and faith in turn on signs, signifiers that can be understood, re-understood, and re-understood again. Possibly more than any other writer Jacques Derrida brought this to our attention with his innovation of deconstruction,¹⁸ and if we take the time to work through the eventualities within that set of tools, and the wider focus on hermeneutics broadly applied that has since resulted (but which must nevertheless be engaged per our inherited forms¹⁹), we may discover notional frameworks far more open than those we had anticipated. In these uncoverings we then work to apply, to outfit ourselves anew, and with the resulting fresh intuitional equipment we engage the world – and above all one another – quite differently, pristinely. We (re)make what we think (assume, presume) precisely because we know that *such will then make us*.

Understood thusly, wherein God/“God” is more encouraging voice than commanding lord, more of a support and less of a sovereign, the human position within its contextualized embeddedness could be quite different for a religious believer, and one would think more liberating and empowering in that, more conducive to a renewed emphasis on rationality through the given space to think and find that a “weak” theology of non-omnipotence and non-omniscience (yet still – or not – transcendence, infinitude, etc.) would afford while yet remaining largely within one’s chosen tradition. Conceptual landscapes could then be changed, “horizons” could be re-drawn, “worlds” could be re-built, and notion/events re-born – hence further birthing – anew. If God/“God” is not completely in charge it is up to us, and my goodness I had better pay more attention to you: we are very much dependent upon each other.

Caputo, in commenting on the narrative and symbolic truths of scriptural texts (instead of being representationally true), states that: “The truth of a symbol is that it effectively organizes a *form of life*, for better or for worse, and when it ceases to, it is not because a proposition is falsified but because it withers away and ceases to command our faith and love.”²⁰ Can the symbolic value of God/“God” taken to be all-powerful and all-knowing, modeled on our (allegedly) mistaken reading (reading-into) of the Genesis creation myth, continue to attract us? Should it? Has not the pandemic given ample impetus for a

¹⁵ See his titles: Caputo, *The Weakness of God*; Caputo, *The Folly of God*; Caputo, *Hermeneutics*; and Caputo, *Cross and Cosmos*.

¹⁶ The contemporary Jewish emphasis on *tikkun olam* (“world repair”) would clearly apply here, although not necessarily in the progressive politics manner it has become somewhat synonymous with in certain circles.

¹⁷ Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*.

¹⁸ Derrida, *Of Grammatology*; but of course also many of his following works. His *Cinders* provides an accessible self-appraisal and self-(re)viewing (a re-consideration) of his own previous oeuvre, tracing recurrent themes.

¹⁹ I am less familiar with Gianni Vattimo’s work but it seems to fit in well here, and with Keller’s more recent process theological studies, such as in her *Cloud of the Impossible*.

²⁰ Caputo, *Cross and Cosmos*, 120; emphases in the original.

re-thinking, a re-ordering, a re-symbolization that would engender – over time – a fresh suite of intuitive responses, ascertainments, and praxes? Have we not learned how much we need to re-orient ourselves towards one another *in order to* be towards God/“God”? The way we have thought the divine – as dominant (domineering) mover – has caused too many to simply pray that the entirety slips by, disappears, while doing little concretely to exist differently in the wholly altered circumstantial landscape that has been forced on us. Those with belief and practice need not exchange one iota (one yod) for a pure epidemiology, but (re)thinking said belief and practice would surely assist in gauging one’s interlocution with science’s lessons. Perhaps some of us cannot think of God as a symbol (it is a very personal choice), but surely we can think of *the way we think of God* as a symbol, of the means of our approach; change that, and change the relation. The conceptual, the abstract first: from thence all else flows.

We do not have control, we cannot have control, we want to be controlled but not even God/“God” is in complete control – what hope have we? Only this: the hope in one another, the hope that I might recognize you recognizing me, realizing our own hopelessness in the face of events no one could have fathomed blasting out of the oh-so ordinary days we thought we were living through. In the end, after these seemingly disparate angles we have engaged, we find ourselves – as Husserl so brilliantly taught – turning and turning this problematic, this conundrum, in conscious awareness, revealing now this and now that yet never able to take in the whole at once.²¹ We are tiny animals. Still, we have learned much. I suppose on reflection it does not, it would seem, really matter whether God/“God” is one way or another, or even whether God/“God” “is” at all; we can easily continue to “table” that anyway far too large a query. What does matter is what we do with the *idea* of God, and what that idea does with – and does *to* – us. The world/“world” is ours to build: it all depends on how we think, and therefore envision, and thereby act; therein lies the fullness of it, pandemic or not.

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²¹ Husserl, *The Essential Husserl*; and naturally too Husserl, *Logical Investigations, Volume 1*.

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