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# Cosmology and Meontology: Continental Philosophy and Saint Paul

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## Abstract

The philosophical turn to the letters of Saint Paul in the 1990s can also be read as a critical assessment of the concept of *κόσμος*, especially in the philosophical sense of order. In this article, it is shown that especially the so-called “meontological passages” to which philosophers such as Heidegger, Agamben, Badiou and Taubes equally turn, can be read in terms of such a critical assessment. The article opens with exploring the stakes of present-day philosophical interpretations of Saint Paul, namely to move beyond onto-theology towards meontology. Subsequently, it is argued why the meontological emphasis of these interpretations are neither crypto-Marcionite nor nihilistic. Finally, an in-depth reading of two meontological passages is offered showing how an interpretation organized around the concepts of *κατάργησις* and *χρησις* indeed lives up to the stakes of the present-day philosophical interest in Paul’s letters.

## Keywords

letters of Saint Paul – meontology – cosmology – use – inactivation

## 1 Introduction

Since the 1990s, several philosophers have engaged with the letters of Saint Paul.<sup>1</sup> Not so much for religious reasons and not so much because they share Paul's faith.<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, they do share one concern, namely whether a new legacy of these letters might be possible, culturally, socio-politically and philosophically, in which they have something to say beyond that which was so profoundly criticized by Nietzsche.

This turn to Paul is a re-turn to texts that have been part and parcel of the Western mindset for many centuries. Such a return and rereading, aiming to disclose a new legacy of texts that have been interpreted innumerable times, is always doubly motivated. To capture this double motivation, let us consider two quotations. The first one is from *England, England*, a novel by Julian Barnes. The female protagonist, Martha, visits the church of St Aldwyn in search of what she calls "a capacity of seriousness [of life]" and which she hopes to find "among the remnants of a greater, discarded system of salvation." When Dr. Max suggests that she perhaps "decided to seek God as a way of avoiding anti-depressants," she responds:

No, not that. You misunderstand. I'm not in a church because of God. One of the problems is that the words, the serious words, have been used up over the centuries by people like those rectors and vicars listed on the wall. The words don't seem to fit the thoughts nowadays.<sup>3</sup>

Martha discerns a tension between words that used to be vibrant, telling, making a claim on people's lives *and* the process of linguistic and cultural wear and tear: in the course of time, the words that were once alive are used up; they lose their appeal, their capacity to speak and, in the end, no longer "seem to fit the thoughts nowadays." This risk of using up – itself already a Pauline theme to which I will return towards the end of this article – is intrinsic to all

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1 I have taken up the question of meontology in Gert-Jan van der Heiden, *Saint Paul and Contemporary European Philosophy: The Outcast and the Spirit* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2023), esp. chap. 4. This essay offers an important continuation of the argument set out in this monograph and in this chapter.

2 Alain Badiou, one of the protagonists in the story of this turn to Paul, cannot help himself and repeats several times in his relatively thin book that he considers the resurrection of Christ to be a fable, see *Saint Paul: The Foundation of Universalism*, trans. Ray Brassier (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), e.g., 4, 58, 108.

3 Julian Barnes, *England, England* (New York: Vintage International, 2000), 242–43.

disclosive language that says something new. The search for a new legacy is always amidst the remnants of one that has lost its capacity to give meaning.

The effect, however, of words that are used up and traditions that lose their way, is counteracted by the other drive that motivates the return to significant texts. Heidegger captures this drive when insisting on the capacity of the poetic or philosophical word to say and to speak:

The poetry of a poet or the treatise of a thinker stands within its own proper unique word. It compels us to perceive this word again and again as if we were hearing it for the first time. These first fruits of the word transpose us in every case to a new shore.<sup>4</sup>

The expression “the first fruits of the word,” in German: *die Erstlinge des Wortes*, is also Pauline and refers to τὴν ἀπαρχὴν τοῦ πνεύματος, “the first fruits of the spirit” (Rom. 8:23). Here, this expression suggests that even when brought to ruins or fully used up, such poetic or thoughtful words retain a capacity to speak anew if one is capable of hearing them as if for the first time.

The turn to Paul, it seems to me, is marked by this double hermeneutical attunement: the awareness of living among remnants and the trust that a poetic and philosophical word nevertheless retains its capacity to speak. In this context, Badiou’s characterization of Paul as a “poet-thinker” gains a deepened, hermeneutical sense.<sup>5</sup>

If one were to characterize the philosophical turn to Paul from the point of view of content, the first theme that might come to mind is that of the end of history. It is quite obvious that the contemporary thesis concerning the end of history plays a role at the background of the turn to Paul in the 1990s. As Critchley, for instance, summarizes: “The return to Paul is motivated by political disappointment,” and is marked by “the demand for a new figure of activism” in the context of a liberal democracy that – at least at the time – seemed to have no enemies or alternatives left after the fall of the Berlin wall in 1989.<sup>6</sup>

Yet, if one is to phrase this thesis in genuinely Pauline terms, it would have to concern the end of the κόσμος rather than the end of history. Moreover, in addition to the social-political significance of “world,” κόσμος also brings into

4 Martin Heidegger, *Parmenides*, GA 54 (Frankfurt: Klostermann, 1982), 18. Martin Heidegger, *Parmenides*, trans. Richard Rojcewicz and André Schuwer (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1992), 12. Translation slightly altered.

5 Badiou, *Saint Paul*, 2.

6 Simon Critchley, *The Faith of the Faithless: Experiments in Political Theology* (London: Verso, 2012), 157. See also Van der Heiden, *Saint Paul and Contemporary European Philosophy*, 4–5.

play a cosmological and ontological sense of world. Paul's discussion of the end of the world provides a remarkable point of view when compared to his ancient philosophical contemporaries. In ancient thought, the orders of universe, city and human soul are marked by a particular *mimetic* relation.<sup>7</sup> The order of the κόσμος should guide humans in both the ethical task of taking care of their soul and the political task of taking care of their polis. Yet, with respect to this mimetic paradigm, Paul's letters, by emphasizing the passing away of the present order of the world, seem to insist on another possibility. They raise a disturbing and disquieting question, namely *what if this order is in a crisis?* What if this order excludes? What if it produces exceptions and outcasts that, because they are not awarded a place in the order, cannot thrive or flourish but are rather reduced to bare existence? Such concerns with respect to the notion of the κόσμος and its implied ethics and politics are emphasized in the philosophical turn to Paul. How to be and how to live as a human being in such a world? Compared to the ancient, Platonic paradigm, a particular non-mimetic attitude seems to speak from Paul's letters when he suggests: "Do not conform to the way of the world, but be transformed" (Rom. 12:2).

This suggestion interrupts the ancient model of order and its accompanying ethos imitating and complying to this order. Yet, at the same time, both thoughts – the ontological one concerning the imminent end of the world and the ethical call for non-conformism – belong together intrinsically. These two, the ontological and the ethical, still somehow concur. Moreover, these two thoughts might explain why some of Paul's words may still speak to thought today. When looking at the starry sky above us, we do not see the same as what Aristotle saw: eternal and perfect planetary orbits pointing to – or rather striving and longing for – an unmoved mover. We, moderns, rather see things that are being born and that die again. The starry sky filled with giants whose existence plays out on a completely different time-scale than our own is thus, despite this difference in scale, marked by a similar play of birth and death, of beginning and ending – and nowadays we are forced to a similar awareness concerning our own planet, which is no longer simply the solid background providing us with the means to live. If there is indeed a concurrence between cosmology and ethics, between the starry sky above us and the moral law within us, it must concern this sense of a beginning and this sense of an ending that we discern in the order of what is – and it must concern the sense of a

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7 See, e.g., Hans-Georg Gadamer, "Kunst und Nachahmung," in *Ästhetik und Poetik 1: Kunst als Aussage*, GW 8 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1990), 25–36, at 34–35.

crisis at the heart of what we thought to be irrevocably stable and permanent.<sup>8</sup> Such are, in a very general sense, the philosophical stakes guiding us when returning to and rereading Paul, which thus transgress the limits of the merely political.

## 2 Marcion's Heretical Heritage

Although the term “meontology” has not yet been mentioned, I have already begun to speak about it, in the form of the end of the world. One way to capture the new legacy of Paul and its difference with the old one, is by bringing out two different ways of understanding what is at stake under the heading of “meontology.”

Critchley devotes the fourth chapter of *The Faith of the Faithless* to the turn to Paul. When discussing Heidegger, Badiou and Agamben, he notes that their reading of Paul is rather deeply invested in what one might call “meontological passages,” that is, passages that speak about and thus offer a λόγος of τὰ μὴ ὄντα, the non-beings, the becoming nothing of things or the nothingness of the world.<sup>9</sup> For Critchley, the preference for these passages displayed by Heidegger, Badiou and Agamben alike, is symptomatic of their Marcionism or “crypto-Marcionism.”<sup>10</sup> Marcion of Sinope, the first interpreter of Paul from the first century, reads the apostle's letters in a particular Gnostic vein. Paul's view of the world would be marked by a profound ontological dualism. In Marcion, this means that the god of creation – which means for him: the god of all that is evil – is separated from the god who counts as the father of Christ. Hence, for him, dualism is also a way to exclude Judaism from Christianity, giving a strong antisemitic impetus to his version of Christianity.

Critchley's reference to Marcion is not his own. It goes back to Taubes who in *The Political Theology of Paul* argues how the Paul appearing in Marcion's Gnosticism and its intrinsic antisemitism has determined a whole *Wirkungsgeschichte*, effective history, that tends to depend more on a particular interpretation of Paul than on the Pauline text itself.<sup>11</sup> Taubes points out how this Marcionism affected late 19th and early 20th century theology,

8 See Dennis J. Schmidt, “Thank Goodness for the Atmosphere: Reflections on the Starry Sky and the Moral Law,” *Research in Phenomenology* 50, no. 3 (2020): 370–85.

9 See esp. Critchley, *The Faith of the Faithless*, 177–83.

10 Critchley, *The Faith of the Faithless*, 195–202.

11 Jacob Taubes, *The Political Theology of Paul*, trans. Dana Hollander, ed. Aleida Assmann and Jan Assmann (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004).

leaving especially liberal protestant theology basically intellectually defenseless against the uprising antisemitism in Germany – a characteristic and disturbing example in this respect is the theologian Von Harnack, who published a book on Marcion and who explicitly calls the Judaic books included in the Christian bible a *Lähmung*, a paralysis, of the Christian message.<sup>12</sup>

According to Taubes, not only theology, but also philosophy is marked by this Marcionism. Carl Schmitt is an exemplary case. Schmitt's project of a political theology, as Taubes argues, depends on a Marcionite Paul: "[Schmitt] did not take over a text but a tradition."<sup>13</sup> Taubes's own political theology is an attempt to return to the text and correct the Marcionite legacy looming in Schmitt. Taubes, moreover, does not limit his analysis to Schmitt. He mentions a whole range of authors in whose work he discerns a definite Marcionite legacy. One of them is Nietzsche. Nietzsche's reading of Paul remains dualist with strongly Gnostic traits. The devaluation of the world in which we live here and now, and for which Marcion of Sinope compensates by introducing in a more or less Platonic-Gnostic flavor, the otherworldly component characteristic of dualism, is transfigured in Nietzsche's eyes into a full-fledged nihilism in which everything that actually is, is devalued. One characteristic quotation from *The Antichrist* underlines this nihilism: "When the emphasis of life is put on the 'beyond' rather than on life itself – when it is put on nothingness –, then the emphasis has been completely removed from life."<sup>14</sup>

The correspondence between Marcion's Gnostic dualism and the modern Nietzschean interpretation of Pauline thought as nihilistic is important to note here. There is a striking comment of Ward Blanton on Nietzsche's reading of Paul. Nietzsche, so Blanton comments, "failed radically to transform – rather than simply to excoriate or lament – the ongoing cultural and political functions of the Pauline legacy."<sup>15</sup> It is the Marcionite dimension that obstructs a true reinterpretation and a return to the Pauline text. This allows us to understand what Critchley's claim actually amounts to when he says that the Paul of Heidegger, Badiou and Agamben is also crypto-Marcionite. For Critchley, the present-day readings offer yet another turn and another return of the

12 Taubes, *The Political Theology of Paul*, 60–61. Note that for Critchley, the "crypto-Marcionism" of present-day readers is a "crypto-Harnackianism," see *The Faith of the Faithless*, 169, 175.

13 Taubes, *The Political Theology of Paul*, 51.

14 Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ, Ecce Homo, Twilight of the Idols, and Other Writings*, trans. Judith Norman, ed. Aaron Ridley and Judith Norman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 39 [= §43].

15 Ward Blanton, *A Materialism for the Masses: Saint Paul and the Philosophy of Undying Life* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014), 3–4.

Marcionite tradition, failing to transform the Pauline legacy – incapable of hearing its words as for the first time, only repeating what a certain tradition prescribes and only offering a form of nihilism.<sup>16</sup>

At this point, it seems to me Critchley is treating the return to Paul unfairly. However, in order to offer an alternative to his claim, we should deal straightforwardly with what is right in Critchley's analysis, namely that readers today are indeed interested in the meontological passages that we find in Paul's letters. Yet, the question is whether meontology and nihilism can be equated.

### 3 Beyond Ontological Dualism

In order to elucidate why this is a genuine question, why meontology might not be nihilistic, I want to provide an argument concerning the recent history of continental thought leading up to the 1990s and more in particular the appreciation of ancient philosophy in this period. In my view, this development helped to create a context in which also Paul, a representative of the ancient world, could subsequently be approached differently. This historical development actually goes at the heart of the ancient role and place of the dualism of which I just spoke.

In the second half of the previous century, Pierre Hadot and Michel Foucault started to insist on a different reading of ancient philosophy. In Hadot's formulation, ancient philosophy is not concerned with the question of knowledge as such but rather with that of the art of living. Ancient philosophy is to be understood as a way of life. Foucault, in turn, emphasizes in his last lecture courses the importance of the question of the care of the soul and the self as the basic question of ancient philosophy. While for Hadot probably the Stoics were the culmination point of this form of ancient thought, Foucault, especially in his lectures on the ancient Greek practice of *παρρησία*, seems to embrace the ancient Cynics and their mode of living, their cosmopolitanism, for whom not the conventions or *νομοί* of the *πόλις* but rather the natural circumstances of the *κόσμος* are their true habitat. These interpretations thus emphasize that ancient thought is first motivated by ethical and, by extension, political concerns and perhaps less by an ontological quest for a sphere of permanence.

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16 For the specific sense of nihilism and Critchley's identification of meontology and nihilism, see Critchley, *The Faith of the Faithless*, 177–78, 187. Even Badiou, whose account closely approaches a form of dualism and who in a way seems to regret the loss of the militancy in Paul and still at work in Marcion's heretic heritage, insists that his Pauline dualism is not ontological but militant in nature, see Badiou, *Saint Paul*, 34–36.

Even Platonism is not only concerned with dualism. *The Courage of Truth* offers a striking summary of what is at stake in this rereading:

Maybe [...] it could be said that with Platonism, and through Platonism, Greek philosophy since Socrates basically posed the question of the other world (*l'autre monde*). But, starting with Socrates, or from the Socratic model [...] it also posed another question. Not the question of the other world, but that of an other life (*vie autre*). It seems to me that the other world and other life have basically been the two great themes, the two great forms, the great limits within which Western philosophy has constantly developed.<sup>17</sup>

Hence, not one, but two themes – an ontological and an ethical one – and these two themes, as we see in Foucault's linguistic expressions, are concerned with two different forms of alterity or otherness, captured by the basic difference between *l'autre monde* and *une vie autre* – and please take note of the place of the adjective *autre* in relation to the noun: before and after. For Foucault, this distinction takes on the form of a distinction between the ontological or cosmological question that inspired a particular ancient dualism, and the ethical question that is concerned with an other life, here and now, in this world. The difference to which Foucault draws our attention is important, because it shows that one can read ancient thought in a different key, not determined by dualism or ontotheology. Moreover, playing with the place of the adjective *autre*, Foucault subsequently distinguishes two different relations of world and life, of ontology and ethics. First, the other world of dualism corresponds to another life lived completely in light of the primacy of this other world. In this connection between other world and other life, we recognize the connection of ontology and ethics to which Nietzsche points in Platonism and Christianity. Yet, the ethical motive of a *vie autre* can also be leading, giving rise to another conception of the world, of the κόσμος. The Cynics are Foucault's true heroes because for them this other life is so important that it inspires them *not* to transgressing this world to the other world of dualism but rather to giving shape to an other world, *un monde autre*, that is to say, in Foucault's understanding, to the political and social transformation of *this* world in which we

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17 Michel Foucault, *The Courage of Truth (The Government of Self and Others II): Lectures at the Collège de France 1983–1984*, trans. by Graham Burchell, ed. Frédéric Gros (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 245.



live here and now. Hence, *la vie autre* concerns a mode of living that does not aim to leave this world behind, but that rather aims to transform this world.<sup>18</sup>

Foucault's distinction between these "two great themes" of the other world and the other life can help us to understand why Paul can also be read differently. What if Paul cannot be reduced to the quest for another world with its accompanying life-negating ethics? What if his letters are not simply offering a dualism for the masses but rather display Stoic or Cynic motives concerning the art of living well? Would this not allow for another reading of the ethical and ontological themes in these letters as well?<sup>19</sup> Along the lines of such questions we may understand how and why this turn in the appreciation of ancient thought has paved the way for a new way of reading Paul in which meontology can be understood in another sense, different from nihilism.

#### 4 Meontological Passages

Let us now turn to two characteristically meontological passages and describe them in some detail in order to demonstrate how the above considerations exactly work out in a reinterpretation of Paul's letters. The first is from 1 Cor. 1 and the second from 1 Cor. 7. The first is more cosmologically oriented, whereas the second concerns a description of a mode of living.

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18 The duality of the notion of the world that Foucault discovers here, world in the sense of order and world in the sense of the social world reiterates a difference to which already Heidegger points in ancient thought, see Martin Heidegger, *Wegmarken*, GA 9 (Frankfurt: Klostermann, 1976), 144–45, and which Arendt carefully develops in her account of the double sense of the world in Augustine as the world of creation and the human world, see Hannah Arendt, *Love and Saint Augustine*, ed. Joanna Vecchiarelli Scott and Judith Chelius Stark (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1996), 66.

19 Foucault's portrayal seems to suffer from one important drawback. His approach tends to separate cosmology and ethics and thereby seems to allow only for a *political* change of the *socio-cultural* world in which we live here and now; this seems to be at odds with the ancient emphasis on *μίμησις*. Even the Cynics, I would say, base their mode and art of living in a cosmopolitan way on a mimetic relation between *κόσμος* and *ἡθός*. (One might say that if one truly wants to transpose such discussions to philosophy today, it is exactly the ontological or cosmological status of the globe or planet that should be imitated and followed in our mode of living.) At these points, Foucault's rich and excellent analyses might benefit from some present-day realist twists. Despite several hesitations that I have with respect to Badiou's work, his account of event and fidelity provide a clear example of how ontological concerns go hand in hand and offer the main background for new ethical considerations.

#### 4.1 *The τοῦ κόσμου-Formulas*

The passage from 1 Cor. 1 is discussed by Agamben, Badiou, Taubes and Heidegger alike. The letter as a whole is marked by a rhetorical chorus, repeating the formula τοῦ κόσμου, “of the cosmos” or “of the world.” The passage to which we turn first is marked by a buildup of these formulas culminating in a λόγος on non-beings:

But God chose what is foolish in the world [τὰ μωρὰ τοῦ κόσμου] to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world [τὰ ἀσθενῆ τοῦ κόσμου] to shame the strong; God chose what is low[born in the world; τὰ ἀγενῆ τοῦ κόσμου] and despised, things that are not [τὰ μὴ ὄντα], to reduce to nothing [καταργήσῃ] things that are [τὰ ὄντα]. (1 Cor. 1:27–28)

In this passage, the people belonging to the Corinthian community are identified as the people who are considered to be “foolish,” “weak,” “low(born),” “despised” in (the eyes of) the world.<sup>20</sup> Clearly, by this rhetoric, Paul assigns κόσμος or world an antagonistic role; and it plays this role throughout this letter. What is at stake in this tension with the world? Does the opposition between “God” and “world” not reflect a dualism? How else to account for this Pauline God who embraces non-being(s) at the expense of that which is? Does it indeed concern a form of nihilism or might a different meontology be at stake here? Let me address these questions in three steps.

(1) First, it is important to read the preference for non-beings in both an ontological and a socio-political key. A strict separation of the ethical and the cosmological is too modern to impose on this passage. Rather, comments concerning the place of humans in the socio-political world pass over without any discontinuity in a comment on non-beings. The expression “non-beings” of which the last sentence speaks, however, does not refer to the product of the imagination or of a certain fiction; it does not refer to something that simply does not exist. As the culminating sentence of the tension built up in the previous lines, the expression “non-beings,” τὰ μὴ ὄντα, rather refers to that which *is not assigned a place in the current order of the κόσμος*; it refers to that which does not belong to this order in both an ontologico-cosmological and

<sup>20</sup> See also the New Living Translation (NLT); τὰ ἀγενῆ (τοῦ κόσμου), the lowborn or ignoble (of the world), literally means “uncreated,” see George van Kooten, “Paul’s Stoic Onto-Theology and Ethics of Good, Evil and ‘Indifferents’: A Response to Anti-Metaphysical and Nihilistic Readings of Paul in Modern Philosophy,” in *Saint Paul and Philosophy: The Consonance of Ancient and Modern Thought*, ed. Gert-Jan van der Heiden, George van Kooten, and Antonio Cimino (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2017), 133–64; at 140.

a socio-ethico-political sense. Hence, the buildup of the tension with what is called κόσμος, is not concerned with privileging that which is merely nothing and that which simply does not exist at the expense of that which is, but is rather concerned with displaying and bringing into view that which is cast out or excluded from the order. The tension functions as an aletheic moment, something is drawn out of withdrawal.

Apparently, the non-beings concern what is excluded or cast out from the order. Hence, the logic pervading this passage is different from what Nietzsche proposes under the heading of nihilism. The Pauline gesture is not so much to embrace a particular fiction to devalue life here and now. By not simply affirming or embracing the order that is in place – both cosmological and socio-political – but by instead bringing into view that which is not granted a place in this order, the Pauline gesture is rather to show the particular crisis of this order. To capture the sense of this crisis, the cosmological dimension and the political dimension of this order need to be kept together. According to the classical metaphysical point of view, κόσμος is the order in which everything is awarded its own, proper and appropriate place so that it can be in a good way, so that it can flourish and strive towards its own, proper completion. To bring out the outcast under the heading of the non-being is therefore a gesture that problematizes this classical metaphysical point of view. The notion of κόσμος thus does not only represent a mode of living – living in accordance with “the way of the world” – but also a mode of being.

Hence, the divine partiality for non-beings heard in an ontological and cosmological key is part of a meontology that aims to offer an alternative to onto-theology. Badiou explicitly mentions this Heideggerian concept in his interpretation of this passage:

One must, in Paul’s logic, go so far as to say that *the Christ-event testifies that God is not the god of Being, is not Being*. Paul prescribes an anticipatory critique of what Heidegger calls onto-theology, wherein God is thought as supreme being, and hence as the measure for what being as such is capable of.<sup>21</sup>

Paul’s meontology enables a reinterpretation and recalibration of our conceptions of God, κόσμος, and being.

(2) Second, let us discuss in more detail the particular meaning of the term “meontology” if recalibrated in this way. Compared to the metaphysical God

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<sup>21</sup> Badiou, *Saint Paul*, 47.

as the culmination point of the order that the Greeks termed κόσμος, the Pauline God as proposed in 1 Cor. 1 is rather concerned with “reducing to nothing” the things that are. What is this reduction to nothing? Is this not a form of nihilism in which all that is, needs to be destroyed and in which the end of the world is proclaimed, as Paul seems to be doing a few chapters later, in chapter 7? Here, words are important. Let us briefly zoom in on the verb that translated as “to reduce to nothing”; namely καταργέω. For Agamben, this verb is of crucial importance, but especially in relation to his account of the law in Paul’s *Letter to the Romans*. It seems to me, however, that his examinations can also be applied to the meontological passage just quoted, where the same verb is used. Καταργέω does not mean “to destroy” – the English expression “to reduce to nothing” is perhaps ambiguous but nevertheless the sense of “to destroy” quickly comes to mind when hearing or reading it. Both Marion and Agamben insist that καταργέω should rather be translated as “to suspend” or “to inactivate.”<sup>22</sup> If καταργέω were the antonym of ποιέω, to make, as Agamben notes, it would indeed have meant “to destroy”; yet, it is rather the antonym of ἐνεργέω – to be operative, in act or at work – and hence means “to suspend,” “to inactivate,” or “to defer the operativity of” the order of this world.<sup>23</sup> The effect of κατάργησις is anything but destructive; rather its effect is that something is taken out of action because it doesn’t function properly anymore. With respect to the world we might say that its order is taken out of order because the world itself is out of order and out of joint. Hence, the logic of this passage is as follows. The non-beings as outcasts display the crisis, the non- or no-longer-functioning, of the order and therefore, their appearance motivates and necessitates the suspension or inactivation, κατάργησις, of this order. The world is not destroyed, but its order is in a crisis; it is out of joint because it does not offer everything its own, proper and appropriate place. Therefore, the world cannot simply keep on going according to its order.

At this point, consider the following comparison that may help us to position κατάργησις more clearly as an ontological term. Both Aristotle and Plato engaged with the problem of non-being when responding to the question of qualitative movement and of heterogeneity, respectively. The question of non-being is only a genuine philosophical question when under the heading of non-being we actually encounter a phenomenon that is not merely nothing or non-existent. To explain movement, Aristotle introduces the pair of

22 Jean-Luc Marion, *God without Being*, trans. Thomas A. Carlson (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2012), 256n74.

23 Giorgio Agamben, *The Time That Remains: A Commentary on the Letter to the Romans*, trans. Patricia Dailey (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005), 96.

δύναμις and ἐνέργεια; the notion of δύναμις allows him to account for forms of non-being that are not simply nothing. The newborn child cannot speak but is non-speaking – *in-fans* – in a different way than, say, a rock. Paul's understanding of non-being and of κατάργησις belongs to a similar field of philosophical problems as the concept as δύναμις. Yet, it is positioned slightly differently, as the example of the newborn child may illustrate. The newborn child can *not yet* speak but may activate this capacity after some time. To actualize this potential, however, the child needs to *undergo a change*. The child is passive in this transformation. Hence, only if the circumstances are favorable, the child is changed in such a way that they acquire the ability to speak. However, when circumstances are unfavorable, this potential will perish unactualized in the given reality. It is this squandering of possibilities that receives particular significance in Paul's ontology and illustrates the stakes of the notion of κατάργησις.

Agamben is the one who has best captured this element when speaking of the “exigency of the lost” and of “the ontological squandering that we bear within ourselves.”<sup>24</sup> The beings – or, rather, the non-beings – that are excluded from flourishing form a claim and a demand on the order that excludes them. Elsewhere, Agamben describes this squandering and exigency in terms of possibilities that are not actualized. There, he does so against the background of Leibniz's *Theodicy* and the famous image of the pyramid of all possible worlds. In a culmination point of the onto-theological paradigm, Leibniz portrays the demiurge as the God who returns again and again to the pyramid of all possible worlds to take delight in his choice for this one world to exist rather than any of the other possible worlds. In a moving passage, Agamben comments:

It is difficult to imagine something more pharisaic than this demiurge, who contemplates all uncreated possible worlds to take delight in his own single choice. For to do so, he must close his own ears to the incessant lamentation that, throughout the infinite chambers of this Baroque inferno of potentiality, arises from everything that could have been but was not, from everything that could have been otherwise but had to be sacrificed for the present world to be as it is.<sup>25</sup>

24 Agamben, *The Time That Remains*, 40.

25 Giorgio Agamben, *Potentialities: Collected Essays in Philosophy*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), 266. It is difficult not to recognize in the expression “the present world,” the Pauline notion of the present figure of this world, τὸ σχῆμα τοῦ κόσμου τούτου.

The suspension of this order does not open an empty space of mere non-being. Rather, it discloses a *well-defined space of possibilities*, namely the possibilities that have not been granted to what exists. As an unfavorable fate can deny the child the ability to speak or even the gift of life itself as in stillborn children, actuality is marked by possibilities that are not granted to what is. These precluded possibilities are the possibilities of non-beings that are not merely nothing and from which a demand can be heard to be granted the possibilities to flourish.<sup>26</sup> Paul's depiction of the members of the community in Corinth as insignificant, foolish, weak, and despised, refers to possibilities that have not been granted to these people in the current order of the world; it refers to what stays behind with respect to those that flourish and tingle with great power and dazzling wealth.

(3) Third. In Rom. 4:17, Paul also uses the expression τὰ μὴ ὄντα: "God [...] who gives life to the dead [ζωοποιούντος] and calls non-beings as beings [or: calls non-beings into existence] [καλοῦντος τὰ μὴ ὄντα ὡς ὄντα]." The expression τὰ μὴ ὄντα is used in combination with the quickening, life-endowing and creative power of the spirit, which is capable of transforming the mode of being of non-beings. Unlike Leibniz's demiurge who returns to the pyramid of possible worlds to enjoy the scene and his own choice, the divine call, as Paul understands it, does not affirm or accept the order of reality but rather re-calls it. If we want to phrase it in a vocabulary that I borrow from Arendt's reading of Augustine, we might say that the divine call recalls the first word of creation, the word in the beginning, *in principio*.<sup>27</sup> Differently put, it calls non-beings into existence, granting them a place *despite* the order of the world established *in principio*. This re-calling therefore rather concerns an *initium*, a renewal that revivifies and quickens that which counts for nothing or that which cannot flourish in the order that is – it grants possibilities that are withheld in the order. The privileged Pauline expression for this possibility released by *κατάργησης* and fulfilled in this revivifying call is "the new creation." Hence, this expression does not point to another world replacing the old one, but rather to another, pneumatic mode of being of the world. It is the difference between the creation in the beginning, *in principio*, and the new creation, that is, the *initium*, the newness by which an order is being transformed. It seems to me that this distinction between *in principio* and *initium* is simply there to be found in Paul and concerns the very heart of what philosophy today is discovering in his

26 Note how Agamben changes here the Leibnizian principle that all that is possible demands to exist into the demand of all that exists to have possibilities for its existence, see Agamben, *The Time That Remains*, 39.

27 Arendt, *Love and Saint Augustine*, 55.

letters.<sup>28</sup> *Κατάργησις* opens up the space for the *potentiality-of-being-otherwise*, of being revived, quickened, of being new.

#### 4.2 *The ὡς μὴ-Formulas*

After having shown how philosophy discovers in Paul's interrogation of the cosmos not a dualism, but another ontological concern, namely one which views the world in light of unheard, profoundly new possibilities, the question arises what this means for ethics and ethical concerns regarding the mode of living. If there is indeed a concurrence between the ontological and the ethical, how can this Pauline version of the difference between *in principio* and *initium*, between a first calling and a re-calling, between an order and its suspension or *κατάργησις* opening the space for its renewal and revivification, be translated into what one might call an *ethos* or mode of living?

To answer this question, I want to look at a passage from 1 Cor. 7, also meontological and also discussed extensively by contemporary philosophical readers. This passage ends with the famous proclamation of the passing away of this form of the world, and it begins with the statement that the time that remains is only short. In between, we encounter a recommendation of how to live. The specificity of this mode of living is mirrored in the rhetoric Paul uses here: this ethos or ethics is articulated in or with an "as not"-chorus: ὡς μὴ, describing the mode of living in the time that remains, concurring with the passing away of the world. It reads as follows:

those having wives may be as not [ὡς μὴ] having, and those weeping as not [ὡς μὴ] weeping, and those rejoicing as not [ὡς μὴ] rejoicing, and those buying as not [ὡς μὴ] possessing, and those using the world as not [ὡς μὴ] using it up. For passing away is the figure [or: the mode of being] of this world. (1 Cor. 7:29–31)<sup>29</sup>

In the immediate context of this passage, Paul differentiates between the worldly calling and what Agamben calls the "*messianic vocation*," which re-calls the worldly one.<sup>30</sup> The "as not"-chorus basically demonstrates how the

28 Hence, newness is not to be understood in a dualist, Marcionist sense, but concerns the specific sense of the *initium*. It seems to me that this is missed by Critchley in his identification of the sense of newness in both Badiou and Heidegger with a crypto-Marcionist motive, see Critchley, *The Faith of the Faithless*, 200–1. As I explain elsewhere, what is at stake here is not a dualism but a dialectic necessitated by the sense of the outcast, see Van der Heiden, *Saint Paul and Contemporary European Philosophy*, 185–96.

29 Translation taken from Agamben, *The Time That Remains*, 23.

30 Agamben, *The Time That Remains*, 23.

relation between these two callings or vocations works out. The second calling is not simply another calling, replacing the first, worldly calling. Rather, the second call is placed in a particular tension with the first one – the second call does not substitute or destroy the first one. Hence, it neither calls to another, fictional world nor establishes any vocations cultivating a specific hostility to life here and now.<sup>31</sup>

What does this mean? How to make sense of the “not” of the “as not”? It has been suggested that this “as not”-chorus is basically Stoic. The “as not” would then express indifference, like the Stoic ἀδιάφορα. With respect to what we cannot change in life, we should practice indifference. I am not convinced of such a reading: the conclusion of the passage, concerning the end of the world, would extend the Stoic ἀδιάφορα to all that is and result in a form of quietism; as Taubes writes: “under this time pressure, if tomorrow the whole palaver, the entire swindle were going to be over – in that case there’s no point in any revolution!”<sup>32</sup> It seems to me, however, that the ethos expressed by the “as not”-formulas is rather marked *differently* by this passage’s sense of an ending. Rather than indifference, the “as not”-formulas prescribe a mode of living resonating with and participating in the passing away of the present order of the world.

To capture what it means to enact a calling in this strange mode of the “as not,” let us first suggest what it means to enact one’s calling in the worldly mode. To live in conformation to the worldly order is to *identify* oneself with this first vocation, that is, to be totally wrapped up or absorbed in the place that this order assigns as one’s own, proper and appropriate place. Thus, the ontological sense of κόσμος as order is reflected in and concurs with a particular ethics of conformation to this order. By contrast, to live in the mode of “as not,” one lives one’s vocations in such a way that one experiences oneself as someone who is more or different than the identifications the worldly order offers. Hence, to live thusly is to place oneself in the space of possibilities of being and living differently than the mode and the way of the world prescribes, that is to

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31 Rather, the “as not”-chorus concerns, to use Heidegger’s terminology, the enactment, *Vollzug*, of this call. “As not” shows this enactment to belong to the tension between a calling and its re-calling. To capture this enigmatic tension, Heidegger suggests that in this enactment of the “as not,” one’s life “remains unchanged, and yet it is radically changed.” Martin Heidegger, *The Phenomenology of Religious Life*, trans. Matthias Fritsch and Jennifer Anna Gosetti-Ferencei (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2010), 85.

32 Taubes, *The Political Theology of Paul*, 54.



say, to place oneself in and to live in accordance with the space opened up by *κατάργησις*.<sup>33</sup>

At this point, let us grant the nihilists one more chance to speak up. If the second vocation is not a new vocation and does not call for anything, does that not mean this second calling or recalling introduces a crypto-nihilism? If it only revokes the vocations that exist and that orient us in the world, does such a revocation not result in disorientation in life? What is the life that remains in this time that remains?

With respect to these questions, Agamben's reading of Paul offers a unique answer by his focus on the notions of *χρήσις* and *χράομαι*, use and to use, which are used in the culmination of the "as not"-chorus:<sup>34</sup> using the world as not [ὡς μὴ] using it up or as not abusing it. Again, words matter and translations matter. The translation of *chrēsis* as "use" is misleading if we understand "use" merely as "instrumental use" and the user as the one who is in charge of, masters, controls or owns the used.<sup>35</sup> The Greek notion of *χρήσις* rather has the sense that resounds in the German *Umgang*, translated in English as having dealings with or associations with and which concerns in the first place a to-and-fro movement between beings, between the user and the used.<sup>36</sup> That is to say, *χρήσις* expresses that in our dealings with beings, whether things, living creatures or other humans, we are not simply in charge, but are rather affected by these beings and the particular possibilities of association they offer. Hence, rather than being a user in control or in the master-position, the user in the sense of the Greek *χρήσις* is the one who receives their sense of self from the play or association with these beings.<sup>37</sup> This means in particular that *χρήσις* offers another paradigm than that of the order of the *κόσμος*. In this order everything has its own, proper and appropriate place, thus also prescribing the preferred interaction between beings. The notion of use, however,

33 In this context, Heidegger speaks about a new sense granted by the "as" of the "as not": "these relations to the surrounding world receive their sense not out of the formal significance they indicate; rather the reverse, the relation and the sense of lived significance are determined out of the original enactment." Heidegger, *The Phenomenology of Religious Life*, 84–85.

34 Note that Agamben's *Homo Sacer*-series culminates in the concept of use, as the title of the last volume of this series indicates: Giorgio Agamben, *The Use of Bodies*, trans. Adam Kotsko (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2015). Interestingly, though, Agamben first develops this concept in his reading of Paul and, more precisely, of the passage discussed here.

35 Cf. Socrates' description of the soul as user of the body, in which the user is the one who rules, Plato, *Alcibiades I* 129d–130b.

36 See, e.g., Martin Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit* (Tübingen, Niemeyer, 2001), §15.

37 Agamben, *The Use of Bodies*, 24–30.

frees from these fixed positions. In use, relations and dealings with beings do not follow the form and order carved out by the way of the world, but rather discover specific, singular ways of being together, of being-in-common. The suspension of the way of the world, enacted in the mode of “as not,” thus opens up the space of use.

What Agamben might have missed in his reading – because he so strongly emphasizes the alternative that *χρησις* offers to mastery or ownership – is that this new realm of *χρησις* is not paradise. A particular tension remains, as the rhetorical crescendo of the *ὡς μὴ*-formulas indicates: “those using [*χρώμενοι*] the world as not [*ὡς μὴ*] abusing [*καταχρώμενοι*] it” (1 Cor. 7:31). Use is not contrasted with non-use and use is also not contrasted with the fixed order of the world. Use rather concerns our mode of dealing with the world; yet, in this mode of dealing with the world, *χρώμενοι* is opposed to or placed in a tension with *καταχρώμενοι*. The Greek prefix *κατά-* denotes reversal, opposition or degeneration. Hence, use is placed in tension with abusing, misusing, using up or using excessively – and mastery, control, possession, possessiveness and ownership concern only one way, albeit an important one, of possible abuse or misuse. In this culmination of the “as not”-formulas, Paul distinguishes use from abusing, misusing, or using up because *use carries its tension* – the possibility of its reversal, opposition, or degeneration – *within itself*. Use is always engaged in a struggle with the possibility of abuse, misuse, or using up. These possibilities inhabit every use. These possibilities inhabit use because there is no fixed, permanent order in which everything has its own, proper and appropriate place – the fiction of such a permanent order is suspended by Paul’s *κατάργησις*. Free use of the world is thus a use that carries its tension within itself; it is the use always exposed to the risk of its own degeneration, but it is also the use liberated from the phantasms of possession, mastery and control.

Let me conclude by tying the two keywords of the meontological passages, *κατάργησις* and *χρησις*, once more together. The ontological notion of *κατάργησις*, that is, of suspension or inactivation, marks the Pauline response to an order in crisis producing outcasts and exceptions. The notion of *κόσμος* as order does not suffice. Yet, the suspension of this order is not the annihilation of that which is, but is rather an operation – as it always is in the best phenomenological tradition – that aims to make something visible that otherwise would remain hidden, namely the outcasts that are granted no form of being in the order that prescribes what may and may not count as a being. Thus, *κατάργησις* opens up the space in which possibilities are given back to these non-beings exactly because the order of the world, of the *κόσμος* itself is shown in this same operation in such a way that it is marked by the sense of an ending. In terms of the difference between *initium* and *principium*, *κατάργησις*

suspends what is there *in principio*, the pre-given order of creation, and thus opens up the space of the possibility of *initium*, a new beginning, a new creation. This ontological concern is mirrored in an ethical concern drawn out by the “as not”-formulas. The preferred Pauline term of this enactment is χρῆσις, use, in which our encounter with things, with other living creatures and with other humans is placed in light of the same space of possibilities. Under the heading of use we encounter something that others have thematized under the heading of play or *Spiel*: by suspending the prescribed, normative or normalized engagement with whatever is encountered, use aims to bring us back to the original to-and-fro movement in which one discovers the possibilities of how to be with and how to be in common with that which we encounter.