The Death of God and the Life of the World

PHILIPP MAINLÄNDER'S
PHILOSOPHY OF RELIGION

MA THESIS IN PHILOSOPHY BY

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The death of God and the life of the world: Mainländer's philosophy of religion

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“The philosophy of redemption is the continuation of the doctrines of Kant and of Schopenhauer, and the confirmation of Buddhism and of pure Christianity. It amends and supplements those philosophical systems, and reconciles these religions with science.”

(Mainländer 1876/2024:4-5)

“I felt serene that I had forged a good sword, but at the same time I felt a cold dread in me for starting on a course more dangerous than any other philosopher before me. I attacked giants and dragons, everything existing, holy and honourable in state and science: God, the monster of ‘the infinite’, the species, the powers of nature, and the modern state; and in my stark naked atheism I validated only the individual and egoism. Nevertheless, above them both lay the splendour of the preworldly unity, of God… the holy spirit, the greatest and most significant of the three divine beings. Yes, it lay ‘brooding with wings of the dove’ over the only real things in the world, the individual and its egoism, until it was extinguished in eternal peace, in absolute nothingness.”

(Mainländer 1876/2024:108)
(Cited in Beiser 2016:205-206)

Abstract

This thesis aims to provide a detailed study of Philipp Mainländer's philosophy of religion. Employing the philosophical method of close-reading, the author assesses Mainländer's epistemology, physics and metaphysics, in order to identify, explain and critically assess claims that pertain to religion, as well as claims that do not directly relate to religion but support claims that do. This way, the author aims to answer the question what Mainländer's philosophy of religion contributes to our understanding of the nature of existence and human experience. He concludes that special contributions include the localising of a simple unity in a transcendent past, an original conceptualisation of God as this very unity, a hypothesis explaining the purposivity of the world, a path to redemption that does not depend on faith and a novel revaluation the religious and philosophical doctrines of pantheism and Buddhism.

Table of contents

Introduction 6
- Topic and context 6
- Focus and scope 8
- Relevance 9
- Questions and objectives 10
- Methodology 11
- Overview of the structure 12

Philosophy of religion in Schopenhauer 14
- Idealism, will to life and pessimism 14
- Schopenhauer's views on religion 15

Overview of Mainländer's philosophy of religion 17

Epistemology 19
- Understanding and its a priori forms 20
- Reason and its a priori conjunctions 21
- Different types of causality and development 24
- The primordial simple unity 25
- Will to life 27

Physics 28
- The individual essence and the totality of the world 29
- Feeling of autonomy and religions 30
- The simple unity as God 31

Metaphysics 33
- The move from unity to multiplicity as a deed 34
- Effects in the immanent domain 37
- Will to death 37
- The relationship between freedom and necessity 39
- Implications for value of pantheism and Buddhism 39

Discussion and conclusion 42
- Arriving at the simple unity 42
- Equating the simple unity to God 43
- Conceptualising the fragmentation of the simple unity as a deed 43
- Disintegration of the simple unity and purposivity in the world 44
- Purposivity, the will to death and redemption 45
- Solving the paradox of freedom and necessity 45
- Implications for status of pantheism and Buddhism 46
- Special contribution of Mainländer's philosophy of religion 46
- Suggestions for further research 47

Bibliography 48

Introduction

The following work presents a detailed study of Philipp Mainländer's philosophy of religion. Historically situated between the prominent philosophers Arthur Schopenhauer and Friedrich Nietzsche, Mainländer is often considered a mere disciple of the former and an object of ridicule to the latter. Indeed, Mainländer saw it as his life's mission to become the "Paul" to what he perceived to be Schopenhauer's secular religious system, and Nietzsche famously called the disciplined ascetic "the sickeningly sentimental apostle of virginity" (Nietzsche 1980:601). As the present text aims to make clear, however, this would be to underestimate the significance of his contributions. That is, Mainländer was an exceptionally critical apostle, seeking to ground Schopenhauer's system on an immanent and naturalistic foundation (Beiser 2016:211). In doing so, he exerted a significant influence on Nietzsche's philosophical development, to the point where Nietzsche scholars have argued that six of the leitmotifs of the latter's philosophy can be understood as solutions to problems first posed by Mainländer (Jensen 2023:21). Despite a growing recognition of his originality and influence, the first scholarly translation of his main work *The Philosophy of Redemption* into English was only published in 2024. Furthermore, while such studies exist for Schopenhauer (Ryan 2010) and Nietzsche (Young 2006), so far, no focused study of Mainländer's philosophy of religion has been conducted.

Topic and context

Mainländer's life's work, *Die Philosophie der Erlösung*, first appeared in 1876, 17 years after the publication of the third expanded version of Schopenhauer's *Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung* and 16 years after the latter's death. Frederick C. Beiser, a well-known American philosopher specialising in 19th century German philosophy, has referred to Mainländer's magnum opus as "an idiosyncratic masterpiece" (Beiser 2016:201). Indeed, it presents and unifies insights pertaining to the fields of epistemology, physics, aesthetics, ethics, politics and metaphysics. As such, Mainländer can be considered a

genuine system builder in the tradition of Aristotle, Kant, Schopenhauer and Hegel. However, the breadth of his investigations should not distract from the fact that these all stood in service of one central goal. His goal was to offer mankind a path to redemption that, unlike those offered by religions, relies on knowledge as opposed to faith. Hence, he conceptualises this redemption not as a consequence of divine grace and entrance into the kingdom of heaven, but as the eventual attainment of death, which is the hidden goal of all that exists.

In order to place Mainländer's thought in its proper intellectual context, a couple of connections to other philosophical or religious systems or thinkers are worth noting. Firstly, Mainländer relates to Christianity both critically and sympathetically. Many of its core doctrines, such as the incarnation, the trinity and the resurrection, he considers impossible for the modern mind (operating within an immanent worldview) to seriously adopt. These Christian mysteries do contain a truth, but importantly, he considers this truth to be located *in their ethical message alone* (Beiser 2016:204). This ethical message holds that the suffering of life is redeemed only in death. With this, we can see the contours of his life task emerge: that of saving the time-tested ethical message of Christianity for all generations to come by deducing them from strictly immanent and naturalistic propositions, thereby giving them a secular and rational basis.

Furthermore, Mainländer relates both critically and sympathetically to Schopenhauer. He adopts Schopenhauer's view of a blind will constituting the being of the things-in-themselves, but modifies this view in two fundamental ways. First, he makes Schopenhauer's theory of the will monistic. That is, he denies the existence of a single, cosmic will and instead posits the existence of a large number of discrete, individual wills. Second, where Schopenhauer considered the will to be aimless, Mainländer assigns it an ultimate goal: death. Hence, he construes the will to life as a mere means towards an underlying will to death (Mainländer 1876/2024:277).

Lastly, Mainländer operates largely within the epistemological frameworks of Kantian transcendental idealism and critical idealism. That is, he views his philosophy as

transcendental idealism to the extent that it truly gives the things-in-themselves their empirical reality, granting them extension and motion independently of the Subject (Mainländer 1876/2024:40). Furthermore, he considers his philosophy critical idealism to the extent that it recognizes the subjective source of our presentations of space and time (Mainländer 1876/2024:40). Note also that Mainländer introduced the concept of 'the death of God' before Nietzsche did, although Nietzsche seems to give the phrase a sociological rather than a metaphysical meaning (Beiser 2016:202).

Focus and scope

This thesis will examine the philosophical system presented by Mainländer in his 1876 work *Die Philosophie der Erlösung*, with a special focus on his philosophy of religion. As opposed to Schopenhauer, who presented his reflections on religion in the form of self-contained essays, Mainländer offers these reflections in a fragmented manner throughout his main work. This is in keeping with the nature of his project. Indeed, since he aims to ground (his interpretation of) the Christian doctrine of redemption on sure knowledge, the intermediate and final conclusions that form the heart of his philosophy of religion emerge as he expands the corpus of what he considers to be sure knowledge by building up his system as a whole. As a result, one cannot understand his claims that pertain to religion without understanding the more fundamental claims underlying these.

Therefore, I present a detailed account of his epistemology, as well as an account of what he calls his 'physics'. The latter comes down to a further examination of the individual will to life he obtained through his epistemological reflections, as well as the different ways in which this will is objectified. In doing so, I also point out points of divergence from the two thinkers that most influenced Mainländer: Kant and Schopenhauer. From these considerations, insights that can be characterised more directly as pertaining to religion follow. These involve, for example, discussions about the way developments in religious thought have historically been rooted in developments in epistemological views about the relationship between the individual and the world. Other claims I will cover that relate

more directly to religion are his claim that both Christianity and Buddhism reflect important truths found in his immanent philosophy, as well as the alternative creation myth he proposes.

Relevance

Firstly, since the philosophy of Philipp Mainländer remains vastly understudied, this thesis aims to address a significant gap in the literature. This lack of attention becomes clear not only through the small number of articles published in relation to his thought, but also through the slow emergence of new editions and translations of Mainländer's main work. After first being published in 1876 by the German publisher Grieben, a new 4-volume German language edition of the complete works of Mainländer, edited by Winfried Müller-Seyfarth, appeared only in 1996 (Beiser 2016:201). In 2022, a Spanish translation appeared, and it was only in 2024 that the first scholarly English language translation of the work was published. This concerns the translation by Christian Romuss, which was published by the Australian publisher Irukandji Press.

Recently, several collections of articles on Mainländer have appeared. These include the following collections edited by Winfried Müller-Seyfarth: *"Die modernen Pessimisten als décadents": Von Nietzsche zu Horstmann. Texte zur Rezeptionsgeschichte von Philipp Mainländers Philosophie der Erlösung* (1993), *Was Philipp Mainländer ausmacht: Offenbacher Mainländer Symposium* (2002), and *Anleitung zum glücklichen Nichtssein: Offenbacher Mainländer-Essaywettbewerb* (2006). Müller-Seyfarth furthermore wrote the first monograph about Mainländer's philosophical system: *Metaphysik der Entropie: Philipp Mainländers transzendentale Analyse und ihre ethisch-metaphysische Relevanz* (2000). In the English language, the few articles about Mainländer's philosophy include Beiser's article *Mainländer's Philosophy of Redemption*, which appeared in his 2016 book *Weltschmerz: Pessimism in German Philosophy, 1860-1900*, as well as the 2024 article *The Entropics of Discourse: the Nihilistic Teleology of Philipp Mainländer* by Anthony Jensen.

Apart from addressing a gap in the literature, the subject matter of this thesis is relevant to social matters. After all, the tension between a metaphysical need giving rise to religions and post-Enlightenment rationalism seems to be present today as well. The scientific worldview is dominant, but at the same time, paradoxically, while organised religion becomes less and less popular, forms of secular spirituality are on the rise. Furthermore, the hypothesis of a metaphysical need seems to be supported by scientific research. Indeed, Mueller, Plevak and Rummans (2001:1225) found that "most studies have shown that religious involvement and spirituality are associated with better health outcomes, including greater longevity, coping skills, and health-related quality of life (even during terminal illness) and less anxiety, depression, and suicide." This underscores the relevance of engaging with philosophers embarking on the project of making (parts of) time-tested religious systems acceptable to the modern mind.

Questions and objectives

The main question this thesis aims to answer can be stated as follows:

How does Philipp Mainländer's philosophy of religion contribute to our understanding of the nature of existence and the human experience?

In order to answer this question, I will proceed by answering the following subquestions:

- How does Mainländer arrive at the logical necessity of a simple unity located in a past transcendent domain?
- Why does he equate this simple unity to God?
- How does Mainländer justify conceptualising the fragmentation of the simple unity into the present immanent world of multiplicity as a *deed*?
- What does the disintegration of the simple unity tell us about the purposivity of the world and its individualities?
- How does this purposivity lead Mainländer to locate redemption in death?

- How does his philosophy contribute to solving the paradox of man experiencing both freedom and necessity?
- What does this contribution imply for the status and value of pantheism and Buddhism?

By answering these questions, I hope to establish for the first time a structured outline of the claims and insights presented by Mainländer insofar as they relate to religion.

Methodology

The methodology for this study involves conducting a close reading of the main work of Philipp Mainländer, *The Philosophy of Redemption* (1876/2024). Close reading is a method of literary analysis that involves a detailed examination of a text in order to uncover the underlying themes, motifs, and philosophical concepts present within the work. In this study, the close reading involved multiple readings of *The Philosophy of Redemption* in order to gain a comprehensive understanding of Mainländer's ideas and arguments. After identifying elements of the text that are of special importance to understanding his philosophy of religion, I proceed by offering a broad overview or outline of his thoughts about religion, followed by a more detailed presentation and explanation of key passages. Where appropriate, I place ideas in their historical philosophical context by relating them to other thinkers, and offer criticisms of invalid or unsound arguments, as well as insufficiently supported lines of reasoning. Since in Mainländer's organic philosophical system, one claim follows from the other, and claims regarding aspects that directly relate to religion cannot be understood without reference to claims that do not directly relate to religion, it is not feasible to structure the core of the thesis exactly based on the research questions mentioned in the previous section. Instead, I will alternate claims that directly relate to the research question with secondary considerations supporting them, and repeat and critically assess the answers to these questions with more focus in the discussion and conclusion section.

Overview of the structure

This thesis is structured as follows. First, I present a brief overview of the philosophy of the most important source of inspiration for Philipp Mainländer: Arthur Schopenhauer. After explaining his Kantian credentials, his position regarding a single cosmic will, and ways towards knowing this will, I discuss his pessimistic worldview stemming from the ubiquity of suffering. Furthermore, I discuss Schopenhauer's view of religion as popular metaphysics, and as a way for man to come to terms with life's suffering and finality.

Next, I provide a broad overview of Mainländer's philosophy of religion, in order to make it easier for the reader to situate the discussions that follow in the rest of the text. Topics covered here include the developmental trajectory in the religious life of man proposed by Mainländer, as well as his claim that religions at their core aim to answer the question in what relationship the "I" is to be placed with respect to the external world. After illustrating both the developmental trajectory and this core aim by zooming in on Judaism and Buddhism, I present Mainländer's claim that the modern-day individual demands a restoration of his autonomy and introduce his attempt to give the individual this autonomy *without* relying on faith, in order to arrive at *genuine* atheism.

Then, I provide an outline of Mainländer's epistemology, including his requirements that philosophy must be both immanent and idealistic. I furthermore cover his elaborate mapping out of man's cognitive faculties, including the senses, the a priori forms of the understanding (space and matter), and the a posteriori conjunctions of reason (time, substance, general causality and mathematical space). Based on these considerations, I reconstruct his claim that not causal chains but only developmental chains can lead us into the past of things-in-themselves. I then show how Mainländer uses these developmental chains to reconcile the paradox of unity and multiplicity by positing a simple unity located in a past transcendent domain where all forces from the immanent domain flow together. Next, I cover his assertion that things-in-themselves independently of the Subject appear as forces, and that these forces in their essence are individual wills to life.

Next, in the physics, I discuss the problem of the relation between the autonomous individual essence and the coherent totality of the world, as well as the way the fragmentation of a primordial simple unity solves this problem. With the resulting half-autonomy of the individual in hand, I present Mainländer's reconstruction of the emergence of religions as the effect of one-sided contemplation of this truth. Next, I show how Mainländer argues that with his clean separation of the immanent and transcendent domain, he saves the (half-)autonomy of the individual, thereby laying the foundation for atheism founded on knowledge. Furthermore, I cover here how Mainländer construes the simple unity as God, leading him to what can be understood as an own mythology in which the death of God constitutes the life of the world.

I finish the core of the thesis by an examination of Mainländer's metaphysics. Here, I reconstruct the way he frames the move from unity to multiplicity as a conscious deed, as well as the way he - contrary to his own requirement of immanence - assigns will and mind to the simple unity. Next, I assess how he conceptualises the very existence of the world - through the disintegration of the simple unity - as the sole possible means to the end of God's non-being. Also, I discuss what this view implies for the purposivity of all discrete individualities in that world. This brings me to a reconstruction of Mainländer's move of claiming that the individual will to life is but a means towards a more fundamental means to death, and an assessment of what this means for the nature of an atheistic form of redemption. Then, I return to this individual fate and its opposition to what presents itself to the mind as chance, and discuss how, according to Mainländer, both pantheism and Buddhism have captured an important half-truth by taking in one of two extreme positions regarding the autonomy of the individual in relation to the world. Lastly, I present Mainländer's claim that unlike these systems, his system succeeds in unifying both freedom and necessity.

I finish the thesis with a recapitulation of the sub questions and a critical assessment of the answers offered by Mainländer. Then, I answer the main research question and conclude by proposing opportunities for further research.

Philosophy of religion in Schopenhauer

The philosophy of Philipp Mainländer was heavily influenced by that of Arthur Schopenhauer. Mainländer himself called the day he encountered *The World as Will and Representation* in a bookstore "the most important day of his life" (Beiser 2016:204). Hence, in this section, I will provide an outline of Schopenhauer's general philosophy insofar as it is relevant to understanding Mainländer's philosophy. Then, I turn to Schopenhauer's specific thoughts about the mechanisms giving rise to religion.

Idealism, will to life and pessimism

Just like Mainländer builds upon the philosophy of Schopenhauer, Schopenhauer builds upon the philosophy of Kant. Adopting Kantian idealism, Schopenhauer views our everyday perception of the world as mere appearance or representation. Space and time, which are central to everyday perception, are produced by the human mind when processing external reality. This external (noumenal) reality itself constitutes the 'thing-in-itself', which according to Kant is unknowable to man. Schopenhauer, however, makes a number of statements about the will. First, he considers it non-plural, or 'one'. After all, he argues, individuality and thus plurality depend on space and time, which are mere forms of intuition and hence not features of reality. Second, he asserts that the nature of the thing-in-itself as pure will can be revealed by experiencing one's own body: "A way from within stands open to us as to that real inner nature of things to which we cannot penetrate from without. It is, so to speak, a subterranean passage, a secret alliance, which, as if by treachery, places us all at once in the fortress that could not be taken by attack from without" (Schopenhauer 1844b:195).

Importantly, Schopenhauer views the will as the essence of human nature. That is, a cessation of the will requires a transcendence of human nature. Man is always striving for something. Before the will is satisfied, we suffer, and when the will is temporarily satisfied,

we get bored, which is an even stronger form of suffering. At these moments, he argues, the vanity of life becomes clear. For him, the solution to the cycle of endless striving lies in asceticism or artistic contemplation (Schopenhauer 1844a:201). Note that these very practices constitute important elements of many of the large monotheistic religions. Mainländer will later take this notion of asceticism, or denial of the will, to its extreme in the redemptive quality he assigns to death.

Schopenhauer's views on religion

Schopenhauer views religion as 'popular metaphysics'. That is, it is an allegorical expression of the insights that philosophy expresses in strict and logical form. It makes this knowledge accessible to the masses, who in his view are incapable of thinking and only capable of believing. Similarly, he asserts that the masses are less susceptible to arguments than to authority. Hence, in a sense he views religion as metaphysics for those who lack the intellectual development of those able to engage in proper metaphysics. What then is metaphysics for Schopenhauer? He defines metaphysics as that which is beyond nature or the given phenomenal appearance of things (the thing-in-itself), or in other words, "that which is hidden behind nature and renders nature possible" (Schopenhauer 1844b:162).

Why, according to Schopenhauer, do so many people, either through philosophy or religion, strive for knowledge about the supra-natural? Unlike other animals, humans at some point ask themselves what they are and why they exist. For Schopenhauer, this has to do with their being conscious of temporality, and especially, their being conscious of the prospect of death, which "we fear as children fear darkness" (Schopenhauer 1844a:411). Hence, he asserts, one of the central aspects of the human condition is a craving for a denial of life's finality. Because of this, for Schopenhauer, the heart and most attractive feature of any proper religion, is not the existence of an omniscient, omnipotent and omnipresent God, but the promise of immortality. In fact, he asserts, if the two happened

to be incompatible, “man would soon sacrifice the gods to their own immortality and be eager for atheism” (Schopenhauer 1844b:161) (Young 2006:11).

Religions without a consistent doctrine of immortality are considered failed religions by Schopenhauer. He argues that the lack of such a doctrine was the reason that ancient Judaism and Roman paganism were incorporated into Christianity (Schopenhauer 1844b:170). Citing Plato’s *Phaedo*, he further asserts that providing consolation for death is a core task of philosophy as well (Schopenhauer 1844a:463). Note that Mainländer will later argue that the will to life is a mere disguise for an underlying will to death, and that the fear of death described by Schopenhauer is a mere disguise for an underlying longing for death. As we will see, this reversal has profound implications for what is required of a religious system to fulfil man’s metaphysical need.

The second cause of the metaphysical need and hence of the need for religion for the masses is rooted in Schopenhauer’s profound pessimism. His assertion that in life suffering is the rule presents another riddle of life asking for an answer (Schopenhauer 1844b:171). The omnipresence of pain causes a feeling of despair in man, from which he seeks redemption (Schopenhauer 1844b:170). Religion offers this by providing a grand narrative in which the painful part is but a brief chapter.

Religion for Schopenhauer not only offers solutions for existential problems of individuals, but it also serves the needs of society as a whole. It increases social cohesion through supporting morality, both by setting commandments and enforcing these through (the belief in) sanctions for breaking them, and by setting standards of integrity and virtue. In the case of Christianity, for example, think about the central place of the exemplary lives of Jesus Christ and the saints (Schopenhauer 1844b:167).

Lastly, for Schopenhauer, mystery is essential to any religious system. They use allegorical language not only to reach the masses, but also because its object of study (the thing-in-

itself) is so profound that regular logical language does not suffice to describe it. Mystery, or awe before the unknown, furthermore provides religions with the authority needed to be a credible solution to the riddles of the human conditions discussed above (Schopenhauer 1844b:166).

Overview of Mainländer's philosophy of religion

Before discussing the specifics of Mainländer's philosophy of religion, it is useful to first provide a broad overview of what he views as the landscape of possible religious positions, as well as the developmental trajectory he recognises within this landscape. This helps one retain the bigger picture of his philosophy of religion and understand the goals behind some of the considerations that follow in the rest of this thesis.

Importantly, Mainländer identifies a clear developmental trajectory in the religious life of man. According to him, this path passes through the stations of 1) polytheism, 2) monotheism and (first religious and later philosophical) pantheism, and 3) atheism (Mainländer 1876/2024:3). Here, polytheism constitutes the belief in more than one god, monotheism constitutes the belief in a singular God, pantheism constitutes the view that all that exists falls within God, and atheism constitutes the absence of a belief in god(s).

Like the philosophical branch of epistemology, Mainländer asserts, religious systems in their core aim to provide an answer to the question in what relationship the "I" is to be placed with respect to the external world (Mainländer 1876/2024:205). Hence, he sets out to explain developments in religious thinking through developments in epistemology. In the following, I will provide a brief overview of the developmental trajectory outlined by Mainländer, which will be covered in greater detail throughout the rest of this thesis.

In the beginning of civilization, man's reason grasped the power of nature in a fragmented manner. These discrete expressions of force were personified and turned into gods (polytheism), which in turn were melded into a single God (monotheism). This single God,

through the most abstract thought, later became an utterly unimaginable being (pantheism) and quickly fell prey to critical reason, which put the individual back on the throne (atheism) (Mainländer 1876/2024:3).

According to Mainländer, only in India and Judea has this last stage been reached. The mental life of the former indeed evolved from polytheism via religious pantheism to the philosophical pantheism of the Vedanta, which in turn evolved into Buddhism. Vedanta is one of the six orthodox traditions of the Hindu philosophy, and Buddhism is an Indian religion and philosophical tradition based on the teachings of the Buddha.

Interestingly, Mainländer views Buddhism as a form of atheism, as it stresses the omnipotence of the individual in relation to the external world. He further notes, however, that it founds atheism on faith as opposed to knowledge. Indeed, in Buddhism, the claim about the omnipotence of the individual rests on faith in the doctrine of karma, which involves the view that a person's future is fully determined by their past actions (Mainländer 1876/2024:3).

He makes a similar claim about Judaism. It started off as polytheism and quickly evolved into monotheism positing an omnipotent God, denying the individual every sense of autonomy. In this case, Mainländer asserts, the autonomy of the individual person was restored in the person of Christ, which constituted God taking on human form. Again, paradoxically, it is a form of atheism that depends on faith. In this case, restoration of the belief in human autonomy requires faith in the existence and eventual death of the figure of Christ understood as God taking on human form (Mainländer 1876/2024:4).

The reigning intellectual systems of the Western world, Mainländer asserts, are even less developed (that is, less atheistic) than Buddhism and pure Christianity. Indeed, they evolved from Ionian philosophy, which took the discrete individualities of the world (in the latter case water, air and fire) and made these into principles of the whole. In the Middle Ages, this simple unity became the God of Scholasticism, which can be understood as philosophical monotheism (Mainländer 1876/2024:4).

Later, this monotheism, through the works of philosophers like Spinoza, turned into philosophical pantheism, which, mediated by Kant's critical idealism, inspired the works of Hegel and Schopenhauer. In Hegel, the omnipotent simple unity takes the form of the absolute, and a developmental element is present, while in Schopenhauer, it takes the form of the will, and no developmental element is present. However, Mainländer stresses, they are forms of philosophical pantheism all the same, and most people in the West of the 19th century operate within this worldview (Mainländer 1876/2024:4).

The individual, Mainländer asserts, demands a restoration of his autonomy at the expense of the power of the simple unity, however construed. Hence, he sets out to provide a strong and lasting foundation of atheism, basing it not on faith, as Buddhism and pure Christianity did, but on knowledge (Mainländer 1876/2024:4). As we will see in later sections, he integrates this atheistic approach to the immanent domain with an original cosmology that interprets the universe as flowing from the voluntary self-destruction of a no longer existing simple unity he equates with God.

Epistemology

Since Mainländer aims to understand the development of religious thinking through developments in epistemology, a solid understanding of his own epistemological position is vital to understanding his philosophy of religion. This position involves his requirement of immanence, as well as his commitment to idealism. Furthermore, many of the key problems he aims to resolve in his work, such as the apparent contradiction between unity and multiplicity in the world, as well as core questions about the finitude of the universe and the possibility of knowing the beginning of things-in-themselves by following causal chains are introduced in his text on epistemology.

For Mainländer, the object of study of philosophy must be the knowable world (it must be immanent). That is, explanations must start from principles that can be known by each man. Hence, it can never rely for explanations on powers outside of this world, nor on

unknowable worldly powers. Also, philosophy must be idealistic: it must consider the cognising subject and assess its role in the creation of the world one perceives (Mainländer 1876/2024:9). Here, Mainländer immediately shows his Kantian credentials.

In keeping with his own requirement, Mainländer proceeds from the Subject. He identifies two sources of knowledge: the senses (looking outward) and self-consciousness (looking inward) (Mainländer 1876/2024:9). He divides the senses into the sensory organ, tasked with producing an impression, and the conductive apparatus, tasked with its conduction to the brain. The sense-impressions this produces, Mainländer calls 'presentations', a concept which corresponds to Schopenhauer's concept of representations. Next, he divides these into intuitive presentations (based on the sense of sight and touch) and non-intuitive presentations (based on the sense of sound, smell and taste) (Mainländer 1876/2024:10). Mainländer does not make clear what exactly constitutes the difference between intuitive and non-intuitive presentations. Since he indicates that intuitive presentations are based on the sense of sight and touch, he seems to suggest that these kinds of presentations point to extension, which is located in the things-in-themselves. Non-intuitive presentations, on the other hand, seem to refer to qualities that are more dependent on the observer.

Understanding and its a priori forms

How does a presentation arise from an impression made in a person's eye – from a change taking place in a retina? According to Mainländer, this happens through the intervention of the faculty of cognition called the understanding. It seeks a cause for every change in the sensory organ. This function, which Mainländer calls the law of causality, is a precondition of perception and hence an a priori function of the understanding. Note that without external stimulation independent from the Subject, the understanding would never be activated. Hence, "autonomous things-in-themselves must actuate the understanding" (Mainländer 1876/2024:11).

Within the understanding and prior to all experience, furthermore, lay *forms* it uses to 'mould the cause' (Mainländer 1876/2024:11). One of these forms is *space*. Indeed, Kant's critical philosophy has refuted the view that infinite space or confined concrete spatialities belong to the essence of things-in-themselves and exist independently of the Subject (Durant 1933:267). In fact, space is merely the Subject's capacity to delimit the thing-in-itself where its sphere of efficacy – which exists independently from the Subject – ceases. In other words, "the extent to which it unfolds itself is determined by the extent to which the thing-in-itself has an effect" (Mainländer 1876/2024:12).

The second a priori form of understanding and thereby a further precondition of experience recognised by Mainländer is *matter*. Matter unifies and *objectifies* every quality or special efficacy of the things-in-themselves *within* the shape described by space. It is paralleled in the real domain by the sum of efficacies of a thing-in-itself, which Mainländer also calls *force*. Force that is objectified by a Subject's perception becomes *substance*; independent from this, it remains mere force (Mainländer 1876/2024:12). Furthermore, "expressions of force of the thing-in-itself as objectified by matter are not identical with those expressions of force in their essence" (Mainländer 1876/2024:13). I will return to the nature of this force in the section on Mainländer's 'physics'.

Reason and its a posteriori conjunctions

In short, the thing-in-itself and the Subject together make the Object. It is the understanding's role to objectify sense-impressions. These remain, however, a set of mere discrete partial presentations. It takes another faculty of cognition called *reason* to join these together into one Object. Reason is supported by the sub-faculties of *memory*, *judgement* and *imagination* (Mainländer 1876/2024:14). Memory preserves sense-impressions, judgement places together what belongs together, and imagination retains as an image the Object that has been synthesised by reason. Thus, reason proceeds as follows: judgement provides reason with presentations to be conjoined, either stemming from real-time perception or retrieved from memory, imagination retains the result, and

the process is repeated *ad infinitum* (Mainländer 1876/2024:15). This synthesis is an a priori function of the cognitive faculty, paralleled in the real domain by the unity of the thing-in-itself (Mainländer 1876/2024:16). The same process occurs, at a higher level, in the abstract domain. That is, after partial presentations are synthesised into whole Objects, reason places together Objects to form concepts. Next, it synthesises concepts into judgments and judgments into premises. At this level, we can speak of genuine thinking (Mainländer 1876/2024:17).

From a priori forms and functions of the cognitive faculty, Mainländer asserts, flow a posteriori *conjunctions* of reason, of which *time* is the most significant (Mainländer 1876/2024:18). Note that here, he fundamentally diverges from Kant, who treats time as an a priori form (Kant 1787/2003:26). Mainländer justifies this view by outlining how he thinks time emerges in the human mind – through a synthetic process similar to the one described.

We are, Mainländer tells us, always in the present, moving from present to present, continuously sacrificing one present for another. After becoming conscious of this process, the sub-faculty of reason called imagination *retains* the disappearing present, in turn conjoining it with the arising present. Reason acquires a set of *filled* moments, and forms a concept of the past. Similarly, reason conjoins the coming present with the one that follows it. In a sense, it 'rushes forward' to acquire a series of moments *to be filled*, and hence forms a concept of the future. When reason takes the last step of conjoining the past with the future into a line of indeterminate length, "on which the point of the present rolls onwards", it has synthesised time (Mainländer 1876/2024:18). Note that time is the subjective measure of the real motion of things-in-themselves, which does not depend on the Subject (Mainländer 1876/2024:19).

Two types of change exist: change of location and inner change (development). Change of location is perceived as displacement of an Object relative to resting Objects and hence does not depend on time (Mainländer 1876/2024:19). The opposite is the case for the

perception of inner change. Without the conjunction of time, one cannot recognise the blossoming and fruit bearing tree as the same Object (Mainländer 1876/2024:20).

Note that according to Mainländer the totality of spatial-material Objects does not constitute the whole 'world as presentation'. He claims that sense-impressions exist which cannot be shaped spatially and materially (such as air and sounds), but nevertheless need to be accounted for to form a complete picture of the universe. Hence, manifold but homogeneous presentations are associated by reason into the unity called *substance*, which like time is an a posteriori conjunction of reason based on an a priori form (matter) (Mainländer 1876/2024:20).

Reason "thinks matter into all the sense-impressions which do not allow themselves to be moulded in the forms of the understanding", and thus arrives at presentations of incorporeal Objects. Now, all substantial Objects (both corporeal and incorporeal) are accounted for, making the proposition that every sense impression must be caused by a substantial Object unconditionally valid (Mainländer 1876/2024:21). In the real domain, the ideal conjunction of substance is paralleled by the collective unity of forces (Mainländer 1876/2024:21). One could object here that Mainländer is wrong in calling phenomena such as air and sounds incorporeal Objects. Indeed, even the ancient Greeks already recognised the material nature of these phenomena. Mainländer's point, however, may not be that these phenomena are genuinely immaterial, but that due to their invisible nature, man is not able to objectify them by means of the understanding, requiring them to be objectified through reason.

Remember that while the understanding cannot think, reason can. Hence, reason is able to expand its function. It recognises that every change in a Subject's sensory organs must have a cause, is able to reverse this insight, and concludes that things-in-themselves have an effect on the Subject (Mainländer 1876/2024:22). By construing the (body of the) Subject as an Object among Objects, it arrives at general causality. This involves the notion that a thing-in-itself has an effect on another thing-in-itself, and that "every change in an Object must have a cause which precedes the effect in time" (Mainländer 1876/2024:23).

General causality thus connects both Objects and their underlying things-in-themselves. This causal relation is then expanded into yet another causal relation: that of community. It says that all things-in-themselves continually have an effect on and are affected by all other things-in-themselves. The conjunction of community helps the Subject cognise the *dynamic coherence* of the universe in the real domain (Mainländer 1876/2024:24).

The last a posteriori conjunction of reason Mainländer introduces is mathematical space. It arises when reason rather than a thing-in-itself spreads out space by synthesising any number of pure discrete spatialities into a whole of indeterminate extension. Again, the process is comparable to the formation of whole Objects from partial presentations. In the real domain, mathematical space is paralleled by absolute nothingness (Mainländer 1876/2024:25).

As I have briefly mentioned, the nature of the thing-in-itself is *force*, and the world is the totality of things-in-themselves becoming Objects before the Subject. The emergence of Objects depends on the Subject, but the Subject does not gravely distort the thing-in-itself, which means that we can safely rely on experience (Mainländer 1876/2024:26). I will cover the nature of the thing-in-itself *as force* in more depth in the section on physics.

Different types of causality and development

Note that the law of causality is only capable of seeking the cause of a change in the sensory organs (it recognises causal relations between the Subject and the thing-in-itself). It does not ask after the cause of this cause. For example, the understanding recognizes the movement of a branch as the cause of a change of light falling on the retina, but it does not ask about the cause behind the movement of the branch (Mainländer 1876/2024:27). These kinds of Object-Object causal relations can be recognised by the a posteriori conjunction of reason called general causality. This way, complex causal chains can be identified. According to Mainländer, however, these chains of causality “are only ever the association of the efficacies of things-in-themselves, and never contain the things

themselves as links" (Mainländer 1876/2024:27). Take the example of a plant. The causal chain turning a seed into a grown plant does not include *the plant itself* as a link. Hence, one cannot ask after the cause of a thing-in-itself in the world, and causal relations cannot lead us into the past or the being of the things-in-themselves (Mainländer 1876/2024:28).

This epistemological view has important implications for Mainländer's philosophy of religion. Indeed, his assertion that causal chains cannot lead us into the past of things-in-themselves leads him to reject theories of creation and proofs for the existence of God that rely on these kinds of causal arguments, such as the cosmological-ontological argument proposed by Descartes (Descartes 1641/2017:67) (Mainländer 1876/2024:28).

Interestingly, Mainländer asserts, while causal chains (arising through causality) cannot lead us into the past of things-in-themselves, *developmental chains* (arising through time) can. After all, the latter "have to do with the being of *one* thing-in-itself and with its changes" (Mainländer 1876/2024:28). This way, we can for example trace back organic forces to chemical forces, and these chemical forces to elemental substances. According to Mainländer, however, continuing this process *does not* allow us to overcome multiplicity and arrive at unity, since this is impossible in the immanent domain (Mainländer 1876/2024:29).

Mainländer recognises that man does experience a logical compulsion to search for the simplest possible unity. Indeed, as we have seen, conjoining 'manifold but homogeneous' presentations is the main task of reason. The fact that all forces we keep separated are – as forces - essentially alike also points us in this direction. Knowing better, however, we must "preserve reason from certain downfall" (Mainländer 1876/2024:29) and call off the search for unity in the immanent domain.

The primordial simple unity

The problem that Mainländer now needs to solve involves reconciling the apparent multiplicity in the immanent domain with the logical compulsion of an underlying unity as

the only way to explain the interconnectedness of individuals and the dynamic coherence of the universe (Mainländer 1876/2024:29). In other words: “Science postulates a single universe because of the interconnection of all things according to laws; and ordinary experience teaches us that things are independent of one another, that the destruction or removal of one does not change everything else” (Beiser 2015:216). He proposes the following innovative solution. That is, Mainländer lets the multiplicity of final forces from the immanent domain flow together in a simple unity located in a transcendent domain that no longer exists (Mainländer 1876/2024:30).

This marks an important point of divergence from Kant and Schopenhauer. While for these thinkers the transcendent domain is the domain of the things-in-themselves, Mainländer locates both the things-in-themselves and the presentations as mediated by the Subject in the immanent domain. Indeed, in his view, currently no transcendent domain exists anymore.

Remember that force is the nature of the thing-in-itself in the immanent domain, and that which is objectified by the Subject. Hence, in the simple unity located in the no longer existing transcendent domain, force does not exist. Hence, it is impossible to form a presentation of the nature of this premundane (pre-wordly) unity (Mainländer 1876/2024:30). Furthermore, our entire cognition, that is, both the a priori forms and the a posteriori conjunctions, breaks down in the face of this transcendent unity. Indeed, the senses encounter no efficacies of forces to respond to. As a result, the understanding has no content to fulfil its function and seek causes for changes in perception. Reason collapses as well, since again there is no content to conjoin or synthesise. Without real succession, the conjunction of time is inactive as well, and the same goes for general causality, since no efficacies of things-in-themselves are available to be associated (Mainländer 1876/2024:30).

Hence, the simple unity can only be defined negatively as “inactive, extensionless, undifferentiated, unfragmented, motionless and timeless” (Mainländer 1876/2024:30). Hence, it is best conceptualised as nothingness. However, it existed. Also, all

developmental chains issue from this simple unity, and something cannot emerge out of nothing. Therefore, Mainländer refers to it as relative nothingness: “a passed, incomprehensible, primordial being in which everything that is was contained in a manner inconceivable to us” (Mainländer 1876/2024:31).

Indeed, Mainländer tells us, everything that is has not arisen from nothingness, but already existed in the transcendent domain prior to the emergence of the world. However, every force *insofar as it is force* has a definite beginning (Mainländer 1876/2024:32).

As we established earlier, the things-in-themselves appear as Objects to the Subject, and independently of the Subject are moving forces with a definite sphere of efficacy (Mainländer 1876/2024:41). This result, Mainländer attained by following the first of the two paths to knowledge mentioned earlier: that of sensory access to the external world. This path, however, does not lead to any knowledge about the precise nature of force (Mainländer 1876/2024:41).

Will to life

Luckily, another source of knowledge lies open to us: that of self-consciousness. Man, after all, belongs to nature himself and is himself a self-conscious force. Hence, “the essence of force must be there in self-consciousness to be apprehended” (Mainländer 1876/2024:42). When sinking into self-consciousness, like in the transcendent unity, the senses and the understanding do not function due to a lack of impressions. We are furthermore free from space and matter. We do, however, feel how far our sphere of force, which Mainländer calls *real individuality*, reaches (Mainländer 1876/2024:42). We furthermore feel ourselves in unceasing and restless motion, Mainländer asserts. Here, in the midst of the thing-in-itself, the force unveils itself as an individual, moving *will to life*, which is totally independent of the Subject (Mainländer 1876/2024:43).

Hence, like Schopenhauer, Mainländer equates the fundamental nature of the thing-in-itself to the will to life. A key difference between the two, however, stems from

Mainländer's insistence on philosophy being immanent. He asserts that multiplicity cannot be overcome within the immanent world, and that every form of unity, (whether in the form of ideas, species, universals or archetypes), is so abstract that we cannot have any experience of it and hence it belongs only to the transcendent domain. Therefore, Mainländer's immanent philosophy can be further characterised by its nominalism: the belief that only particular or determinate things exist (Mainländer 1876/2024:48). Apart from it seemingly following from his requirement of immanence, Mainländer does not offer a systematic defence of his nominalism (Beiser 2015:212). Importantly, the position is reflected in his view of the will to life: unlike Schopenhauer, who postulates a single, cosmic will to life, Mainländer consistently talks about the individual will to life. This position allows Mainländer to hold on to his later claims about death bringing redemption to the individual, while following Schopenhauer in his single will thesis would undermine this claim.

Physics

Mainländer goes on to further examine the real individual will to life he gained in his epistemology. We already found that this will to life underlies force. Furthermore, since everything in nature unceasingly has an effect and efficacy is force, he concluded that every thing-in-itself is individual will to life (Mainländer 1876/2024:47). Since life is explained by motion and motion is the "sole, genuine predicate of the will" (Mainländer 1876/2024:47) – as opposed to presentation, feeling, and self-consciousness, which are phenomenal appearances of a particular divided motion (Mainländer 1876/2024:49) - Mainländer further develops a classification of nature based on an investigation of this motion. It aims to show how the will is objectified in many different forms or states – from inorganic to organic individuals and from animal to man.

For example, following Schopenhauer, he considers the brain the objectification of the will's striving to cognise the external world, and the entire organism the objectification of

the entire will (Mainländer 1876/2024:51). The will of man is a closed 'being-for-itself' or egoism (I-ness). Each man wants existence in a particular way, giving rise to character (Mainländer 1876/2024:53). Furthermore, Mainländer follows Schopenhauer in identifying pleasure and pain as the most fundamental, *immediate* states of the will in which all states of the will can be united: "they are whole, undivided motions of the genuine will to life" (Mainländer 1876/2024:60).

The individual essence and the totality of the world

An important issue remains the relation of the individual essence to the totality (the world). If the individual will to life is the sole principle of the world, it must be completely autonomous and independent. In that case, however, a dynamic coherence is not possible (Mainländer 1876/2024:90). Since everyday experience does show the dynamic coherence of nature, as well as the dependence of the individual on this dynamic coherence, the *individual* will to life cannot be the principle of the world. Mainländer calls it "the most important problem of all philosophy" (Mainländer 1876/2024:91). On it depends the autonomy of the individual – it could be irrecoverably lost if immanent philosophy does not succeed in "saving the individual whom it has hitherto so faithfully protected" (Mainländer 1876/2024:91). In that case, we would necessarily view the individual as a marionette in the hands of some transcendent essence. In terms of religious worldviews, this leaves open only the options of monotheism and pantheism, and closes off the road to atheism. If we do succeed in rescuing the individual will, Mainländer asserts, man has found a scientific foundation for atheism. Note that, as discussed before, this was the main goal of Mainländer's philosophical project.

Earlier, in the section on epistemology we have seen that neither the law of causality nor general causality can lead us back into the past of things. Pursuing chains of development, we found that in the immanent domain we cannot get beyond multiplicity. In other words, the individual will was not lost through these investigations (Mainländer 1876/2024:92). Reason, however, demanded a simple unity in order to account for the world's dynamic

coherence. Mainländer solved this tension by letting the individuals flow tougher into an inconceivable unity in a transcendent past. This unity contained everything that now exists, and since all our cognitive faculties collapsed in its presence, we can gain no presentation of its precise nature (Mainländer 1876/2024:92).

So far we cannot answer the question why and how precisely the unity disintegrated into multiplicity. We do know, however, that it was the act of the simple unity. In the next chapter on metaphysics, I will show why Mainländer construes it as a conscious act.

The individual wills found in the immanent domain are not thoroughly autonomous, because *prior to the world* they were a simple unity: "This premundane unity lies over the world of multiplicity; thus all discrete essences are embraced by one invisible, unbreakable bond, as it were, and this bond is the dynamic coherence of the world" (Mainländer 1876/2024:92). We hence have *half-autonomous* individuals, encroaching upon the world autonomously, and the world encroaching upon their individuality.

Feeling of autonomy and religions

The spirits, gods and demons of religions, Mainländer states, owe their genesis to *one-sided contemplation* of the world's dynamic coherence in periods where things were not going well for man. When things did go well, the individual felt his force and did not detect the influence of the other ideas (that is, specific objectification of the will in the word). In a sense, such a man feels like a god himself (Mainländer 1876/2024:93). If, in contrast, other ideas confronted man with their unwelcome efficacy, his own force disappeared from consciousness. Then he saw in the efficacy of the other ideas "the all-destroying omnipotence of a wrathful transcendent essentiality" (Mainländer 1876/2024:93).

Importantly, before Mainländer's separation of a transcendent domain existing only prior to the world, and an immanent domain existing only now, man rightly considered the individual as either autonomous (ruling out dynamic coherence in the process), or not autonomous, where the dynamic coherence in the world stems from a simple substance

that tends to be defined in religious terms (Mainländer 1876/2024:93). After Mainländer's intervention, it is no longer a matter of either/or. Now, the individual will to life and its autonomy are forever rescued as the sole principles of the world, albeit as half-autonomy.

Earlier, in the section on epistemology, we identified the simple unity negatively in accordance with the faculties of cognition, finding it to be inactive, extensionless, undifferentiated, unfragmented, motionless and timeless. Now we can further state that unlike the Objects in the immanent domain, which are always caught in relentless striving and ceaseless inner motion, the transcendent simple unity was at rest. Note that here, Mainländer refers not to external rest (change of location of an Object relative to other Objects), but to absolute rest (inner motionless) (Mainländer 1876/2024:93).

Furthermore, according to Mainländer, everything in the immanent world, from a stone falling from our hand to a man acting upon a sufficient motive, moves by necessity. To the simple unity he does attribute freedom, since its unfragmented and solitary nature takes away the compulsion of motive (Mainländer 1876/2024:94). We have also seen that force, in the transcendent domain, ceases to be force, becoming something utterly unknowable. Furthermore, we have seen that force is the nature of the individual will, and that the mind is but the function of an organ precipitating from this will (a part of a divided motion). Hence, the simple unity was neither will nor mind (Mainländer 1876/2024:94).

The simple unity as God

The fact that the senses, understanding and reason all go lame in front of this mysterious, invisible essence, leads Mainländer to take the important step of equating the simple unity to God: "we now have the right to give this essence that familiar name which from time immemorial has designated what no imaginative power, no flight of the boldest fancy, no thinking however deep or abstract, no composed, devout soul, no ecstatic mind rapt on high has ever attained: *God*" (Mainländer 1876/2024:95). By defining the simple unity in a strictly negative fashion and in turn equating it to God, Mainländer places himself in the

tradition of negative or apophatic theology, which holds that we can only describe God by means of negations (McCombs 2013:84).

Equating the simple unity to God is a contentious step, since God has historically been given the predicate of a certain degree of consciousness. God, as commonly understood, would be the kind of 'mind' that Mainländer assures us the simple unity is not. The step from an unknowable simple unity to God, a concept that in common parlance involves the characteristics of omnipotence, omniscience and omnipresence seems to be insufficiently motivated.

The fact that the simple unity (God) was, but is no more, and in the process gave rise to the world of multiplicity, leads him Mainländer to the important statement that inspired the name title of this thesis: "God has died and His death was the life of the world" (Mainländer 1876/2024:95). Hence, we have a pure, immanent domain in which no force resides that reduces individuals to mere puppets. Everything which now is, Mainländer asserts, existed prior to the world *in God* – we existed in him. We do so no longer: since the simple unity has been destroyed, we are in a world of multiplicity "whose individuals are compounded into a solid collective unity" (Mainländer 1876/2024:95).

The why and how of the disintegration will be covered in the next section. For now, what matters is Mainländer's assertion that it was the first and last deed of a simple unity and gave everything that now exists its essence and motion. Importantly, from the primordial unity Mainländer derives not only the dynamic coherence of the universe, but also its purposiveness. Indeed, all motions that followed the first motion of disintegration into multiplicity are merely its continuation. As such, the sum of force contained within the world weakens continually (Mainländer 1876/2024:96).

Mainländer proudly states that his epistemology, with its correct cut through the ideal and the real, made possible the complete separation of the immanent from the transcendent, and hence the separation of God from the world. He expects this cut to have a profoundly beneficial influence on the course of humanity's development (Mainländer 1876/2024:97).

Metaphysics

In his metaphysics, Mainländer aims to extend the insights presented earlier. However, he stresses that metaphysics is not allowed to "go wild with reason", and states that for him, metaphysics merely involves taking the highest immanent standpoint (and therefore can be understood as a continuation of his physics). That is, "it stands above all disciplines, looks out over the entire world and embraces everything in one point of view" (Mainländer 1876/2024:269). This is in line with his clear separation of the transcendent and the immanent domain, where he locates the transcendent domain in an inaccessible past.

Again, I will offer a brief recap. After noticing that causal chains do not lead us into the past of things-in-themselves, we pursued the developmental chains of things-in-themselves and found a single, premundane unity before which our cognition went lame. Hence, we defined it negatively as inactive, extensionless, undifferentiated, unfragmented, motionless and timeless. We further characterised the simple unity, again negatively, as at rest and free and neither will nor mind. However, Mainländer also identified positive results, recognising that the simple unity he now calls God fragmented itself into a world and thereby perished entirely. Furthermore, the world, because it originated from a simple unity, stands in a dynamic coherence, and the motion stemming from the efficacy of all individuals is leading to a continuous weakening of force (Mainländer 1876/2024:270).

As indicated, we know that the simple unity existed. The type of existence, however, is veiled from us. What we can say, however, is that it bears no resemblance to any kind of being with which we are familiar, for we are familiar only with moving and becoming being, while the simple unity is in absolute rest. From the mere fact that the simple unity existed, Mainländer draws the conclusion that it must have had a particular essence, "for every *existentia* posits an *essentia*" (Mainländer 1876/2024:270). The nature of this essence remains incomprehensible, since again, everything we apprehend as the essence of individuals in the world is inseparably connected with motion.

The move from unity to multiplicity as a deed

We are, however, confronted with a *deed*. Calling it a deed is justified, Mainländer asserts, since "we are still standing entirely in the immanent domain, which *is* nothing other than this very deed" (Mainländer 1876/2024:271). Asking after the factors which brought about his deed, however, requires leaving the immanent domain. In the world as we know it, a deed stems from an individual will to life confronted with a sufficient motive. Extending this to the deed of the simple unity requires positing the deed as stemming from a divine will and a divine intelligence, which would contradict the insight obtained earlier that the simple unity is neither will nor mind (Mainländer 1876/2024:271).

What we *can* do, according to Mainländer, is "make these same immanent principles into regulative principles for the mere judgement of the deed" (Mainländer 1876/2024:271). That is, we can explain the arising of the world by conceiving it *as if* it had been a motivated act of will, *temporarily* ascribing will and mind to His essence. I deem this way of proceeding contentious, since it means that the results obtained will merely have the status of metaphors and hypotheses as opposed to precise logically derived explanations. Mainländer tends to overlook this fact. He presents and builds upon these results with a confidence that seems inappropriate given their metaphorical and hypothetical status. Interestingly, he calls it '*merely* a problematic judgement', which he deems acceptable to further our knowledge, and far less negative than engaging in logical contradiction (Mainländer 1876/2024:272).

Here, Mainländer seems to introduce false or insufficiently justified premises or assumptions as 'regulative principles' in order to function as a viable cognitive heuristic that supports useful higher level insights he *does* deem true. The German philosopher Hans Vaihinger recognised the same move in Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*, claiming in his 1925 work *The Philosophy of 'As if'* that Kant's things-in-themselves are a mere useful fiction ensuring that we restrict our inquiries to what is empirically given to us (Vaihinger 1925/2005:55). Although Vaihinger's work was not yet published in the days of Mainländer, the latter may have recognised Kant's usage of regulative principles while reading *Critique*

of Pure Reason, leading him to take the freedom of employing the regulative principle of assigning will and mind to the simple unity.

Why does Mainländer ascribe both will and mind to the simple unity, and not will alone? This is due to the fact that, given the nature of a simple unity, God existed in absolute solitude, leaving him unable to be motivated from without. Hence, according to Mainländer, the motivation must have stemmed from his own mind (Mainländer 1876/2024:272). He does not clarify why this motivation must have necessarily stemmed from a *mind*, and not another faculty. Mainländer further asserts that God was able to exercise his freedom in only a single, or what one could call Shakespearean, choice: to be or not to be. That is, he faced the choice of whether or not to enter absolute nothingness and annihilate Himself completely. After all, the freedom to become other than he was had to remain latent, since "we can conceive no more complete and better being than that of a simple unity" (Mainländer 1876/2024:272).

This raises the question why God, if he wanted not to be, did not *directly* enter into nothingness. How does one reconcile this with His omnipotence? According to Mainländer, the only solution is that God's direct annihilation was impossible due to some obstacle (Mainländer 1876/2024:273). Indeed, Mainländer asserts, God was omnipotent, but he was omnipotent in the sense that nothing lying outside Him constrained him. However, he was not omnipotent with respect to His *own* power, and hence, "the simple unity was unable, by means of itself, to cease to exist" (Mainländer 1876/2024:273). When theorising about the omnipotence of God, theologians throughout the ages overlooked this lack of omnipotence of God in relation to His own existence (Mainländer 1876/2024:273). Note however that Mainländer overlooks Anselm of Canterbury here, who already in the 11th century AD offered reflections about God's omnipotence being directed toward His external surrounds, but not necessarily toward Himself (Urban & Walton 1978:35). Given Mainländer's considerations, the deed of God (the disintegration into multiplicity), presents itself as "the carrying out of the resolution not to be" (Mainländer

1876/2024:273). The world can then be conceptualised as the sole possible means to the end of God's non-being.

Importantly, Mainländer argues that even if one does not accept this obstacle preventing God from direct dissolution into nothingness, it can be deduced retroactively. Indeed, as I will cover later, close consideration of the immanent domain leads Mainländer to the conclusion that the universe – through all discrete individualities - is in fact moving out of being into non-being (Mainländer 1876/2024:274). To the objection why God did not will non-being sooner, Mainländer responds that this invokes a temporal concept, which lacks meaning in the transcendent domain. Note that the question why God did not will non-being sooner seems to mirror the theological question whether God's decision to create the world implies a change in God. This changeability has been thought to potentially undermine God's perceived perfection (Leftow 1991:157). Furthermore, to the question why God preferred non-being over being, Mainländer responds that the latter must have been preferable over the former, for if this were not the case, the omniscient God would not have chosen it (Mainländer 1876/2024:274). Mainländer does not further motivate the assumption of the omniscience of God.

Again, I offer a quick summary. God wanted not to be, but his essence was an obstacle to His instant entry into non-being. Hence, He had to disintegrate into a world of multiplicity, in which discrete individualities all strive towards non-being. In their striving, they struggle with each other and in this way weaken their force. God's essence remains active in the world, albeit in a modified form (the sum of individual forces). The world has the *objective* not to be and achieves this through continuous weakening of its force. This way, the striving of each individual to be annihilated will be fulfilled as well (Mainländer 1876/2024:275).

Effects in the immanent domain

As already announced, Mainländer subjects these insights – especially the striving towards annihilation of individuals in the world – to a test in the immanent domain. Indeed, gases strive to spread out in all directions, liquids want to flow apart horizontally in all directions towards an ideal point lying outside itself, and solid bodies (through the physical law of gravity) also strive towards an ideal point lying outside it. If such a solid body would theoretically reach the centre-point of another body, it would be annihilated (Mainländer 1876/2024:276). Most of the time, as is the case for any individual striving for annihilation, this annihilation cannot happen directly, reflecting the same obstacle God himself encountered when striving annihilation. Hence, also in the immanent world, each individual is inhibited from reaching the goal it's striving for, and the annihilation is reached only through a continual weakening of the sum of forces (Mainländer 1876/2024:277).

Will to death

Importantly, the direction and goal of the striving of immaterial substances is attributed to it by the cognising Subject. Independently of him, the motion of the inorganic bodies is mere blind will (Mainländer 1876/2024:277). The will behind their striving, we have previously called will to life. Given the above considerations, Mainländer states, we need to revise this term and call it pure *will to death*. In the inorganic realm, not life, but death is willed – life is the phenomenon of the will to death, emerging because instant attainment of it the latter is impossible (Mainländer 1876/2024:277). For the organic realm the same is true: it is in fact "the most perfect form for the extinction of force", since unlike the inorganic realm it allows for *real death* (Mainländer 1876/2024:278).

Unlike inorganic entities, the plant shows a direct will to life alongside a will to death: "Because it wants absolute death but cannot have it, it wants life directly as a means to absolute death, and what results is relative death" (Mainländer 1876/2024:279). Here, relative death refers to obtaining individual death while 'living on' through reproduction.

The animal mostly shares these characteristics, but shows an additional phenomenon. It wants annihilation, but by virtue of its mind, it fears death (Mainländer 1876/2024:279). Since life is an effective means towards achieving the purpose of the whole (extinction of force), this extinction can (paradoxically) best be attained through fear of death. Unlike the plant, where the will to life stands alongside the will to death, in the animal the former obscures the latter completely, although death is all it deep down strives for. Indeed, Mainländer asks, "could the animal die if it did not want to die?" (Mainländer 1876/2024:280). In man, through cognition, both fear of death (through reflection on it) and will to life (through more refined enjoyments) are even more pronounced than in other animals. In man, the will completely loses sight of its end and holds fast merely to the means (Mainländer 1876/2024:281).

In short, everything in the world is will to death, which in the organic realm appears more or less veiled as will to life, since through the latter, the former, which constitutes the purpose of the whole, is more efficiently achieved. Indeed, the organism "admits chemical ideas, draws them into the maelstrom of its individual motion, and then expels them no longer as the same chemical ideas, but weakened, even if the weakening eludes observation and does not unveil itself to synthetic perception until the end of long developmental phases" (Mainländer 1876/2024:284). This aligns with the view held by modern thermodynamics that life speeds up the continuously increasing level of entropy (disorder) in the universe (Wehrl 1978:221). Since the second law of thermodynamics was established in 1850 by Rudolf Clausius, it is possible that Mainländer was aware of these insights while writing his work. Note, however, that the Clausius statement of the second law of thermodynamics was mostly focused on its application in engineering, and at that time, the implications of these insights for cosmology were not widely discussed.

The view that life is an efficient means of achieving the ultimate end of non-being seems difficult to unite with his defence of sexual abstinence, which he also calls a more effective means towards a weakening of the sum of force than utter devotion to life (Mainländer 1876/2024:285). Indeed, if life constitutes the most effective path towards reaching the

ultimate goal of the universe, why not have many children to generate more life and speed up the process? The contradiction seems to be explained by his assertion that through abstinence, one can redeem one's own *type* – one's particular line of offspring. The contradiction, however, further becomes evident when he indicates that "the wise hero creates for himself in the world true and genuine happiness, and in so doing he [...] promotes the universe's motion out of being into non-being" (Mainländer 1876/2024:286). It seems that whether one chooses life or death is an immaterial matter to Mainländer. What matters to him is the establishment of the sure *possibility* of redemption through death, as opposed to the possibility of redemption through divine grace or the prospect of heaven, which rely on faith as opposed to knowledge (Beiser 2016:202).

The relationship between freedom and necessity

From the highest immanent standpoint taken in the metaphysics, fate is the motion of the entire world stemming from the efficacy of all its individuals. This movement towards annihilation is a fate common to all. Against it, the individual's power cannot be asserted (Mainländer 1876/2024:295). However, from the standpoint of a particular human being, another image emerges. From this standpoint, an individual fate (or life-course) exists, produced in equal measure by the mind of the particular individual and by chance. Note that this chance can be equated to the sum of the efficacy of all individuals. It involves the foreign opposing power, that is independent of the individual, discussed earlier (Mainländer 1876/2024:295). Recall that this division leads to a half-autonomous individual will.

Implications for value of pantheism and Buddhism

This view implies, Mainländer claims, that all doctrines which shift the individual away from the middle position between complete autonomy and complete dependency, are

false (Mainländer 1876/2024:295). From this perspective, Mainländer evaluates the merits of both pantheism and Buddhism. Indeed, according to pantheism, the individual is but a tool in the hand of an all-powerful simple unity *in* the world. His deeds are not his, but effected within him through divine intervention. Although it correctly recognises that there is a power not ruled by the individual (chance), it does not recognise that this power has been constrained by the individual himself and hence is a half-power (Mainländer 1876/2024:296).

Later, Mainländer applies his insights to Buddhism. Buddhism is one of the world's major religions. It traces its origins to Siddhartha Gautama, who later became known as the Buddha. Born in the 6th century BCE in what is now Nepal, the Buddha's teachings have since influenced millions of people across the globe. It is not merely a religion but a philosophy and way of life that addresses the human condition, the nature of suffering, and the path to liberation or enlightenment (Harvey 2013:14).

Central to Buddhist cosmology is the concept of karma and rebirth. Karma, the law of moral cause and effect, posits that our actions have consequences – both in this life and in subsequent existences. Positive actions lead to positive outcomes, while negative actions result in suffering. The cycle of rebirth, or samsara, is the continuous process of birth, death, and rebirth driven by karma. Buddhism teaches that breaking free from the cycle of rebirth is essential for attaining Nirvana, a transcendent state in which there is neither suffering, desire, nor sense of self. The quality of one's rebirth is determined by the accumulated karma from previous lives. By cultivating wholesome actions, practitioners seek to purify their karma and ultimately escape the cycle of samsara (Harvey 2013:32).

Through its doctrine of karma, Buddhism takes the other extreme position. Here, the individual is all-powerful. Again, like in pantheism, "the truth lies half unveiled" (Mainländer 1876/2024:296). The individual indeed has a real power not ruled by chance, but again, it is only a half-power, giving him half-autonomy.

Everything which now exists, once was contained within the simple premundane unity. Hence, everything which now exists took part in God's resolution not to be. A retarding element, located in the essence of God, made the instant carrying out of this resolution impossible. This element, however, is gradually eliminated through the *process* of the world. To the extent that I was once part of the simple unity, Buddhism is correct in claiming that everything that affects me is my work. To the extent that the motion of the entire world tends towards one goal, pantheism is correct as well, albeit that this motion is not carried out by a simple unity *in the world*, but set in movement by a simple unity *prior to the world*, and is currently carried out in the world by real individuals only (Mainländer 1876/2024:297).

Note how Mainländer succeeds in uniting freedom with necessity: "The world is the free act of a premundane unity; in the world, however, there reigns only necessity, because otherwise the goal could never be reached" (Mainländer 1876/2024:298). The same goes for an action of the individual. It is free to the extent that "it was resolved upon prior to the world in a free unity", and necessary to the extent that "the resolution is materialising, is becoming a deed in a necessary way *in* the world" (Mainländer 1876/2024:298).

These conclusions are made possible, Mainländer writes, because he, for the first time, creates a pure immanent and a pure transcendent domain. Both the pantheists and the Buddhists made the mistake of blending the two: the pantheists because they located the simple unity from which the unitary world motion stems *in* the world, and the Buddhists because they "falsely inferred the complete autocracy of the individual in the world from the individual's actual feeling of complete responsibility for all his deeds" (Mainländer 1876/2024:298).

In short, Mainländer locates the simple unity in a past transcendent domain. He explains the unitary world-motion from the deed of this simple unity. Furthermore, he unifies the individual's half-autonomy with the power of chance in the world by placing the origins of autonomy in God's autonomous resolution to no longer exist (in the transcendent domain), and by explaining the power of chance (leading to the individual's half-non-autonomy)

through the unitary choice of means available in the world to carry out this resolution out. This way, he unifies freedom and necessity “in the midst of that gulf separating the perished, transcendent domain, from the immanent domain” (Mainländer 1876/2024:298).

Even given the insights gained through these investigations, Mainländer remains mild towards those turning to religion. Interpreting the recognised fate once again as the will of an almighty father as opposed to understanding it as mere fate, he considers an “innocent, harmless game of the fancy” (Mainländer 1876/2024:299). The wise man, however, “looks absolute nothingness firmly and joyfully in the eye” (Mainländer 1876/2024:300).

Discussion and conclusion

This thesis aimed to provide an overview of Mainländer’s philosophy of religion. Specifically, it aimed to answer the question of how it contributes to our understanding of the nature of existence and the human experience. In order to do that, I posed a number of sub questions.

Arriving at the simple unity

The first sub question I posed was how Mainländer arrives at the logical necessity of a simple unity located in a past transcendent domain. As we have seen, an important intermediate step that leads him to this conclusion is the insight that causal chains cannot lead us into the past of the things-in-themselves, but developmental chains can. Pursuing these developmental chains into the past, Mainländer seeks to overcome multiplicity and arrive at the unity that, in order to account for the universe’s dynamic coherence, must also be located *somewhere*. He concludes, however, that it is impossible to find this unity in the immanent domain. Hence, given the fact that both unity and multiplicity must exist (or have existed) in order to account for the existence of both freedom and coherence in the universe, and the unity cannot be located in the immanent domain, he locates it in a

past transcendent domain. This unity consisted of everything that now exists in the world. I deem this a solid hypothesis in order to account for the necessity of both multiplicity and unity under the constraint that the unity cannot be located in the immanent domain. However, note that Mainländer does present any convincing arguments for the latter claim, potentially undermining his claim of a simple unity located in a past transcendent domain.

Equating the simple unity to God

The second sub question is why Mainländer equates this simple unity to God. He does so after assessing what aspects of the simple unity our cognitive faculties could possibly fathom. He concludes that due to its simplicity and its being at absolute rest, no efficacies of forces are present and no sensory inputs are offered to the understanding, in turn leaving reason with nothing to synthesise. Hence, he characterised the simple unity as inactive, extensionless, undifferentiated, unfragmented, motionless and timeless, but stressed that it was only *relative* nothingness, since it did *exist*. Then, Mainländer notes that this kind of unimaginable but existing power has historically been called God and takes the bold step of equating his newly established simple unity with the divine. Again, this is a contentious step, since Mainländer conveniently focuses on only one characteristic that is commonly attributed to God, stepping over the other common attributes such as omnipotence, omniscience and omnipresence, the presence of which he did not prove for the simple unity. On the other hand, a simple unity can be said to have these characteristics by logical necessity.

Conceptualising the fragmentation of the simple unity as a deed

As we have seen, Mainländer furthermore conceptualises the fragmentation of the simple unity as a deed, that is, as a motivated act of will. The third sub question aimed to answer how he justified this. He initial justification he provides (‘we are in standing in the immanent domain which *is* the deed’) is a form of circular reasoning and can therefore be

rejected. His second justification for his anthropomorphisation of the simple unity is more convincing. Ascribing will and mind to the simple unity, he asserts, is only a regulative principle: it comes down to explaining the arising of the world by conceiving it *as if* it had been a motivated act of will. Holding the regulative principles to be true allows one to better understand the other claims and insights that follow from his system, and doing so is unharmful since these other claims do not depend on the truthfulness of the regulative principles. In this case: conceiving of the disintegration of the simple unity as a motivated act of will (specifically, that of no longer wanting to exist) helps one understand the will to death present in the discrete individualities present in the immanent world (which as a hypothesis indeed does not depend on the disintegration being a *deed*, since Mainländer also demonstrates the presence of this will to death from the immanent world itself). Hence, I consider his step of conceptualising the disintegration of the simple unity as a deed acceptable.

Disintegration of the simple unity and purposivity in the world

The next question I aimed to answer was what the disintegration of the simple unity tells us about the purposivity of the world and its individualities. As we have seen, with the disintegration of the simple unity, a process was set in motion: that of the movement of every individuality of the world towards death, which when obtained manifests itself as absolute rest. As stated, Mainländer established this purposivity also through the behaviour of different kinds of individualities in the immanent domain. Note however that the considerations stating that, for example, characterise gravity as proof of a will to death present in solid bodies are of limited worth, since one cannot derive the purpose of the world as a whole from the nature of one physical law. Still, the perceived purposivity leads him to posit that every discrete individuality of the world is motivated by a will to death, albeit more or less veiled by a will to life. Mainländer presents this as a mere reversal of the will to life into a will to death. However, I would argue that it goes further than that. Indeed, the will to life as hypothesised by Schopenhauer was blind and aimless. While

Mainländer's will to life seems to be blind, there seems to be a clear aim in the form of death. One could object to this that the *life* in Schopenhauer's will to life is just as much of an aim as the *death* in Mainländer's will to death. I would respond, however, that death as a goal is extremely concrete, while the will to life in Schopenhauer seems to refer to a general animating spirit without a concrete direction.

Purposivity, the will to death and redemption

Next, I aimed to answer the question how this purposivity leads Mainländer to locate redemption in death. Having established purposivity, Mainländer draws the conclusion that the kind of redemption from suffering that religions have historically offered through concepts like divine grace or the prospect of a heaven can now be found not through belief in these latter elements, but through mere death. Indeed, if the purpose of all individualities is a striving for death, endowed to them through the act of the simple unity, it makes perfect sense to locate redemption in the obtainment of this purpose. I deem it important to note, however, that in man, the will to death has fully cloaked the will to life, many people still fear and will continue to fear death. These people will by no means find redemption in (the prospect of) death. Mainländer, however, would probably respond that a person who truly understands his philosophy would lose the fear of death, storing the redemptive quality of death even for those who used to fear it.

Solving the paradox of freedom and necessity

The second-last question I aimed to answer was how Mainländer's philosophy contributes to solving the paradox of man experiencing both freedom and necessity. As we have seen, according to Mainländer, a person experiences freedom to the extent that he is one of the separate individualities created when the simple unity fragmented. At the same time, he experiences necessity to the extent that a dynamic coherence remains from what once was the simple unity. That is, the purposivity stemming from the simple unity still works

through him and other individualities. If the hypothesis regarding the fragmentation of the simple unity holds, I deem this a successful way of solving the paradox. However, as we have seen, serious criticisms can be raised against this hypothesis on which the resolution of the paradox depends.

Implications for status of pantheism and Buddhism

The last sub question I aimed to answer was what this half-autonomy means for the status and value of pantheism and Buddhism. According to Mainländer, pantheism makes the individual a tool in the hand of an all-powerful simple unity *in* the world. With that, it correctly recognises that there is a power in the world not ruled by the individual. Buddhism takes the other extreme position, making the individual all-powerful through belief in the doctrine of karma. With that, it correctly recognises the real power of the individual. This way, according to Mainländer, both doctrines present a half-truth and are therefore deserving of a certain degree of appreciation. A weakness of this view is that Mainländer seems to exaggerate the positions of both these systems. After all, authors such as Michael Levine have argued that pantheism is not necessarily incompatible with free will (Levine 1992:4), and Buddhist theology does recognise the existence of necessary natural laws (Promta 2016:981). Still, in Mainländer's view, it is only his philosophy that posits both truths, with the additional advantage of founding them not on faith, but on sure knowledge. As we have seen, however, Mainländer at times takes logical steps that are not adequately substantiated, and hence the point can be made that his system at certain points can be accused of relying on faith as well.

Special contribution of Mainländer's philosophy of religion

Using the answers to these sub questions, the answer to the main research question of this thesis presents itself. What Mainländer's philosophy of religion contributes to our understanding of the nature of existence and human experience is the interesting

hypothesis of a simple unity located in a transcendent past, an original conceptualisation of God as this very unity, a hypothesis explaining the purposivity the world at times seems to show, a path to redemption that does not depend on faith, and a novel revaluation the religious and philosophical doctrines of pantheism and Buddhism.

Suggestions for further research

This thesis focused on the elements relevant to Mainländer's philosophy of religion that were presented in the chapters on epistemology, physics and metaphysics in his 1876 work *The Philosophy of Redemption*. I did not consult the chapters on aesthetics, ethics and politics. Further research may benefit from an elaborate close-reading of these chapters as well. This could potentially reveal more of the ethical implications of the views held by Mainländer, and lead to more clarity out the social and political implications of these views. Furthermore, Mainländer published a number of separate essays on pantheism, Buddhism and Christianity. As of today, these have not been translated into English. Revealing the insights contained in them could significantly benefit understanding of his positions regarding these systems. Lastly, interesting new insights might be gained by conducting a comparative study of the philosophies of religion of both Philipp Mainländer and his chief source of intellectual inspiration, Arthur Schopenhauer.

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