the reviewer to recommend. Finally, on the technical level, the table of contents does not match the page numbering.


*Review by Jason Harman, York University.*

Upon surveying the salons of 19th century Europe, Søren Kierkegaard noted the eagerness with which hungry minds sought to go beyond the drab palette offered by religion. Abraham, however, he told his readers, did not seek to go beyond religion. In fact, for Abraham, faith was an endeavour that requires a lifetime. In reviewing Christopher Watkin’s *Difficult Atheism*, I am reminded of these words, for, as Watkin shows, the task of overcoming religion is an arduous one that ultimately begs the question: what are we really going beyond? Watkin’s text seeks to chart contemporary French thought’s attempt to attain “a thinking that is truly without God” (1), through an analysis and critique of Alain Badiou, Jean-Luc Nancy, and Quentin Meillassoux. It should be noted upfront that for sheer breadth and depth Watkin’s work is astounding. Watkin, I am led to suspect, feels perfectly at ease inhabiting the minds of Badiou, Nancy and Meillassoux. Further, where contemporary French philosophy often dallies in the obscure, Watkin’s rendering— with ample citations from a wide selection of primary texts—both clarifies and sharpens. Throughout this text, Watkin ushers the reader into the intimate circle of philosophy’s leading minds—certainly no small feat.

Indeed, I can offer nothing short of praise for the text’s descriptive and explanatory qualities, though I do have reservations regarding the method and criteria used to judge the philosophies in question. For starters, Watkin does little to actually clarify for us what God, religion, theology, or faith is. Though he reminds us early on that there are many atheisms (12), at least one for each of the prominent French philosophers whom occupy the text, there appears to be only one theology for which, “consensus” indicates, we must proceed beyond. (239) Watkin, following Nietzsche, whose name and philosophy he invokes early on, at times uses the phrase “Platonic-Christian” to designate the metaphysical structure that post-theological thought must overcome. (11) Yet, at other times—for example, in critiquing Jean-Luc Nancy for “Christian hyperbole” (240)—his concern seems to
be any connection whatsoever to Judeo-Christian thinking. Watkin does remind us not to confuse the utilisation of theological terms with theology proper: "If a philosopher uses terms such as ‘miracle,’ ‘faith’ or even ‘God,’ it does not necessarily follow that her thought is imitative" of theology. (3) Yet, he simultaneously criticises philosophers for the fact that every departure or partition (partage) is also a relation—a fact we will return to later. (85)

Watkin establishes as the pincers of his critique two criteria: imitative (or parasitic) atheism, and residual (or ascetic) atheism. Where a philosopher might escape the one, he or she is likely bound to fall victim to the other. Imitative atheism is defined as the practice of denying religion while erecting a new one in its place. Humanism, for example, replaced God with the adulation of Man, just as the Enlighentment replaced God with Reason. In each case the only thing that changes is the name of the deity. It is for this reason that Watkin reminds us that “parasitism keeps the fruit of the Platonic-Christian structure, but does nothing to attack its root.” (11) “The fruit” includes the prizes of Truth, Justice and Equality—virtues which receive their force and effect from the inexplicable root of the system: the belief in a supra-rational power which grounds, or provides the reason for, everything else.

Residual, or ascetic, atheism is aware of the pitfalls of imitative atheism. In seeking to avoid squatting on the theological terrain it explicitly rejects, residual atheism ascetically contents itself with its own half of the universe. Glamouring for immanence at the expense of religious transcendence, as does Badiou, or contingency in exchange for divine necessity, as does Meillassoux, these philosophies become vulnerable to critique. Describing them as still ensnared within the matrix of a religion that divides the world into the sacred and the profane, Watkins argues that these philosophers proceed simply by forfeiting the former for the latter, leading to his charge of asceticism.

In concluding, Watkin tells us that none of the three philosophers fully lives up to the post- of post-theological thinking. This empirical fact "leaves a question mark over the possibility of moving beyond the parasitism and asceticism that still haunt Nancy, Badiou, and Meillassoux." (243) Yet, the question must be asked as to whether such a "question mark" was ever in doubt, and as such, whether an empirical examination, however revealing, was necessary? For the criterion which Watkin applies to his thinkers, and which declares that each has come up short, must itself be scrutinised as to whether it is itself post-theological. The criterion is, quite simply, the notion that one can “turn the page on religion" (13) and the twin criteria of imitative (parasitic) and residual (ascetic) atheism are the tools of Watkin’s trade. Yet,
Watkin ought be wary after discussing Nancy's attempt "to avoid...a definite break, on pain of a gesture that imitates a quintessentially theological move." (87) Indeed, such a break is what Watkin himself describes as a form of parasitism: "the danger of declaring that...religion is finished, is that it constitutes the victory of the dialectical theology of the death of God, a return to imitative atheism." (87) Applying this very insight to his own project, Watkin must confess that the ideal of a fully post-theological philosophy entails a "definite break" and as such he is paradoxically criticising Badiou, Nancy, and Meillassoux for failing to adequately imitate theology by failing to completely abandon theology.

The source of Watkin's problem is that the "possibility of moving beyond" theology is not appropriately addressed and properly clarified. The danger of embarking with an ambiguous notion of theology is of course that it proves tremendously difficult to shed. Watkin's paradox of abandoning theology only to return to it shows us that the core of what he calls theology is precisely the logic of contradiction (or dichotomy) that begins in Plato and is absorbed by medieval Christianity. Though Watkin does identify Platonic dichotomies as a residue of onto-theology (46) and criticises both Badiou and Meillassoux for employing them and for becoming entangled in their parasitic webs, he does not affirm their centrality.

For Badiou, problems begin as soon as he declares himself an atheist and severs all ties to the transcendent realm. Advocating for the immanent multiple as against the transcendent One (45), the result Badiou achieves is simply the summary dismissal of the One. Yet this brash action does not prevent the One from constantly reappearing, haunting his mathematical ontology. In fact, Meillassoux implies that Badiou's void, which opposes itself to the being of the multiple, is characterised by the same sort of mystical properties one finds in mono-theism. (133) Watkin explains that the attempt to simply forget or forego transcendence in favour of a solely immanent ontology still leaves one caught within the matrix of opposition. Watkin cites Michel Henry's L'essence de la manifestation, which puts the matter plainly: "Immanence has been defined by reference to transcendence and through the exclusion of the latter from its internal structure." (19)

This omitted reference to transcendence reappears when Watkin questions how Badiou's immanent philosophy establishes itself. Badiou's axiomatic philosophy, by definition, cannot explain its own first principles: "Axioms are not deduced or induced, but asserted." (100) This, Watkin indicates, has generated critique from a number of sources including Jean-Francois Lyotard, Jacques Rancière, and theologian John Milbank. The thrust of the arguments Watkin assembles is
that because the axiomatic system is inherently “arbitrary” it requires a decision that is fundamentally “unfounded.” (103) He concludes that Badiou’s philosophy ultimately “reveals the insufficiency of mathematics to connect us to the Eternal.” (107) Badiou’s mathematical ontology thus requires a faith that is “covertly religious” (108) to empower it.

Quentin Meillassoux is the other post-theological thinker who seems happy to embrace the logic of opposites and who, like Badiou, becomes ensnared in their trap. While Meillassoux seems to break new ground towards post-theological thinking by refusing to comply with the theism/atheism dichotomy that entangled Badiou (133), he nonetheless becomes entrapped within opposites of his own choosing. Meillassoux makes the dichotomy of necessity/contingency paramount in both his refutation of the existence of God and his insistence that hyperchaos governs the universe. (139) Meillassoux’s discourse, as Watkin compellingly shows, contradicts itself by secretly relying upon an unshakable ground—be it time (153), logic (155) or reason (162)—that is kept safe from the hyper-contingency of the world.

It is Jean-Luc Nancy who goes the farthest to escape the Platonic-Christian structure that Watkin identifies early on. Like Meillassoux, he troubles the a/theism divide but does not stop there. His ontology of singular plurality or, equally, plural singularity, as Watkin helpfully points out, goes the farthest in eclipsing dichotomizing thought. (177) Indeed, it is for that very reason that I believe Watkin’s text ultimately commends the thought of Jean-Luc Nancy, who alone indicates an acute awareness of the crippling power of contradiction, and who attempts to grapple with this paradox head-on. In order to do so, Nancy realises most fully that he must, in Watkin’s words, “turn to religion in order to turn the page on religion.” (13) Nancy’s method of deconstruction is the only one that seeks to take religion seriously and in so doing it unabashedly borrows elements that do not wholly part with the place of their origin though, despite that, have nothing in common with the Platonic-Christian structure that Watkin (and Nietzsche) explicitly identify as constituting theology per se.

*Difficult Atheism* lives up to its title by highlighting the pervasive presence of theology in contemporary “post-theological” philosophy. However, it does not adequately treat the problem of the theology it wishes to escape. Though Watkin wisely takes pains to differentiate the usage of theological terms from the deployment of theological concepts, his efforts are undermined by failing to single out how Platonic theology is not identical to religion—as Kierkegaard distinguished Christendom from Christianity. As such, his project of identifying a post-theological thinking wholly free from all connection to theology is undermined from the start.