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Faith in the Nominalistic Age? The Possible Theological Contribution of Hermeneutics

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Abstract: This paper inquires about the defensibility of spiritual faith in this Nominalistic age, i.e., an age when all reality is reduced to scientifically ascertainable matter and all spiritual realities are deemed to be irreal. This Nominalistic worldview was developed in the late Middle Ages and became one of the major presuppositions of Modernity. It has made it ever more difficult to defend the legitimacy of faith and its objects. It also played an important, albeit seldom recognized, role in the emergence of Hermeneutical thought in the 20th Century. In his strong, if also seldom carefully studied, interpretation of Heidegger's philosophy, Gadamer saw in the Nominalism of Modernity one of the main challenges to which Heidegger's thinking wished to respond: the hegemony of the Nominalistic understanding of being would have led to the Nihilism of our technological Age and made the experience of the Divine unthinkable. After recalling the outlines of this interpretation and of the meaning of Nominalism itself, this paper argues that this Nominalism was also one of the main challenges Gadamer wanted to overcome with his Hermeneutics. It discusses how Hermeneutics strives to overcome this Nominalism by calling into question the monopoly of scientific truth (an effort summed up in the title "Truth and Method") and through its renewed understanding of language as the presentation of Being itself, which goes hand in hand with the rediscovery of the Platonic metaphysics of the Beautiful. Hermeneutics thus shows how something like faith is defensible and thus makes an important theological and metaphysical contribution.

Keywords: faith; nominalism; hermeneutics; metaphysics; Gadamer; Heidegger; modernity



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The title of this contribution speaks of "Faith in the Nominalistic Age?", with a question mark that one can expect at the end of all philosophical titles. Since I hail from a discipline, hermeneutics, that is fond of double entendres, this title also has a double meaning. In its first meaning, "Faith in the Nominalistic Age?" inquires about the possibility, indeed the defensibility, of faith, religious faith mostly, in the Nominalistic age: what does faith consist in? How can it be justified? Must it be justified? This is a most classical question of theology, philosophy and what is called the philosophy of religion. There is, however, another meaning of the title "Faith in the Nominalistic Age?": it inquires not about the status of religious faith in this day and age; rather, it questions our own faith in the Nominalistic age as one of the hidden creeds of our time. As I will argue or recall, Nominalism forms the default metaphysics of our time, our basic worldview, out of which it is quite difficult to justify anything like a religious faith. Can this Nominalistic framework be overcome?

I will try to wrestle with these issues in three steps. I will first try to give a general idea of my starting point, which is to be found in Gadamer's dialogue with Heidegger and centers on the topic of my lecture¹ (faith in the Nominalistic age). I will secondly try to explain (or recall) in broad terms what this Nominalistic age is all about. Thirdly and lastly, I will try to sketch how faith can be thought of in the Nominalistic age with the help of hermeneutical philosophy and thus try to outline the, or a, possible theological contribution of hermeneutics to theology.

1. Gadamer's Unique Theological Interpretation of Heidegger

There are many things to marvel at in Gadamer's hermeneutics, but one of the things that never ceases to amaze me is the intensity of his life-long dialogue with his teacher Heidegger. When Gadamer met him, in 1923, he came from a very different background and already had a solid philosophical upbringing. For the background: Heidegger came from a peasant setting, the backwater city of Messkirch, and from a modest family in which no one had ever received a university education. Gadamer, on the other hand, came from a major city, Breslau, and was the son of an acclaimed professor of pharmaceutical chemistry who became the rector of the University of Marburg in 1921. In religious matters, Heidegger was in his youth a devout Catholic, destined for the priesthood, whereas Gadamer was, at best, a nominal Protestant, for whom faith issues were less existential, if relevant at all. On the philosophical front, Gadamer benefited from a solid upbringing before he ran into Heidegger: he had studied with some of the most famous Neo-Kantians of his time: luminaries such as Paul Natorp, Nicolai Hartmann and Richard Höningwald, all strong believers in the sacred authority of science, as was the case with Gadamer's father. Worlds thus separated Gadamer and Heidegger, but in 1922, Gadamer happened to be interested in Aristoteles, and his teacher Natorp handed him a handwritten manuscript of the young Heidegger on Aristotle. Gadamer was entranced by it and decided to study with Heidegger in the summer of 1923. The rest is history.

The first thing that amazes me is that Gadamer, despite his different background, immediately became a follower of Heidegger and wished nothing more than to do his habilitation under his supervision (Heidegger first refused, in 1925, but finally accepted him in 1928, after Gadamer had made strides in his studies of Greek Philology with Paul Friedländer from 1925 to 1927). The other thing that amazes me is that, from the time of this early encounter, Gadamer developed an intense and original reading of Heidegger's main motivations, which forms the bulk of the strong Heidegger interpretation he developed during Heidegger's lifetime and which he presented (among other places) in tributes for Heidegger's 75th, 80th and 85th birthday (which Heidegger appreciated, by the way, as his soon-to-be published correspondence with Gadamer will show). Gadamer continued developing this interpretation in his book *Heideggers Wege*, published in 1983 and translated as *Heidegger's Ways* in English, as well as in his later work published in the 1980s and 1990s. To my knowledge, this strong interpretation of Heidegger by Gadamer has hitherto received little scholarly attention, even though it has much to teach us about Heidegger's underlying motivations, or at least Gadamer's perception of them.

According to Gadamer, the driving force behind Heidegger's endeavor, or "what Heidegger was all about", was his life-long effort to find an adequate expression for the experience of Christian faith. Heidegger, in Gadamer's eyes, was a *Gottsucher*, a God-seeker. Early on, probably as early as 1919, as Heidegger's now-famous letter to his mentor Engelbert Krebs testifies (published in [Kisiel and Sheehan \(2010\)](#)), Heidegger became disillusioned with the traditional philosophical terminology with which this experience of faith was expressed². Gadamer's interpretation is all the more noteworthy because Heidegger himself never presented his path of thinking in this way; from Heidegger's perspective, his only question was that of Being, and in order to raise it properly, one had to unfold an existential Analytics of *Dasein* or delve into the history of Being. One must, however, ask: *why* is it important to raise anew this long-forgotten question of Being? For Gadamer, Heidegger's main motivation was always theological, and this is what the publication of Heidegger's early lecture courses of the 1920s confirmed in his eyes³. In 1989, when Heidegger's *Natorp-Bericht* was finally published (Heidegger's *Beiträge* were also published in that year, but Gadamer had far less interest in them), Gadamer wrote a preface provokingly titled "Heidegger's theological *Jugendschrift*", an allusion, of course, to the belatedly published manuscripts of the young Hegel (by a Dilthey pupil, no less, Hermann Nohl). Just as the publication of these early Hegelian "theological" manuscripts opened the way for a renewed and unitary understanding of Hegel, so, too, would the

early manuscripts and lecture courses of Heidegger open the way for an appreciation of the underlying religious motivations of his entire philosophical outlook.

It would be a complex story to explain Heidegger's misgivings about the vocabulary with which Christian faith was expressed, but there is no doubt that he was wrestling with his own theological upbringing, which was framed by the Catholic Church and the doctrine of Thomism, which, like him, extolled the question of Being. Heidegger believed—like many other theologians of his time, it must be noted (von Harnack springs to mind, but also dialectical theologians such as Barth and Bultmann, to name only the most famous)—that the scholastic doctrine alienated or distorted (*überfremdet* is Gadamer's word) the original Christian message and experience, which was rooted in the temporal anguish of the believer. Where did this "alienating" doctrine come from? This would also be a long story to narrate but, in a word, it came from "metaphysics" (GW 3, 298) and its reassuring attempt to understand the whole of reality out of a first principle and, according to Heidegger, to distract human existence from its own temporality. This metaphysical urge to explain the world became, according to Heidegger, the foundation of our technological age which would also seek to control everything and thus make us forgetful of our historical condition.

Where did Gadamer encounter this motivation in 1923? In this fateful summer semester of 1923, Gadamer followed Heidegger's seminar on Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* and his programmatic one-hour lecture course on the "Hermeneutics of facticity". Yet, it was in a small seminar Heidegger held with Julius Ebbinghaus on Kant's *Religion in the Limits of Reason Alone* (1793) that Gadamer appears to have recognized the secretly religious motivation of Heidegger's questioning. Gadamer recalls, for instance, that it was Heidegger's aim, in this seminar, to distance Kant from Luther (GW 10, 7), whom Heidegger celebrated, and to situate him in the continuity of Thomas and metaphysical thinking. What ensued was *Being and Time* and its attempt to understand human existence, indeed Being itself, out of its forgotten or repressed temporality. When Heidegger soon realized that *Being and Time* was itself not entirely free of the metaphysical vocabulary (as if any philosophical work could ever be), he abandoned its entire project and plunged into the history of Being in order to understand our present predicament as the consequence of the long history of "metaphysics", and to explore ways of thinking beyond it, since the outcome of this history had been a debilitating nihilism.

In this process, Gadamer never fails to point out a major motivation of Heidegger's undertaking, which would also prove decisive for Gadamer himself: it is Heidegger's attempt to escape the narrowness of the scientific culture of the West, the *Versuch, aus der Enge der Wissenskultur des Abendlandes auszubrechen* (GW 10, 27). This is indeed a fundamental tenet of Heidegger's thinking about technology, namely the notion that the all-pervasive attempt to dominate the world would stem from the tradition of metaphysics. It is this technological mindset that can be identified with the project of Nominalism, at least in Gadamer's eyes. This is perhaps less the case for Heidegger, who had little to say about Nominalism *per se* and who even had positive things to say about it—in his *Habilitationsschrift* of 1916 for instance—because of its focus on *haecceitas* or "thisness" as opposed to essential generalities. Nonetheless, Heidegger would have readily recognized what Gadamer understood by Nominalism. Which leads me to my second question:

2. What Is Nominalism and to What Extent Is It the Default Metaphysics of Our Time?

Of course, Nominalism is not a doctrine of Gadamer. It is the name of a worldview, actually a metaphysics, which came about in the Middle Ages and traced its own roots back to the privilege Aristotle bestowed upon the *tode ti*, the this or that, as opposed to the abstract essence. The history of the rise of Nominalism is a complex issue and it is not my aim, nor part of my competence, to dissect here its meaning for medieval authors. When I speak of Nominalism, I mostly refer to the Nominalism of our age⁴, our scientific and materialistic age, whose roots go back to a metaphysical revolution that occurred in the late Middle ages when the (Platonic) view that there was an order of Being we could know through reason was challenged by the view that there are only individual and contingent

entities which we would know through experience. What gives Nominalism its name is the notion that abstract entities and universals are just “names”, *nomina*, since the only realities that “actually exist” would be individual ones which can be observed in space and time. There are different types of apples, but the concept of the apple as such does not exist; it is a creation of the mind—hence a mere name—to characterize various types of beings that share a characteristic. As is well known, at least by historians of Nominalism, the original motivation of this metaphysics, which rejects essences, was theological: Medieval authors such as Ockham argued that it would limit the omnipotence of God, the only eternal reality, to admit a realm of eternal essences that would coexist, as it were, with God. Being omnipotent, God could modify, at will, any order of Being. This view of the world had a wide-ranging and well-studied impact on Modernity, and many relate its rise to that of Nominalism⁵. The consequences are ontological and epistemological. On the ontological side, Nominalism goes hand-in-hand with a new understanding of Being, which is now viewed as individual existence (*Vorhandenheit*) in time and space; it is not the unfolding of an essence. Since essences have become problematical, or viewed as mere, albeit useful, fictions of the mind, there is no “order of Being” out there, no *telos* of Being either, only individual realities devoid of any essential purpose⁶. The epistemological consequences are no less revolutionary: to know is not to grasp an essence anymore, since essences do not really exist; it means to recognize through experience, which Nominalism promotes as the main source of knowledge besides logic, patterns or laws that govern individual realities. For modern authors such as Kant, it is ultimately the human understanding that would be a priori responsible for the order we recognize in the world of phenomena. I do not need to make the argument here, since it has been done countless times over, but it is generally right to view in this Nominalism one, if not the, deciding feature of Modernity.

It certainly promoted the scientific and empirical study of nature based on repeated observation, but it also promoted, as Hans Blumenberg argued in his book *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age* (1966), the autonomy of the human subject, which is also widely heralded as a hallmark of Modernity. Since the human subject is not constrained anymore by an overbearing realm of essences to which it must subject, it appears free to fashion the world, its own world, to its liking. Nominalism is thus the age of the individual and of the ego. Of course, the question of what is binding for this ego has to be raised: what should govern our lives, and what is the point of our lives if there is no order of Being to which we can look up to? The history of Modernity can be read as a series of answers to this question and, thus, to Nominalism.⁷

Needless to say, Nominalism has potentially disastrous consequences for the issues that theology deals with. The irony here, but which is now mostly viewed as a mere historical curiosity, is that the original motivation of Nominalism was theological to begin with: it would limit the omnipotence of God to admit an independent realm of essences besides God. It was thus a Nominalism *ad majorem Dei gloriam* (or *ad majorem Dei omnipotentiae gloriam*). However, if there are only individual entities and all abstract, non-observable realities become questionable, any idea of an otherworldly God can ultimately fall under the razor of Nominalism. This was, of course, not an issue for the Middle Ages, but it would become one for Modernity, which can be viewed in this regard as a radicalization of Nominalism. For Descartes, for instance, there are only two types of realities: *res extensae*, the meaningless, purposeless individual and material entities “extended” out there, and the *res cogitans* of my thinking ego. The existence of God can only be deduced (at least, in the Third Meditation) from the fact that the finite being that I am cannot be the cause of the idea of infinity which I find within my mind (See [Arbid 2017](#)). This argument was only binding, it appears, for Descartes himself. Out of a Nominalistic understanding of existence and reality, the existence of God became problematic for modern philosophers and would become ever more so for the wider public (at least, its “educated” class in the West) in our late Modernity, or our “Secular Age” as Charles Taylor calls it.

These issues are well known and generally well studied. What is perhaps less appreciated is the impact they had on thinkers such as Heidegger (who spoke little of Nominalism

and even had, as I recalled, some appreciation, in his formative years, for its sense for *haecceitas*) and Gadamer. Gadamer, in his powerful reading of Heidegger, saw the principled Nominalism of Modernity as *the main issue* of Heidegger's *Being and Time* and the overriding challenge behind his life-long struggle or *Auseinandersetzung* with metaphysics⁸.

Even if Heidegger speaks little of Nominalism *per se* (thinkers often speak very little of their deepest motivations), it is arguable that his entire philosophical effort wishes to problematize its understanding of Being by tracing it back to the forgetfulness of Being which would be the signature of metaphysics. There are at least two prominent instances of Nominalism's understanding of Being that come to mind in Heidegger's work. The first, to be found in *Being and Time*, is the privilege bestowed upon the understanding of Being as sheer *Vorhandenheit*; mere subsistence or Being as "occurrentness" (See [Cerbone 2021b](#))⁹—what is is what can be objectified and observed as an object that stands in front of me (very much like Descartes' *res extensa* or Sartre's *en-soi*). This is an understanding of Being that most of us presuppose without question: Being means to actually exist somewhere as opposed to not being there or not "being a thing", as one says nowadays (a sense of Being as existence Aristotle *never* evokes [!]) when he famously distinguishes four senses of Being in *Metaphysics*, V, 7 and VI, 2; *existentia* was a late Medieval discovery, as Jean-Christophe Bardout has shown ([Bardout 2014](#)). It was Heidegger's genius (or mischievousness) to show that this understanding of Being was not only one of many, but that it was even *derivative*: it would emerge out of the *disruption* of the mode of Being of *Zuhandenheit* ("availableness" (See [Cerbone 2021a](#)), "readiness to hand", 'handiness') which would be more original and more related to *Dasein*, for whom *Vorhandenheit* would also be a woefully inadequate way of describing its way of being. To my knowledge, Heidegger never explicitly relates *Vorhandenheit* to the Nominalistic understanding of Being, but it is obvious that there is no *Vorhandenheit* without Nominalism (granted, Heidegger is probably thinking more about Descartes' *res extensa* or the *Gegenstand* of the Neokantians). It is this Nominalistic understanding Heidegger wishes to rattle by raising anew the question of Being. As we saw, according to Gadamer, the motivation of Heidegger was ultimately theological: the Nominalistic understanding of Being would make it impossible to think of the possible being of God.

The second decisive instance of the Nominalistic understanding of Being can be found in Heidegger's later account of the essence of technology which, according to his provocative reading, would emerge seamlessly out of the tradition of metaphysics and its focus on objectified beings (*eidos*, *ousia*, *res*) instead of on the "event" of Being (Being as *phusis*, *Aufgehen* or *Ereignis*). How does technology consider beings? It views them mainly as something to be controlled and exploited. Descartes's emblematic phrase about us becoming "*maîtres et possesseurs de la nature*" might have led Heidegger to this view, but it certainly confirms his insight. For modern technology, beings would not even amount to a *Vorhandenheit* anymore, ironizes Heidegger but, at best, to something like a reservoir (*Vorrat*) for possible manipulation and domination¹⁰. Beings are essentially disposable, replaceable, since the only reality is (or would be) that of the *Gestell*, the urge to technologically master everything. Again, Heidegger does not relate this urge to Nominalism *per se*, but to the roots of the metaphysical tradition, especially to Plato and his understanding of the world through the prism of the *eidos*, i.e., what the eye can grasp and thus master. Plato, and not Nominalism (which would only derive from Platonism), would be responsible for the forgetfulness of Being, i.e., the forgotten notion that Being cannot be reduced to what the *Gestell* can get a hold of. It is thus metaphysics that Heidegger takes to task, not Nominalism *per se*.

The question one can raise here (and there would be many) is whether metaphysics and our entire Western tradition can indeed be reduced to the Nominalism that came to the fore in the late Middle Ages and paved the way for Modernity. For Heidegger, there is a straight line that goes from the foundations of metaphysics in Plato to Nominalism, Modernity and our technological predicament, which is most evident today, as I believe

Heidegger correctly diagnosed, in the ecological challenge we are facing and in the nihilistic plight of our culture.

It was Gadamer's immense merit, I contend, even if this is not widely acknowledged, to challenge Heidegger's one-sided reading of metaphysics as the cradle of the technological age. He did so in at least two ways: firstly, in his different reading of Plato, and the Greeks more generally, in which he tried to show that it would be an anachronism to project into Plato the modern and Nominalistic understanding of Being. In effect, Gadamer reproached Heidegger for confusing the Greeks with the Nominalist, modern worldview¹¹. Gadamer mostly did so, however, by suggesting, if I understand him correctly, that Plato's understanding of Being was, in fact, much more closer to Heidegger's in that it was, or would have been, more attuned to the essential mobility and, hence, temporality of Being which would escape mastery. Gadamer recognized this sense for mobility in the fact that "movement" (*kinesis*) was indeed one of the five main genres of Being in his *Sophistes* besides "rest" (GW 3, 405–6), in Plato's understanding of the soul as self-movement (*ibid.*) and in the fact that Plato would have recognized that an ultimate intellectual grasp of the world was impossible, since no one knows how many ideas there are. And if the idea of the Good is the overriding principle of the ideas, it is never presented as an idea that we could perceive or grasp (it is not a *Gegenstand* in the Nominalistic sense), but as an idea in which all the others would partake or participate (GW 3, 244). Similarly, Plato would never speak of the divine as an objectified *Seiendes* we could grasp (GW 3, 409). The pointed notion of participation means, for Gadamer, that we only have an inkling of the link of the sensible to some ideal order, but that none of us has any mastery of this relation. Thus, Plato would not only have been the forerunner of metaphysics, and our scientific culture focused on the mastery and logical explanation of beings, but he would also have preserved something of the unity of philosophical knowledge with religious and poetic wisdom (GW 3, 416: he would have been a true witness of "*der unleugbaren Einheit von Wissen und religiöser und dichterischer und Weisheitsüberlieferung*", "the undeniable unity of knowledge and the tradition of religious and poetic wisdom"), with its sense for the immemorial, the uncontrollable and the unpredictable (GW 3, 415: *das Unvordenkliche, das Unbeherrschbare, das Unberechenbare*). Thus, Gadamer did challenge Heidegger's reading of Plato; however, a massive part of his argument was to show that Plato was actually somewhat of a Heideggerian or, at least, an author with whom Heidegger could have identified himself more than he did¹². I, for one, believe this is not the only, nor the best, way to challenge Heidegger's reading of Plato. I would more readily follow Gerhard Krüger, who defended a metaphysical reading of Plato against Heidegger's effort to overcome metaphysics and also showed how much Heidegger was a son of Modernity in this undertaking¹³.

The second important way in which Gadamer rejected Heidegger's reading of metaphysics lies in the distance he took from Heidegger's notion that there would be such a thing as a constraining *language* of metaphysics, a *Sprache der Metaphysik*, that would have held philosophy captive from Plato to the logical positivists. By challenging Heidegger on this, Gadamer suggested that there are actually many different voices in the metaphysical tradition and not only the Nominalistic blowhard. He also made the point that language is, in principle, always able to express or convey what needs to be said (which is a standard version of the universality he claims for hermeneutics (See Jean Grondin (2022a))). This is also true of the alleged language of metaphysics: if Heidegger thinks here about the objectivizing language of substance metaphysics, he should know that there are non-objectivizing ways of thinking of Being, as can be found in Plotinus, Meister Eckhart, Schelling, Hölderlin, Bergson and, according to Gadamer, even in Plato. There are indeed many different languages of metaphysics, i.e., of the effort to understanding something about Being. Plato's language is not necessarily that of Descartes or Carnap. In his unitary understanding of metaphysics as a forgetfulness of Being, Heidegger would himself have fallen prey to the technological urge to become *maître et possesseur* of our entire philosophical tradition.

Gadamer thus resisted Heidegger's unified view of metaphysics; in his own understated way, of course, since he always revered his teacher and mentor Heidegger. Yet, he did not do so, for the most part, to rekindle metaphysical thought, which was not his main task, but only to rectify, as it needed to be, Heidegger's too-modern reading of Plato, which was perhaps influenced by the NeoKantians (again, Heidegger was more modern than he believed). I think, and this is a guiding thread of my modest work, that one can build on Gadamer's resistance to Heidegger to renew the metaphysical impetus of philosophy (I fully understand that this is not the most popular way of doing philosophy but I, for one, see, in the rabid rejection of metaphysics and in philosophy, the hidden impact of Nominalism and its metaphysics). I will now try to suggest how this is true of faith and the faith in the being of God, since this was our starting point.

3. Faith in the Nominalist Age: The Possible Theological Contribution of Hermeneutics

We have seen that it was Gadamer's contention that the main impetus for the God-seeking Heidegger was to find an adequate expression for the experience of Christian faith, which he could not find in the vocabulary of Greek metaphysics. Other readings of Heidegger's motivations are certainly possible, but Gadamer's reading has the benefit of pointing towards one of the possible theological and metaphysical contributions of hermeneutics¹⁴. As we saw, Gadamer argues that the Nominalism of Modernity was *the* main challenge Heidegger wanted to take on in *Being in Time* and in his life-long struggle with metaphysics.

There is no denying that faith represents a challenge for Modernity in light of its fundamental Nominalism. How is faith seen from a Nominalist and modern point of view? One of the many differences between the contemporary Nominalist reading of faith with that of earlier epochs resides in the fact that faith is now mostly seen as an *option* that the subject can espouse or not. You either have faith or you do not (as if the issue were black or white; it is not!) and whichever option you choose, this is your sovereign, plebiscitary decision. As Charles Taylor argued at the beginning of his *Secular Age*, one of the hallmarks of Modernity resides in the fact that it was almost impossible for any Western person around the year 1500 to not believe in God, whereas in our epoch this has become possible, if not inescapable¹⁵. In our Secularized age, and most of us will recognize ourselves in this, faith is "understood to be one option among others, and frequently not the easiest to embrace"¹⁶. Yet, faith has not always been seen as an option we could choose, like we can choose to vote for this or that candidate on election day. In the Letters of Paul, for instance, which were also the first to stress the importance of faith (*pistis*) in our relation to God, this *pistis* is readily understood as a *gift* from God, a *theou donon* (*Ephesians* 2, 8) or *donum dei*. It is not a plebiscitary decision on the part of the subject, but a gift that opens up an outlook on life and a path (*hodos, via*) we can follow. This conception explains, by the way, Paul's all-important notion that we would be saved by the grace of faith. If faith were merely and only a matter of human initiative, this doctrine of salvation would make no sense at all. In our time, the notion that faith can be seen as a gift and a grace has been masked by what can be called the metaphysics of subjectivity, which posits the human subject as an autonomous monarch that constructs its own relation to everything, to the world, to others, to itself and even to God (this widespread constructivism is a consequence of Nominalism).

This plebiscitary conception of faith has only been enhanced by the ascendancy of modern science and its Nominalistic outlook on our mindset. In the modern era, science has accumulated so many triumphs—especially in its technological and economic applications (which do not exhaust science and were not part of its original project)—that any relation to the world that does not follow the track of science has been widely discredited. Everything that is not science (*epistèmè*) is only a matter of opinion (*doxa*). Faith (*pistis*) would also fall in the category of opinions, i.e., of views that cannot be rationally defended. The only reliable and rational access to reality would be provided by science, which studies,

as Nominalism commands, individual realities in the empirical world and the laws that govern their interactions.

Given this scientific and Nominalistic outlook, faith has become, for all intents and purposes, excluded from the realm of truth. Any justification of faith appears desperate and vain because a faith that would be rationally justified would not be faith anymore, but knowledge, scientific knowledge. This possibility appears precluded by the Nominalistic presupposition that confines science to observable empirical entities. Faith is thus doubly excluded from the realm of truth and victim of a “Catch-22” of sorts:

a/ It concerns, or so it seems, *objects* that “do not exist”, or are at least viewed with suspicion, by the modern Nominalistic outlook which holds that there are only observable material realities: God, gods, spirits, blessings and the like all fall under the Nominalistic razor;

b/ Faith seems devoid of any type of *certainty*, which also excludes it from any serious, i.e., scientific, consideration. Faith appears to be such an inferior type of knowledge that it hardly merits being called knowledge at all. It is thus excluded from any claim to truth.

This Nominalistic predicament sums up what one could call the tragedy of faith in the modern world: it does not form a reliable, truth-capable form of knowledge, and it deals with realities that our modern Nominalistic metaphysics deems as unreal and views, with obvious and contemptuous condescendence, as fairy tales. The Christian, Jewish or Muslim God would not be different in this respect from any Greek or Roman god or any other fictional character from a Disney movie.

We are thus faced with a question which Heidegger already confronted, according to Gadamer: how is a philosophically responsible account of faith possible in this Nominalistic age? I would say, somewhat ironically using the Nominalistic vocabulary of our time, that this is the “Million-dollar question”. How can one answer it or rise to its challenge?

I believe hermeneutics opens a few paths to address this question, and I would like to close by indicating some of these, knowing that a short paper can do no more:

1/ The first contribution of hermeneutics resides, I believe, in its challenge to the monopoly of scientific truth, which was indicated by the title of Gadamer’s main opus, *Truth and Method*. Even if faith was by no means a major subject in this book, it is clear, from a hermeneutical point of view, that the tragic situation of faith in the modern age proceeds from an absolutization of scientific truth, i.e., the conviction that there would be no truth outside of the conditions defined by modern Nominalism, which posits that every truth must be empirically verifiable and independent from the person that makes this experience. This is a notion of truth that Gadamer’s hermeneutics sought to unsettle by arguing, in an important way for an adequate understanding of faith, that there are indeed genuine experiences of truth that do not conform to the scientific, Nominalistic mold, but that can, nonetheless, be recognized and retrieved as legitimate experiences of truth. Gadamer sought to *rediscover* such experiences of truth in the world of education (See Jean [Grondin \(2022c\)](#)), for instance, where the truths we encounter are not objectifiable, verifiable truths but *formative truths* that shape and orient the individual. He also uncovered *bona fide* (I like this “English” expression that evokes faith) experiences of truth in the world of *art*, in moral judgment and common sense, in history and the humanities, in jurisprudence; indeed, in our entire linguistic relation to the world, experiences which, for the most part, resist objectivation. The truth that these experiences offer are not truths that help us to dominate the world, in the Nominalistic sense, but that enable us to participate in a realm of meaning that procures orientation and guidance. Gadamer did not reflect much on this topic, if at all, but my contention is that it is certainly possible to extend his analysis to the realm of religious faith if one wishes to escape its aporetic and tragic predicament in the Nominalistic age: faith can surely not be understood as an objectifiable truth that could be established independently from the person that experiences it. It is quite clear that it does not (or does not only) pertain to realities that would be ascertainable in the modern Nominalistic sense of verification, even if the *fruits* of the engagement of the believer can, in many ways, be verified. They nonetheless offer an experience of knowledge, direction

and wisdom which goes beyond the enclosure of what modern science defines as truth. So, in sum, my first answer would be to apply the insights, indeed the distinction, of “Truth and Method” to the experience of faith.

2/ The second major contribution of hermeneutics would be to challenge, to a certain degree, our faith as such in the Nominalistic age. I spoke earlier of the “conviction” that there would be no truth outside of the conditions defined by modern science. This conviction is that of Nominalism. What Nominalism forgets is that it, too, rests on a conviction, on assumptions and, thus, a form of faith. It is a conviction most of us share, but of which we have forgotten, that it is a faith and a view of the world that is perhaps not the only one that is possible. There are other possible understandings of Being. It is to Heidegger’s immense credit that he sought to explore other ways of understanding Being than those of Nominalism and modern science, focused on *Vorhandenheit*, which led to the hegemony of technological thinking and nihilism. What if this nihilism were the consequence not of metaphysics as such, but of a specific Nominalistic metaphysics, which does not exhaust our experience of Being and its possible understandings?

In this regard, I was always impressed by Gadamer’s contention that there was an intellectual arrogance or *hubris* in the claim that our epoch would be one of sheer nihilism because it would be one in which there would be no binding truths anymore. Is that really true, asks Gadamer? When one claims that there are no binding truths anymore, one presupposes the type of foundation that is privileged by Nominalism and modern science, which only accepts truths that are ascertained deductively or that can be verified independently from the observer. Are those the truths we live by, asks Gadamer? This is an argument Gadamer made, for instance, in a letter of 1 June 1982 to Richard Bernstein, which was published in 1983 (See [Bernstein 1983](#)). Faith was not Gadamer’s main topic when he made this argument, but I believe his intuition can be applied to the type of foundation faith offers¹⁷. When we have faith in someone, a friend, a parent or a grandparent, for instance, does this faith have to be established deductively to be recognized as nothing but a mere opinion or a whim? It is, on the contrary, the very solid basis and common ground of all that we do and are. There are thus other types of *foundations* than those promoted by natural science and technology (the so-called STEM).

3/ Finally, hermeneutics can help us rediscover an understanding of Being to which Nominalism was a reaction and the counterproposal. The Nominalistic notion that there are no essences, only individual, contingent beings, with no inherent purpose, understood itself in opposition to what could be called a Platonic understanding of Being which is easily derided as the view that there would be ideal entities “floating” somewhere in an invisible spiritual realm. Essences have had a bad reputation ever since Nominalism became the leading creed of our worldview. What if something of the Platonic understanding of Being could be rescued from its Nominalistic caricature? For a Platonic understanding, the being that truly merits the name of being is not only the individual material thing since this individual partakes in an order that shines through in the world and which can be contemplated. This essential being also appears to have the rare quality of permanence since it goes beyond the individual itself and evokes something like an order of Being, a certain coherence to the world. Incidentally, this order of the world is one that many types of science help us uncover and, in many cases, presuppose, since it is always a certain order of the world itself that science wishes to reveal. It was also understood and recognized that this order had some beauty, finality and even intelligence to it which could not but spark our amazement. Where do this beauty, this finality, this order and intelligence come from? It is obvious that a Nominalistic understanding of Being has no credible answer to this question (except that it came about “randomly”; if this is not magical thinking, I do not know what is). It can only be answered forcefully from a Platonic and metaphysical perspective on Being.

It has always been my contention that hermeneutics can help us rediscover something of this Platonic, “essentialist” if one wants, understanding of Being. It is indeed striking that Gadamer ends the last section of *Truth and Method* by renewing the metaphysics of the

transcendentals and of the Beautiful that is a hallmark of the Platonic tradition. Gadamer—unlike Heidegger, it must be noted—clearly saw in it an alternative to Nominalism and its instrumental understanding of language (See Jean Grondin (2022a, 2022b)). What attracted Gadamer in this pre-Nominalistic doctrine was the notion that the Platonic tradition and the Middle Ages saw in the transcendentals, like the Beautiful, universal attributes of Being and not mere constructions of the human mind. These qualities would shine through Being, just as the Beautiful would shine through everything there is and even be that which shines the most (*to ekphanestaton*) in this world. Gadamer obviously thought that this was especially true of language (his main topic in the last part of *Truth and Method*), i.e., that language would somehow pertain to Being and give us a glimpse of its order. However, by renewing this Platonic tradition, Gadamer also revived the possibility of a metaphysics that pretends to sense something about the world order, thus helping us make sense of our lives, which is philosophy's traditional task. Hermeneutics can thus help us understand how something like faith is defensible in this Nominalistic age.

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Notes

- ¹ This text was presented as the first Blanchette-Kennedy Lecture in Philosophy and Religion at Boston College on 27 October 2022.
- ² In Gadamer's words, he felt "*die Unangemessenheit der traditionellen philosophischen Begriffe für das Verständnis des christlichen Glaubens*" (GW 3, 294–95 (GW refers henceforth to the standard edition of Gadamer's *Gesammelte Werke*, 10 volumes, Tübingen, Mohr Siebeck, 1985–1995)), "the inappropriateness of traditional philosophical concepts for the understanding of Christian faith".
- ³ See H.-G. Gadamer, GW 3, 298; *Heidegger's Ways*, SUNY Press, 1994, 155: "Now that we know more about Heidegger's first lectures and initial thought experiments (*Denkversuche*) of the early 1920s, it is clear that his critique of the official Roman Catholic theology of his time pushed him closer and closer to the question of how an appropriate interpretation of the Christian faith could be possible or, to put it in another way, how could one ward off the infiltration (*Überfremdung*) of the foreign Greek philosophy—which forms the foundation of both the Neo-Scholasticism of the twentieth century and the classical Scholasticism of the Middle Ages—into the Christian message? There was the inspiration he took from the young Luther; there was his admiring emulation of Augustinian thought and especially his engrossment in the eschatological mood fundamental (*Grundstimmung*) to St. Paul's Epistles. All of this led him to view metaphysics as a type of misunderstanding of the original temporality and historicity experienced in the Christian claim of faith". Gadamer saw in this Heidegger's "most profound driving force", "*der tiefste Antrieb in ihm*" (GW 3, 398): "so sah er sich vor die Lebensfrage gestellt, den Weg der Neuzeit zur Wissenschaft und zur Aufklärung mit christlicher Existenz verbinden zu lernen" (H.-G. Gadamer, *Hermeneutics Between History and Philosophy*, Bloomsbury Academic, 2019, 252, translates: "He, thus, found himself confronting the vital question of learning how to connect the modern way toward science and enlightenment with Christian existence. This was obviously the deepest concern for him.")
- ⁴ Just as Nominalism took on many forms in the Middle Ages, there are also many forms of Nominalism in Contemporary Philosophy. For an almost dizzying overview on the question of Nominalism in Contemporary Philosophy, one can consult the entry "Nominalism in Metaphysics" by Gonzalo Rodriguez-Pereyra (n.d.) in the online Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/nominalism-metaphysics/#Uni>, accessed on 25 October 2022). On the classical forms of Nominalism, see Paqué (1970) (with a preface by Heidegger). See also the essay collection of modern and medieval authors by Panaccio (2012) and the studies of Panaccio (2020, 1987). See also de Gandillac (1998). One also has to think of Hans Blumenberg, *Die Legitimität der Neuzeit*, Frankfurt a. M., Suhrkamp, 1966 (*The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, MIT Press, 1983). On the challenge of Nominalism for Heidegger, see the Chapter "Comprendre le défi du nominalisme" in Grondin, Jean, 2019, 45–59.
- ⁵ It was also Gadamer's view, who liked to mention the ground-breaking work of Anneliese Meier (1905–1971) who published the seminal five-volume work *Studien zur Naturphilosophie der Spätscholastik* (Rome, 1949–1958), of which Hans Blumenberg wrote an extensive review, "Die Vorbereitung der Neuzeit", in *Philosophische Rundschau* 9 (1961), 81–132, a journal published by Gadamer (see in English: Sargent 1982). Gadamer also referred to the work of the Medieval scholar André de Muralt (GW 8, 402; GW 10, 254). In his more recent work, Jürgen Habermas also sees in Nominalism one of the main presuppositions of Modernity. See the

Chapter “Wilhelm von Ockham: Das doppelte Gesicht der nominalistischen Revolution” in his *Auch eine Geschichte der Philosophie*, Band 1, Berlin, Suhrkamp, 2019, 805–851.

⁶ On this notion of an order of Being in the Middle Ages, see Blanchette (1992, 2011). See in the same volume the study by Goddu (n.d., pp. 213–33).

⁷ It was also the conviction of Hans Krämer, *Integrative Ethik*, Frankfurt a. M., Suhrkamp, 1992: “Die Neuzeit ist definierbar als die Geschichte des Nominalismus und seiner Vermeidungsversuche” (“Modernity can be defined as the history of Nominalism and the attempts to overcome it”).

⁸ See H.-G. Gadamer, GW 3, 238; *Heidegger’s Ways*, 81, modified translation: “If Heidegger understood his own endeavor as a preparation for posing the question of Being anew, then this assumed that the traditional metaphysics, since its beginning with Aristotle, had lost all explicit awareness of the questionableness of the sense of Being. This was a challenge to the self-understanding of a metaphysics which would not recognize itself in its own consequences: in the radical nominalism of the modern age, and in the transformation of the modern concept of science into an all-embracing technology. It was the main concern (*das Hauptanliegen*) of *Sein und Zeit* to urge just such a recognition by metaphysics and its later formations”.

⁹ For this translation, see Cerbone (2021b). In *Being and Time* (§ 61, original German pagination, p. 304), Heidegger tellingly speaks of the *Vorherrschaft des verfallenden Seinsverständnisses (Sein als Vorhandenheit)*, of the “domination of the ‘falling’ understanding of Being (*Being as Vorhandenheit*)” which can prevent his readers from understanding the ontological meaning of *Dasein* and of temporality itself (to which § 61 aims to gain access). Heidegger clearly sees here in the prevailing (*Vorherrschaft*) and derivative (*verfallenden*) understanding of Being as mere subsistence (*Vorhandenheit*) one of the major impediments his reawakening of the question of Being aims to overcome. One can argue that this prevailing and derivative understanding of Being is that of Nominalism.

¹⁰ Heidegger (1954, p. 30): “Sobald das Unverborgene nicht einmal mehr als Gegenstand, sondern ausschließlich als Bestand den Menschen angeht und der Mensch innerhalb des Gegenstandslosen nur noch Besteller des Bestandes ist,—geht der Mensch am äußersten Rand des Absturzes, dorthin nämlich, wo er selber nur noch als Bestand genommen werden soll”. Translated in Heidegger (1977, 308): “As soon as what is unconcealed no longer concern man even as object, but exclusively as standing-reserve (*Bestand*), and man in the midst of objectlessness is nothing but the orderer of the standing-reserve, then he comes to the brink of a precipitous fall, that is, he comes to the point where he himself will have to be taken as standing-reserve”.

¹¹ See also Blanchette (1999, pp. 3–19), see especially p. 4: “We could say that Heidegger’s deconstruction of metaphysics was a deconstruction of modern metaphysics or ontology and not of the more ancient science of being as being”. Oliva Blanchette rightly saw that in understanding “the metaphysical tradition as a homogeneous whole running from Plato to Hegel”, Heidegger was “in keeping with Nietzsche’s view of Western Philosophy” (p. 13).

¹² GW 3, 411 sums up Gadamer’s basic conviction: “Nun scheint mir, er [Heidegger] hätte bei Platon mehr finden können”. See also the *last* sentence of his *Heraklit-Studien* (GW 7, 82): “Aber hat nicht auch Heidegger recht, wenn er hinter die Metaphysik zurückfragend Heraklit entdeckt, in dem alles noch ineinanderspielt? Hätte er nicht auch Platos Dialektik entdecken können, in der das Spiel dieses Gedankens weitergespielt wird”. In other words, Heidegger could have recognized his doctrine of *Aletheia* with its interplay of revealing and concealedness not only in Heraclitus, but also in Plato’s dialectics.

¹³ On this, Grondin, Jean, “Gerhard Krüger et Heidegger. Pour une autre histoire de la métaphysique” in Grondin (2019, pp. 185–210).

¹⁴ On the other possible contributions of Gadamer in this regard, see Lawrence (2021, pp. 242–81).

¹⁵ See Taylor (2007, p. 25): “One way to put the question that I want to answer here is this: why was it virtually impossible not to believe in God in, say, 1500 in our Western society, while in 2000 many of us find this not only easy, but even inescapable”.

¹⁶ *A Secular Age*, p. 3.

¹⁷ This argument regarding faith was made in Jean Grondin (2010).

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