

David Bentley Hart: “Nihilism and Freedom: Is There a Difference?”

Before a crowd of roughly 75 U of M students, faculty, staff, and community members, David Bentley Hart offered a lecture last Thursday, March 22 on the topic of freedom and nihilism. He made clear at the outset that he was using the term “nihilism” not in a pejorative sense, but rather as a strictly technical philosophical definition: Nihilism as a fairly peaceful mode of existence that seeks to give up any claims to the desire to rule by force through metaphysical schemes, which ultimately destroy even God in their *libido dominandi*.

Hart sought to understand two competing notions of freedom in Western culture: How have we come to an understanding of freedom as the absence of strictures, as the glorification of will (and therefore nihilistic, since there is nothing higher than an individual’s will)? Why did we move away from the earlier understanding of freedom as a structure for choosing well, towards the good, in accordance with our nature? What, if anything, can be said in support of either definition of freedom?

As an aside, Hart mentioned that if the will is truly free, there’s no reason why it must remain confined to each individual person. We might, for instance, choose to refashion humanity in accordance with our utterly free will, something unthinkable in previous centuries.

Nietzsche’s story of the channeling of the gods into God and then into ourselves (with the subsequent “death of God”) and Heidegger’s tale of Christianity as one more attempt among many throughout the history of Western philosophy to master reality through a metaphysical scheme both have much to commend. The Christian tradition has, in fact, led us to our current nihilistic understanding of freedom.

But, Hart claims, this has not occurred for the reasons outlined by Nietzsche and Heidegger. Rather, our notion of the Christian God had, since the time of the scholastics, contained within itself the nihilism that would work itself out into our understanding of our own freedom as humans. In emphasizing God’s absolute *will* at the expense of focusing on his nature, scholastics such as John Duns Scotus and William of Ockham laid the groundwork for theological reflection throughout the centuries to come.

Rather than God being the eternal good, God has simply become the biggest individual around, and in exalting his absolute sovereignty, even regarding good and evil, we have sought to appropriate that same absolute freedom of will in our own lives. But to this God, Heidegger claimed, “man can neither pray nor make sacrifices,” and he must be abandoned. Hart stated that the godless thinking which has resulted from this abandonment of God is perhaps closer to the true understanding of God than the scholastics’ understanding, upon which both Catholic and Reformed theologies draw.

Hart concluded by affirming Heidegger’s recognition that our modern conception of freedom, nihilistic at its core, has to some degree resulted from the misguided voluntaristic turn of Christian theology. Before such theology, Hart emphasized, atheism is a preferable alternative.