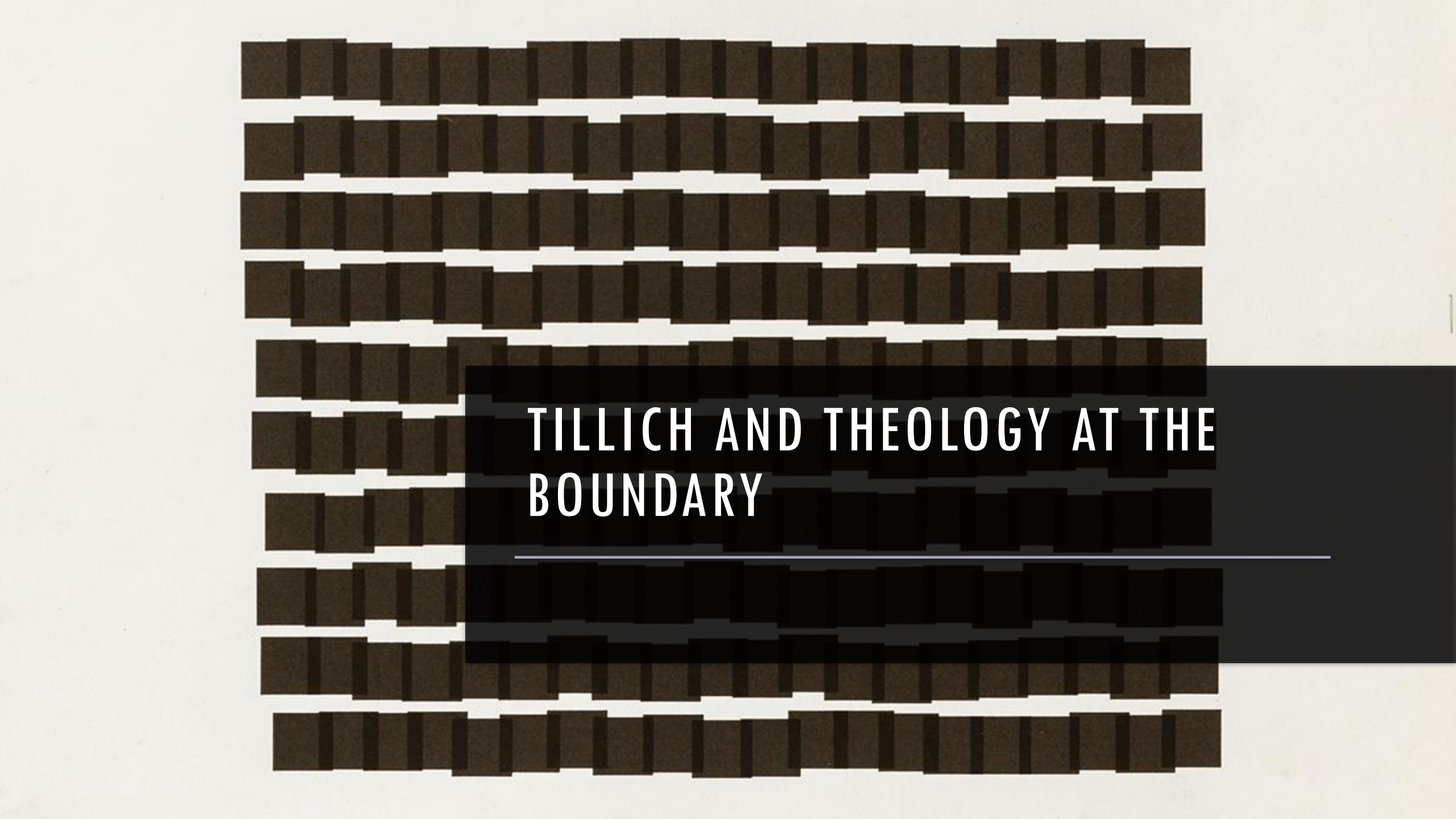


HPRS5905/6905

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**MODERN
CHRISTIAN
THEOLOGY**

Tillich I



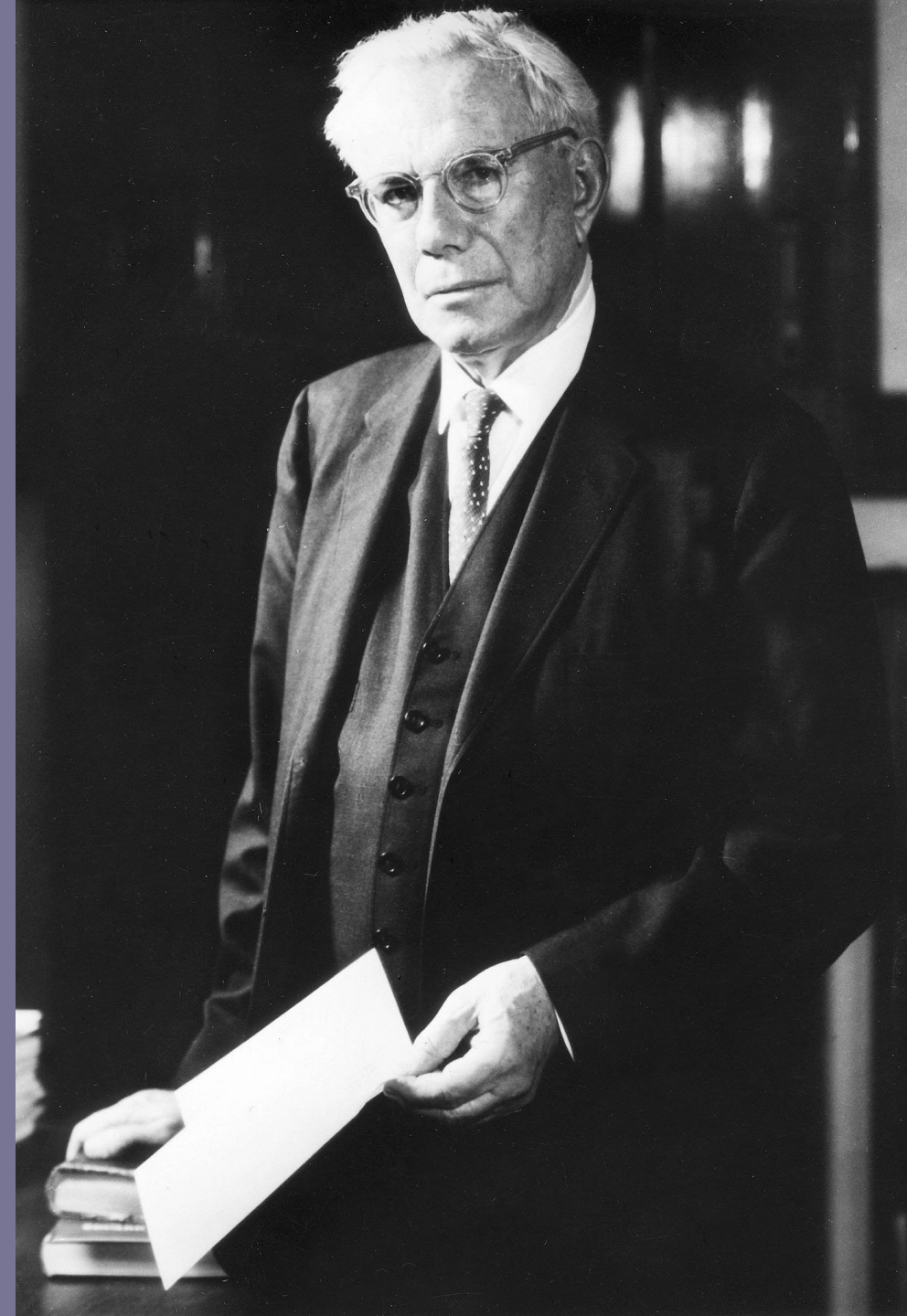
TILlich AND THEOLOGY AT THE BOUNDARY

TILlich AND THEOLOGY AT THE BOUNDARY

Paul Tillich (1886–1965) described his own intellectual situation with a concept he made famous: the boundary.

He stood, he said, on the boundary between theology and philosophy, between church and society, between religion and culture, between Germany and America, between the nineteenth century and the twentieth.

This self-characterisation is more than biographical metaphor though; it identifies the generative condition of his entire theological programme.



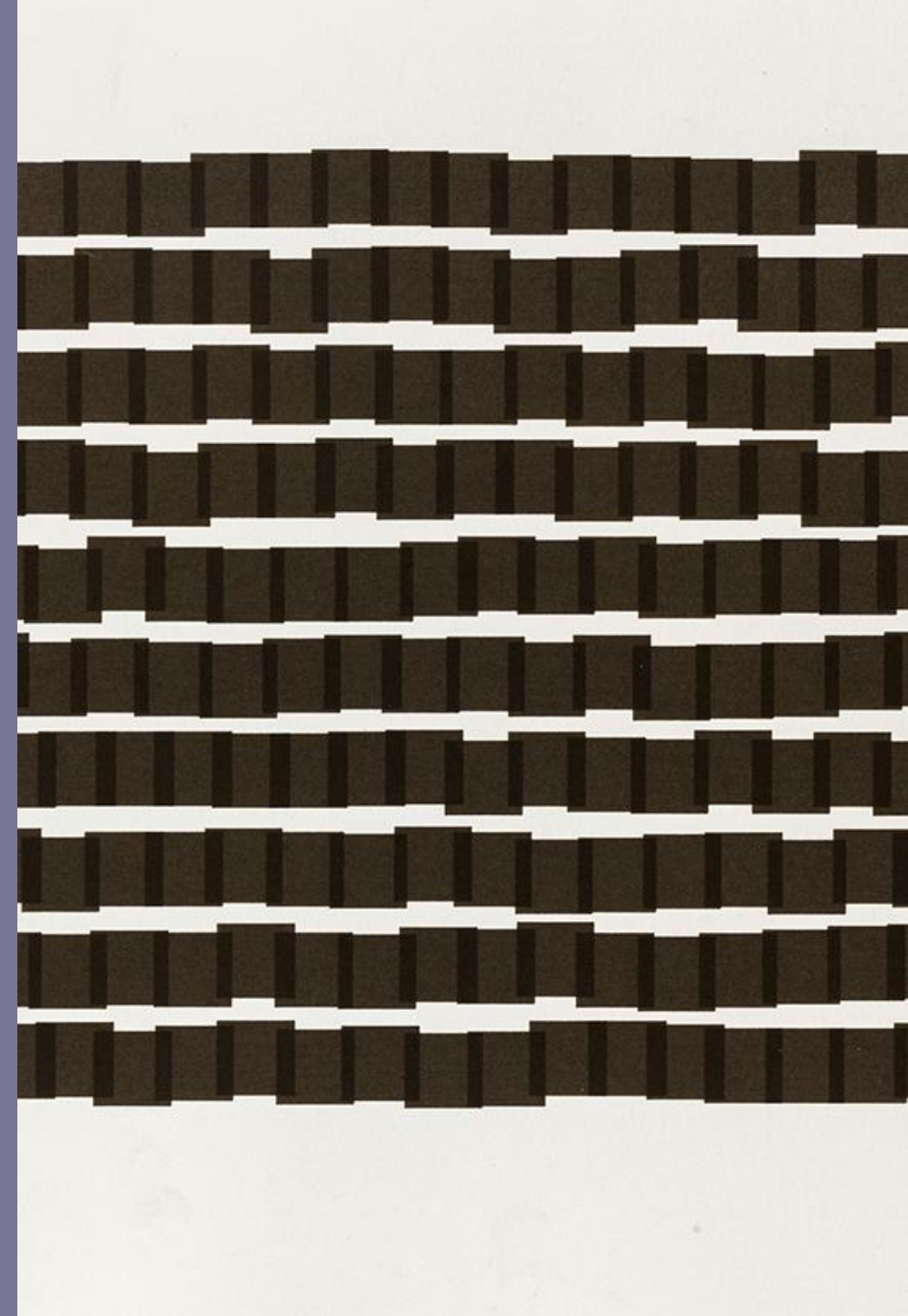
TILlich AND THEOLOGY AT THE BOUNDARY

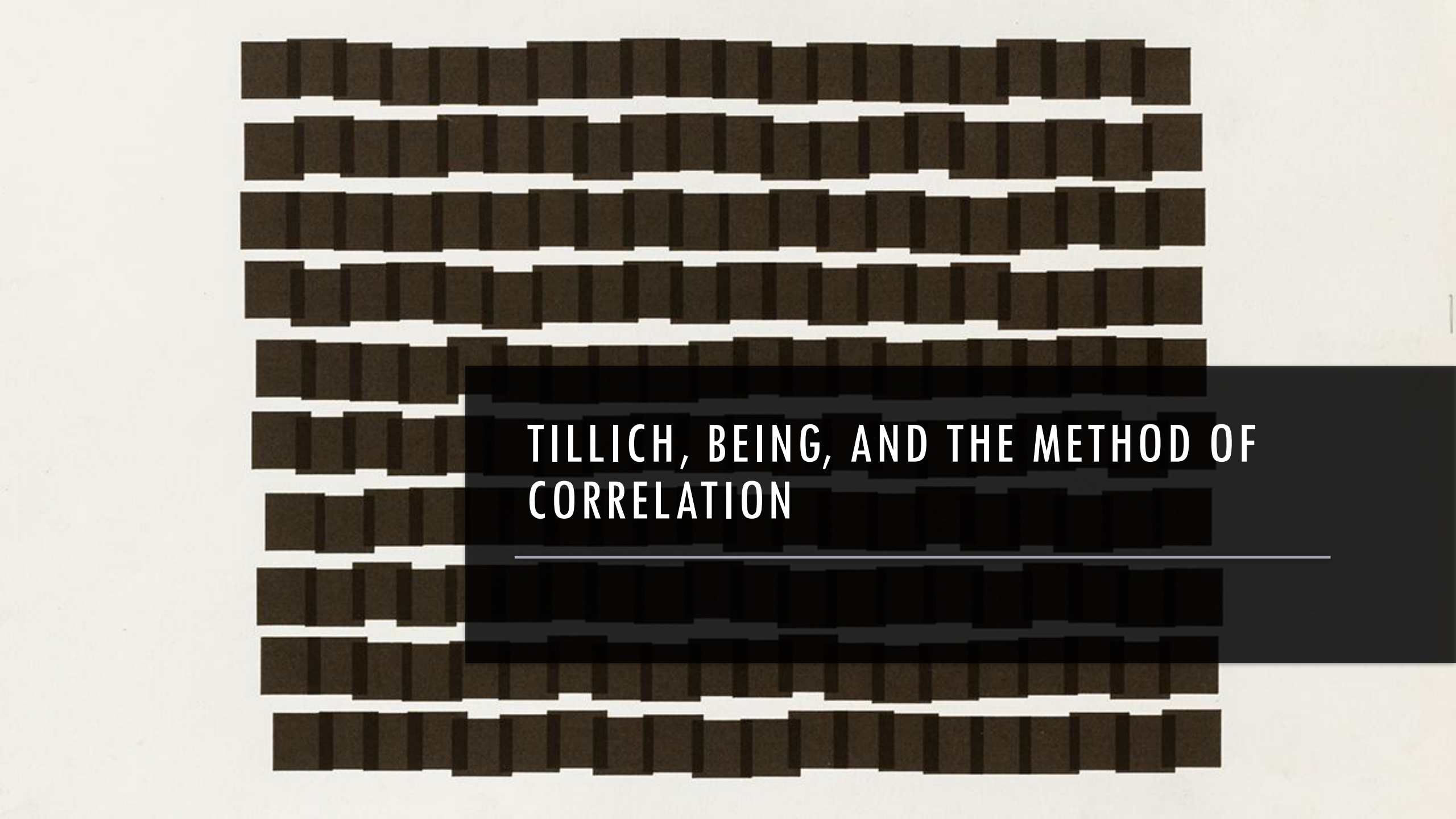
Tillich was formed by three decisive experiences.

The first was his encounter, during his doctoral work in Berlin, with the Romantic idealist tradition.

The second, and perhaps most formative, was the experience of the First World War, in which he served as a military chaplain and encountered at first hand the collapse of the cultural and moral confidence that had sustained liberal Protestant theology.

The third was his engagement with German expressionism and avant-garde culture in the Weimar Republic years — an engagement that convinced him that the questions of ultimate concern were most alive not in the churches, but in the creative fringes of secular culture.





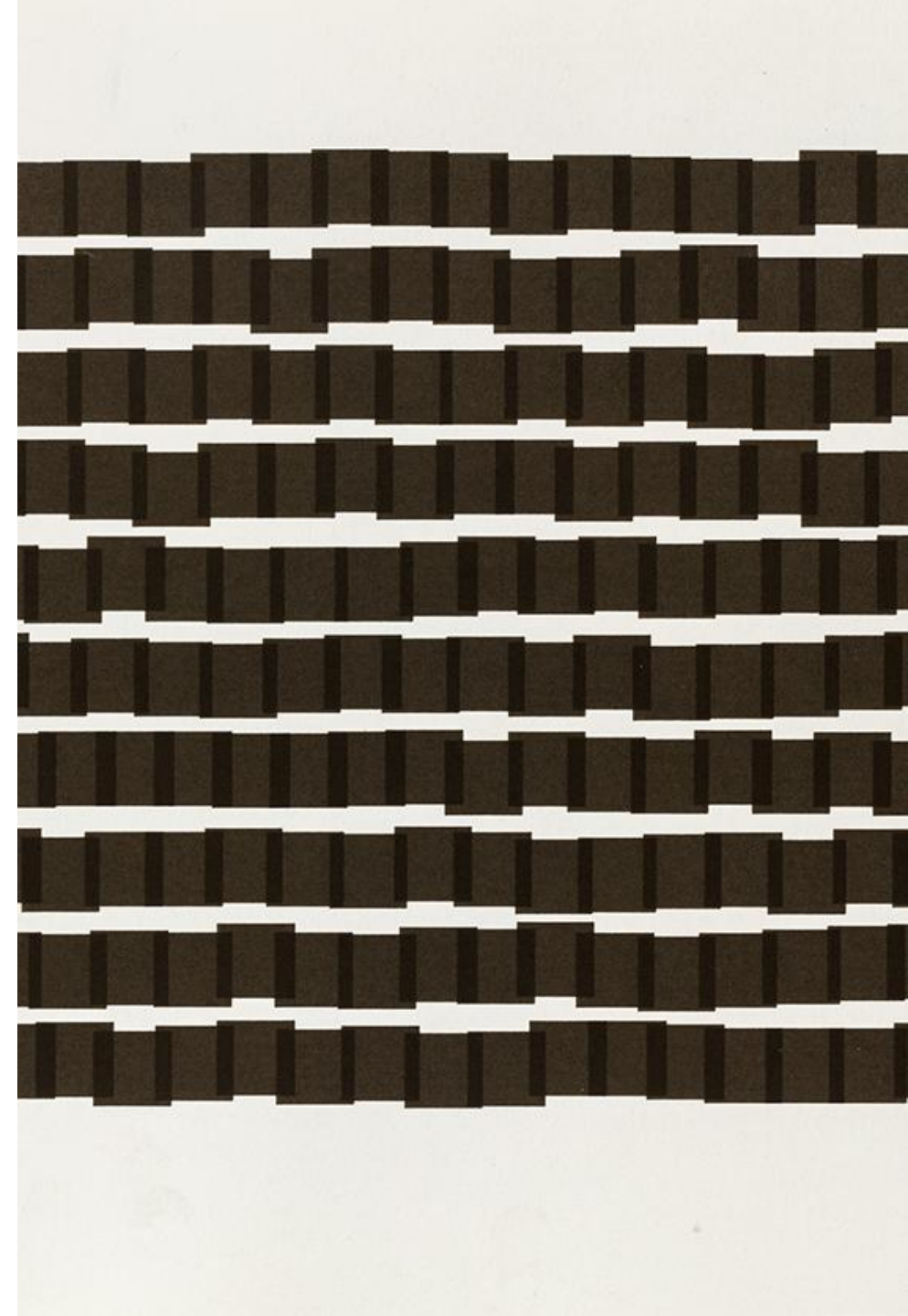
TILlich, BEING, AND THE METHOD OF CORRELATION

TILlich AND THE METHOD OF CORRELATION

Tillich's organising methodological principle is the method of correlation, developed most fully in the introduction to the first volume of his *Systematic Theology* (1951).

The method has a deceptively simple structure: theology proceeds by correlating the questions that arise from an analysis of the human existential situation with the answers that Christian revelation provides.

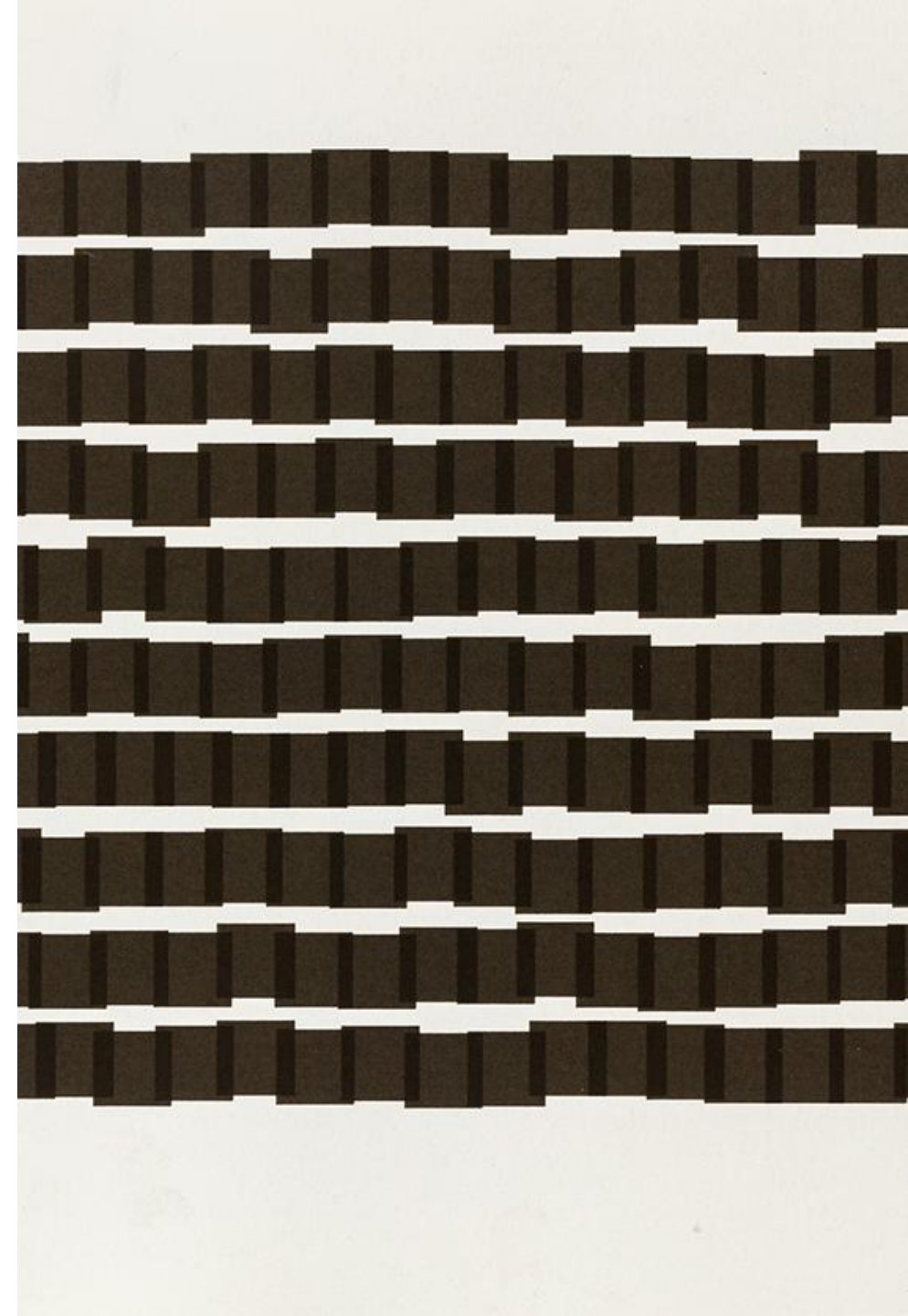
Questions and answers are worked out together, each shaping the form in which the other is expressed.



TILlich AND THE METHOD OF CORRELATION

The questions come from below – from the analysis of human existence, its structures, its anxieties, its aspirations, and above all its inevitable confrontations with finitude, contingency, guilt, and meaninglessness.

The answers come from above – from the symbols, narratives, and doctrines of Christian revelation, which are shown to address precisely the questions that human existence poses.

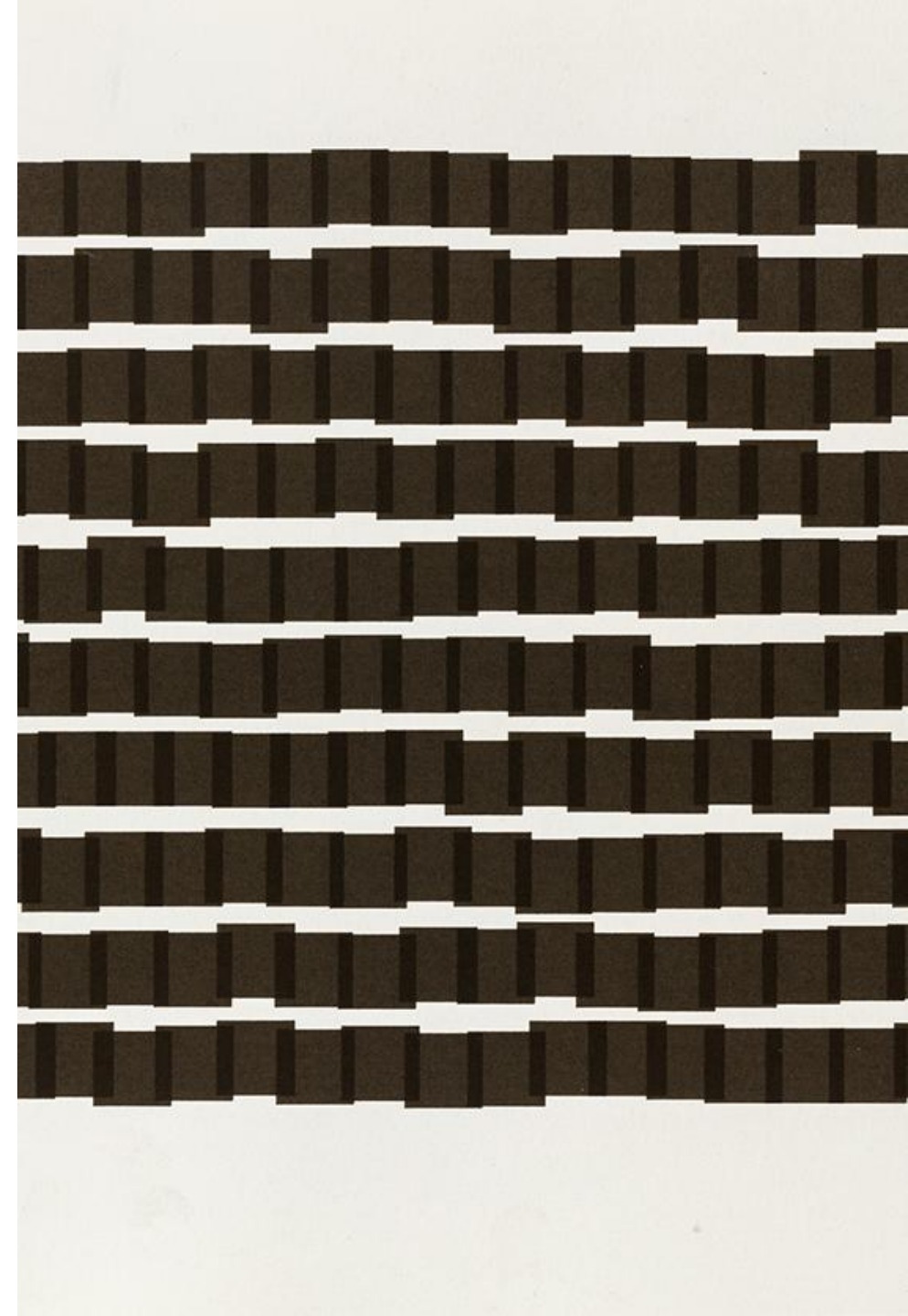


TILlich AND THE METHOD OF CORRELATION

The method of correlation is both the most celebrated and the most contested feature of Tillich's theology, and its assessment sharply divides theologians.

The method is genuinely dialogical: it does not import secular questions into theology as ornamental illustrations of predetermined answers, nor does it derive theological content entirely from secular analysis.

It seeks to respond directly to the core concern of 'modern theology' as we have considered it throughout this module – how are we to respond to the situation of modernity that we find ourselves in?



TILlich AND THE METHOD OF CORRELATION

Its advocates regard it as the most adequate methodological response to the conditions of modern theology: it honours both the integrity of human experience and the specific content of Christian revelation, and it makes theology genuinely responsive to the actual intellectual and existential situation of the people to whom it speaks.

Its critics, above all Karl Barth, argue that the method subtly subordinates the content of revelation to the prior shape of human questions.

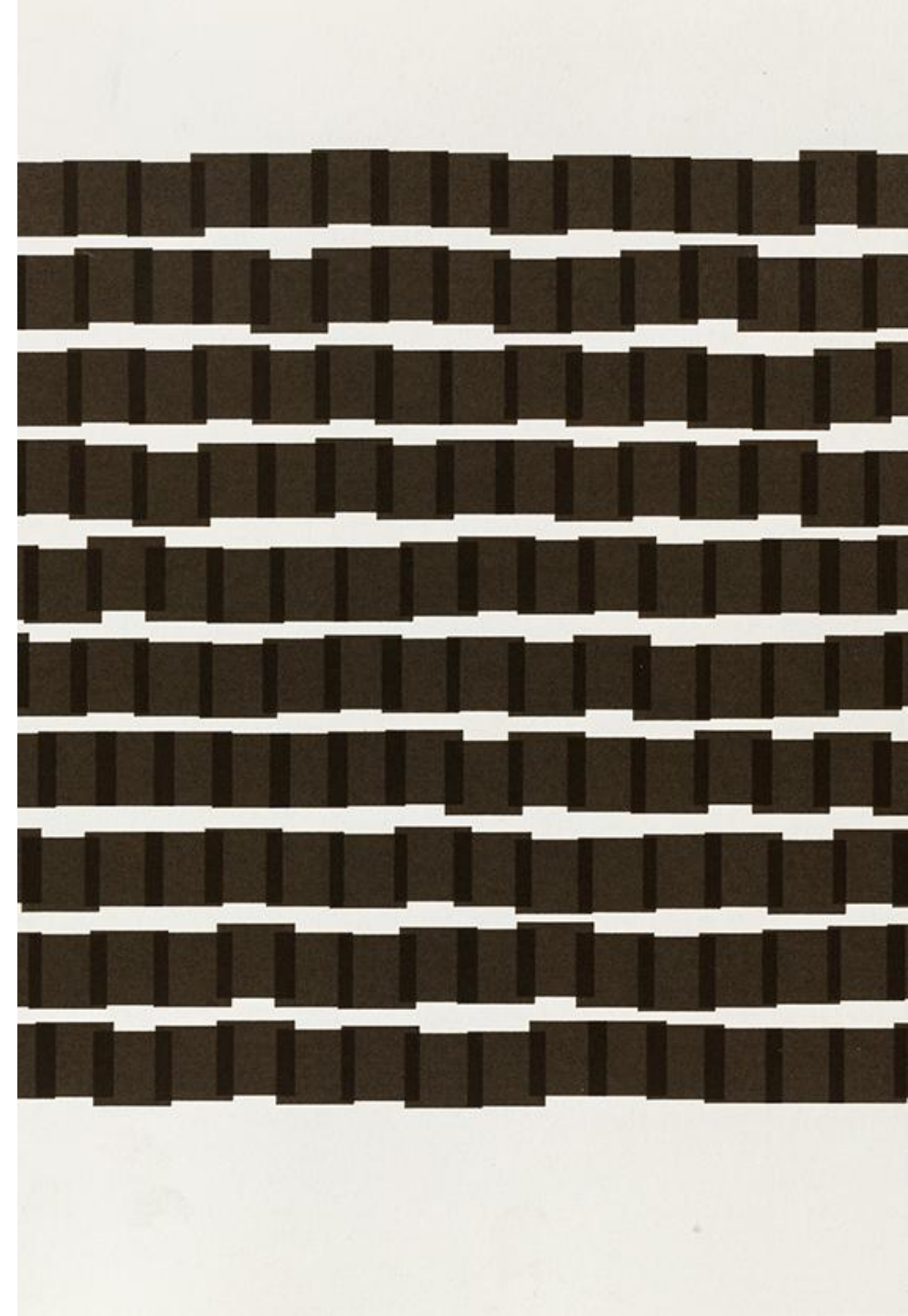
If Christian symbols are presented as answers to questions that secular existence has already posed, then the content of those symbols is constrained from the beginning by the form of the questions: God can only answer what humanity has already asked.

BEING AND NON-BEING

The first and most fundamental correlation in Tillich's *Systematic Theology*, is between the question of being and the symbol of God.

Following a tradition of ontological inquiry that runs from Parmenides through Aquinas to Heidegger, Tillich argues that the most fundamental question that human consciousness can pose is the question of being itself:

Why is there something rather than nothing?

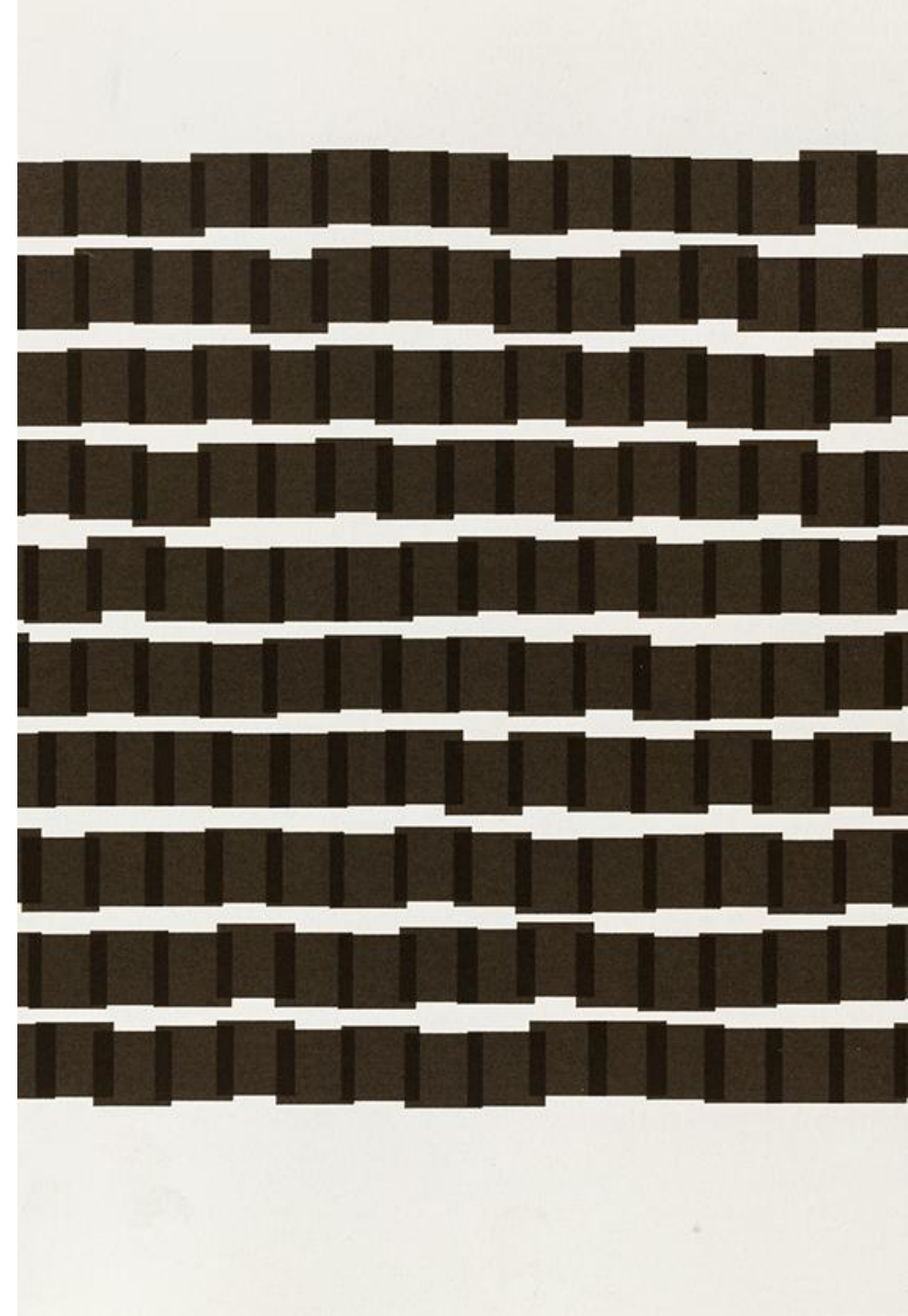


BEING AND NON-BEING

Crucially, the human being is not merely a detached inquirer asking this question. Instead, it is a being who exists under the permanent threat of non-being, of death and the possibility of annihilation.

Anxiety, for Tillich, is the existential awareness of this threat: the sense that being is not self-grounding, that existence carries within it the possibility of its own negation.

This anxiety is universal, inescapable, and the experience in which the question of God is actually posed in human existence, long before any explicitly religious vocabulary is reached.



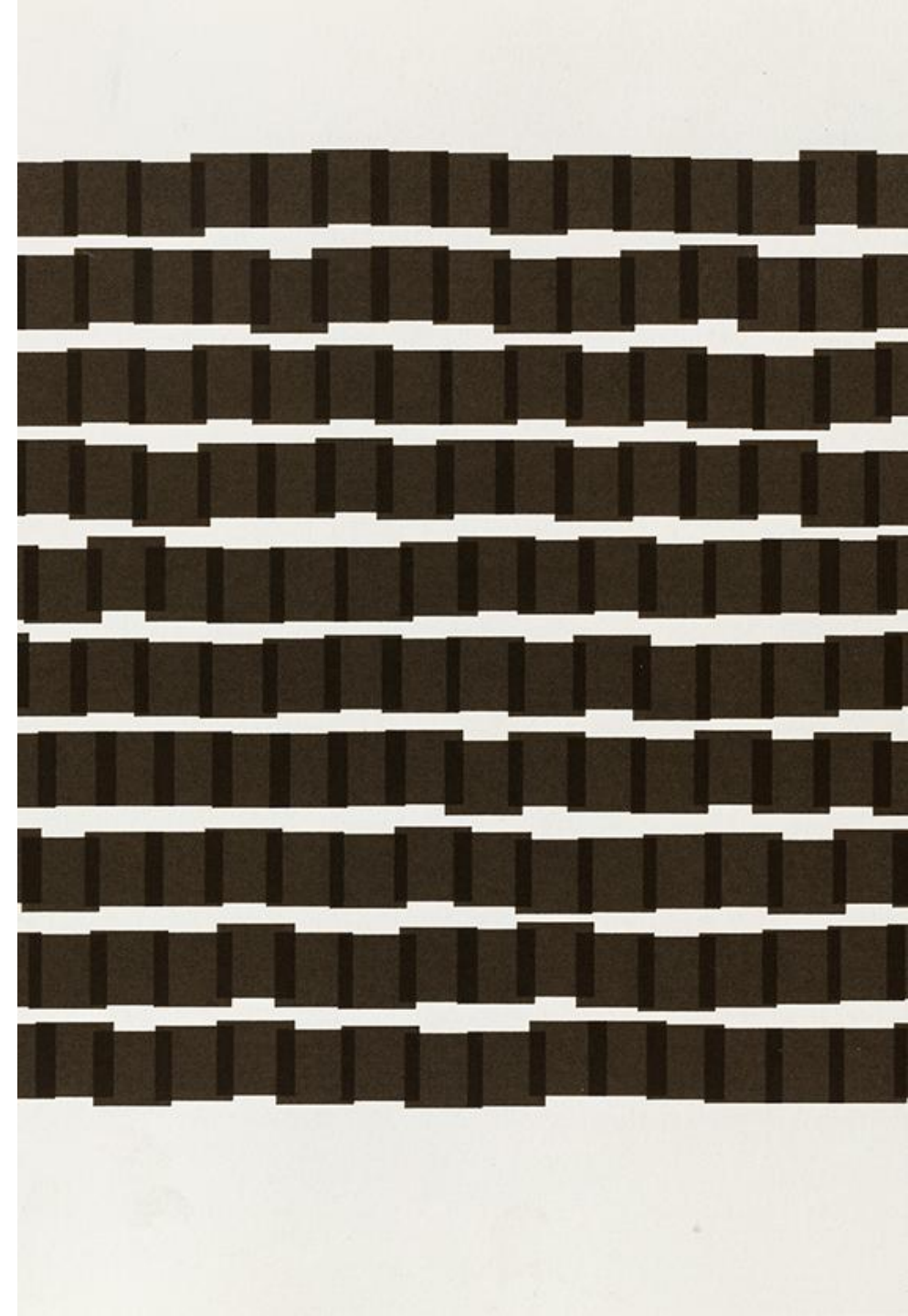
BEING AND NON-BEING

Tillich's answer to the question of being, and his most controversial theological formulation, is that God is the ground of being, or being-itself.

This claim requires careful unpacking.

Tillich is not saying that God is one being among others, even the greatest, most powerful, or most perfect being. A God who is a being among beings would be subject to the conditions of finitude: limited, conditioned, contingent.

Such a God would be an idol or a super-person to whom human categories straightforwardly apply.

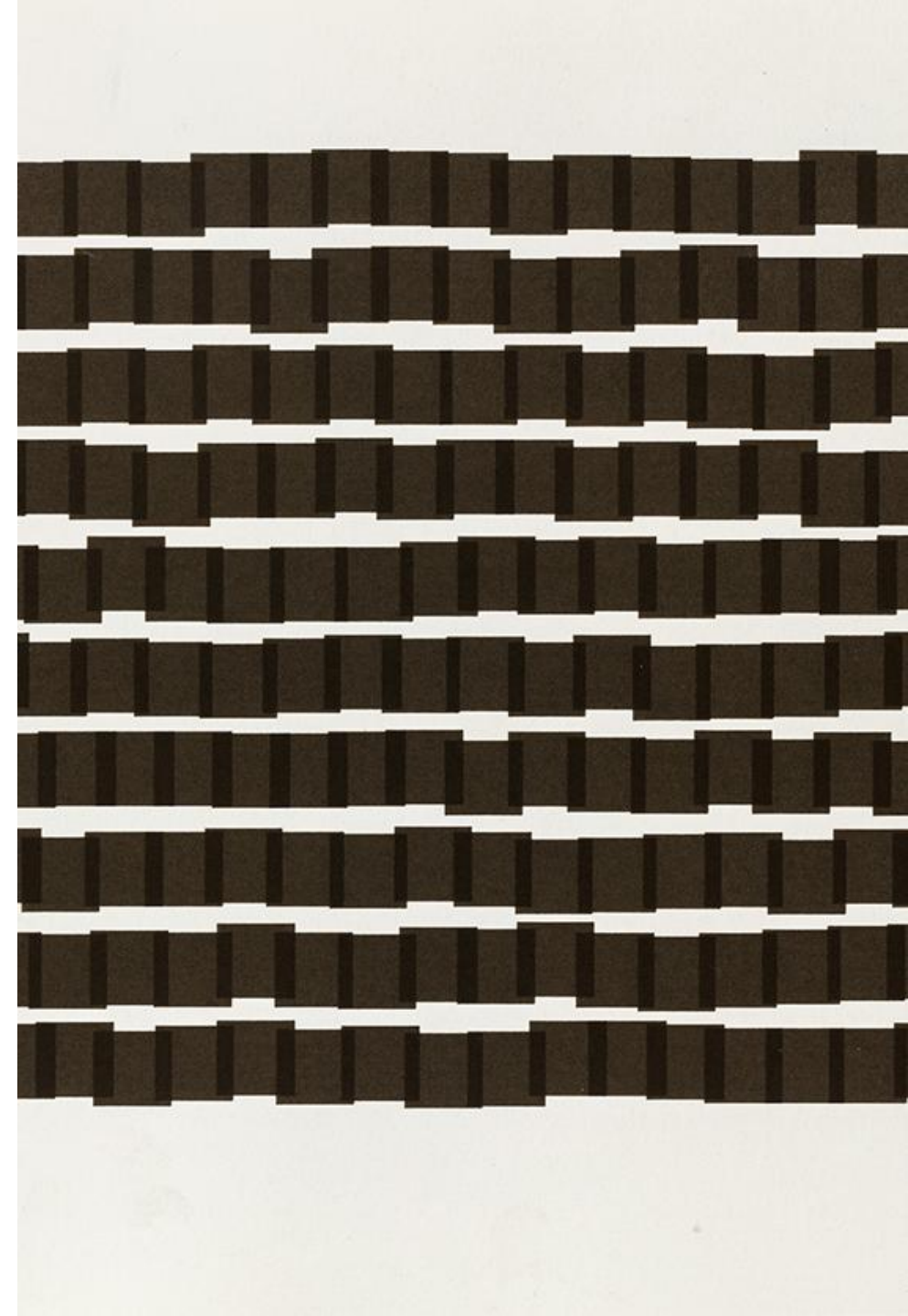


BEING AND NON-BEING

Instead, Tillich's God is not a being but being-itself, that is the power of being that underlies and sustains all particular beings, the inexhaustible ground from which everything that exists draws its existence.

This God transcends the theism-atheism debate entirely, because the debate presupposes that God is a being whose existence can be confirmed or denied which is precisely what Tillich denies.

God as being-itself is not one item in the inventory of the world but the condition for the possibility of any inventory at all.





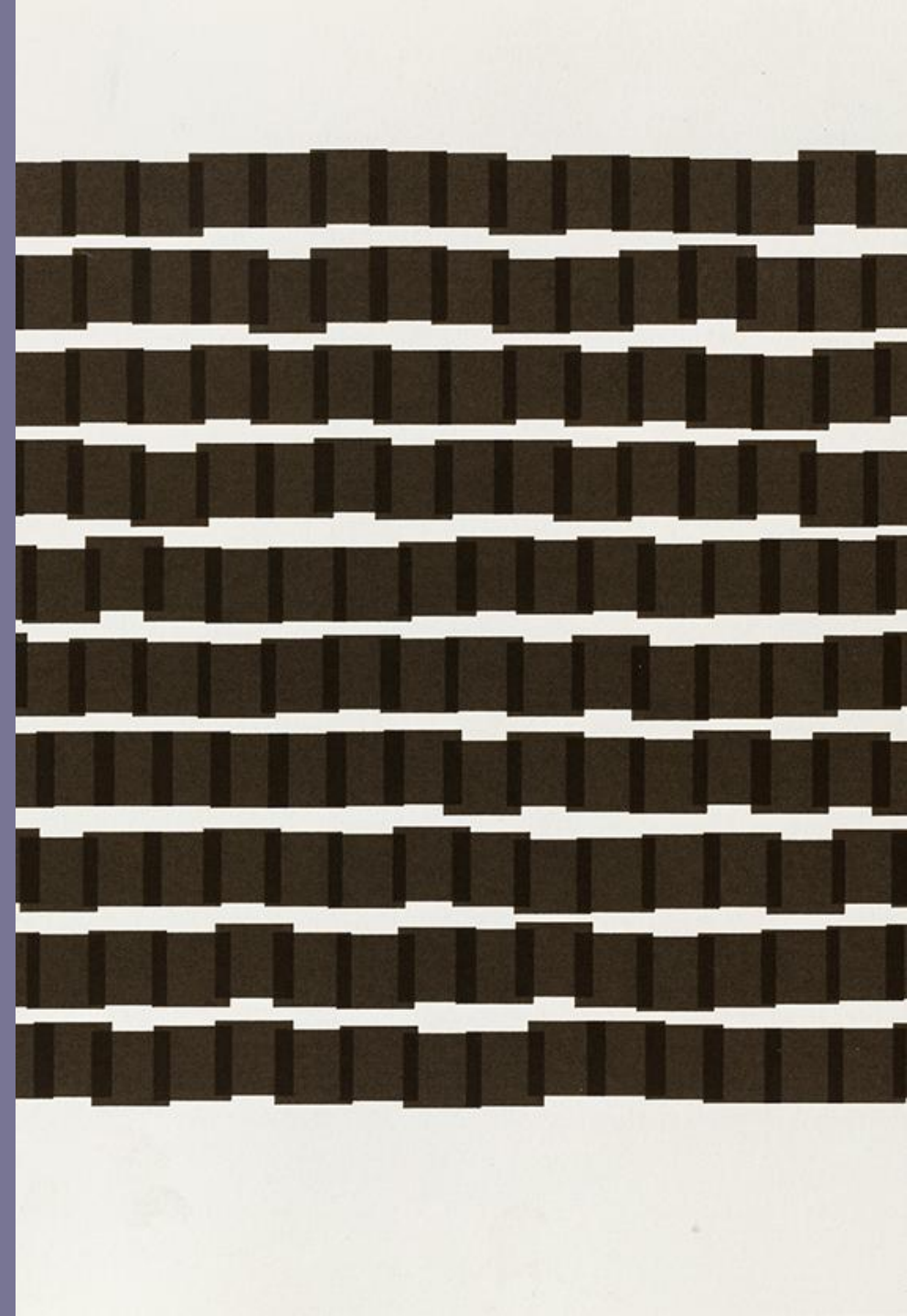
ULTIMATE CONCERN AND EXISTENTIALISM

ULTIMATE CONCERN AND EXISTENTIALISM

The concept of ultimate concern is Tillich's other widely used and often misunderstood formulation, and it deserves more careful analysis than it typically receives.

Ultimate concern for Tillich is not simply a matter of intensity, for example 'of caring very much about something'.

Instead, it is a structural feature of human existence: the fact that every human life is organised around some concern that functions as its ultimate organising centre, relative to which everything else is assessed, prioritised, and given meaning.

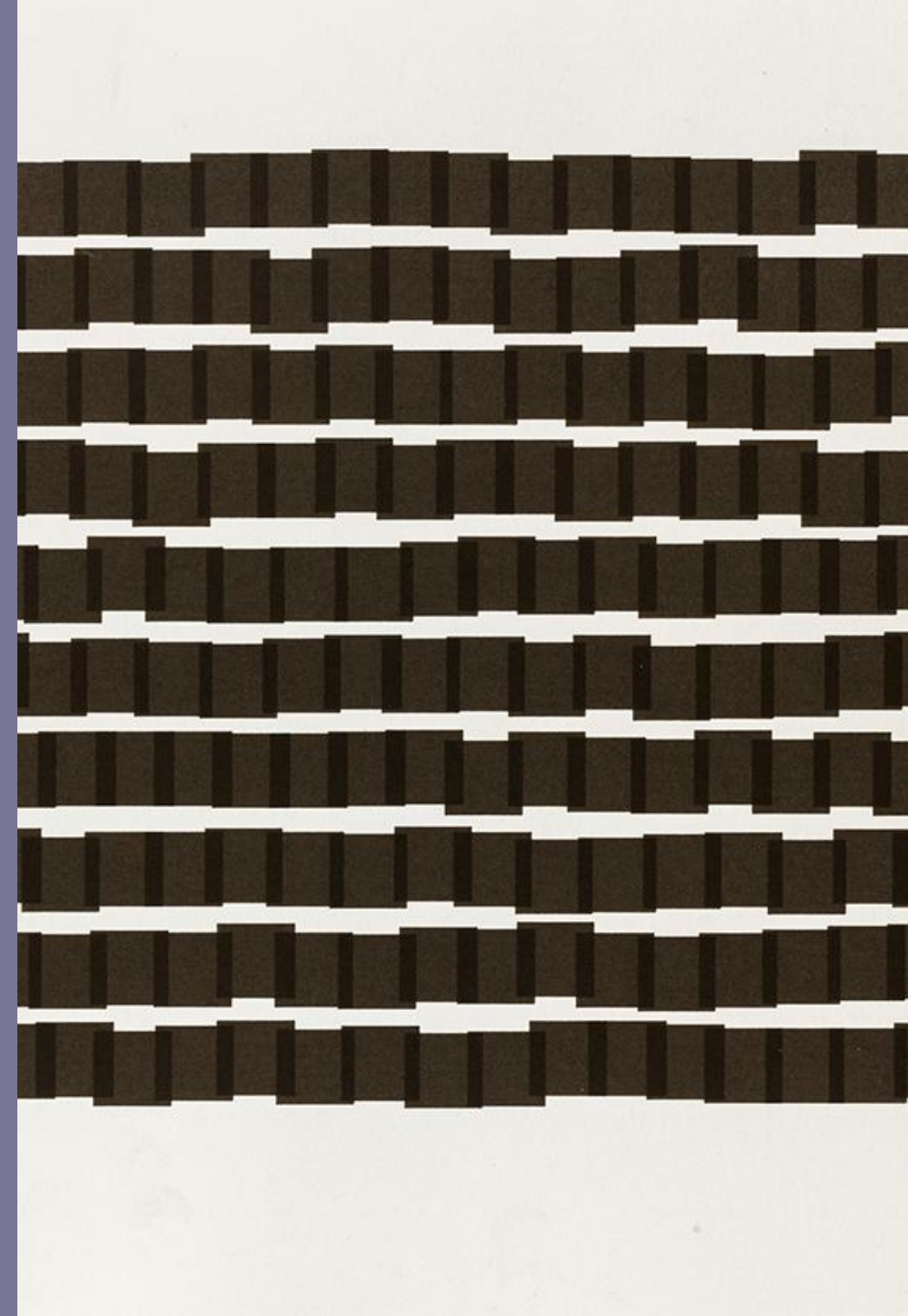


ULTIMATE CONCERN AND EXISTENTIALISM

This ultimate concern may be explicitly religious, or it may be apparently secular depending on who we are and what our goals are.

But in either case, it functions religiously: it claims unconditional devotion, provides the framework within which all other values are arranged, and makes demands of total commitment.

Religion, for Tillich, is defined as the dimension of ultimate concern in human existence, drawing on Durkheim's definition of religion as functional — religion is whatever fulfils the religious function.



EXISTENTIALISM

Tillich's development of this notion of 'ultimate concern' arises from his engagement with existentialist philosophy: existentialism provides him with the most adequate available analysis of the human situation and is a reflection of the core concern shared by humanity.

For Tillich, these existentialist analyses are not secular intrusions into theology, but the most penetrating available descriptions of the human condition that Christian theology has always sought to address, just now rendered in a vocabulary stripped of traditional religious packaging.

Heidegger

Human existence as being-toward-death.

Anxiety as the fundamental mood that discloses the structure of *Dasein*.

Authenticity as the mode of existence in which the self confronts its own finitude without evasion.

Sartre

Account of freedom, responsibility, and the burden of self-creation.

Human existence as characterised by the unresolvable tension between freedom and finitude.

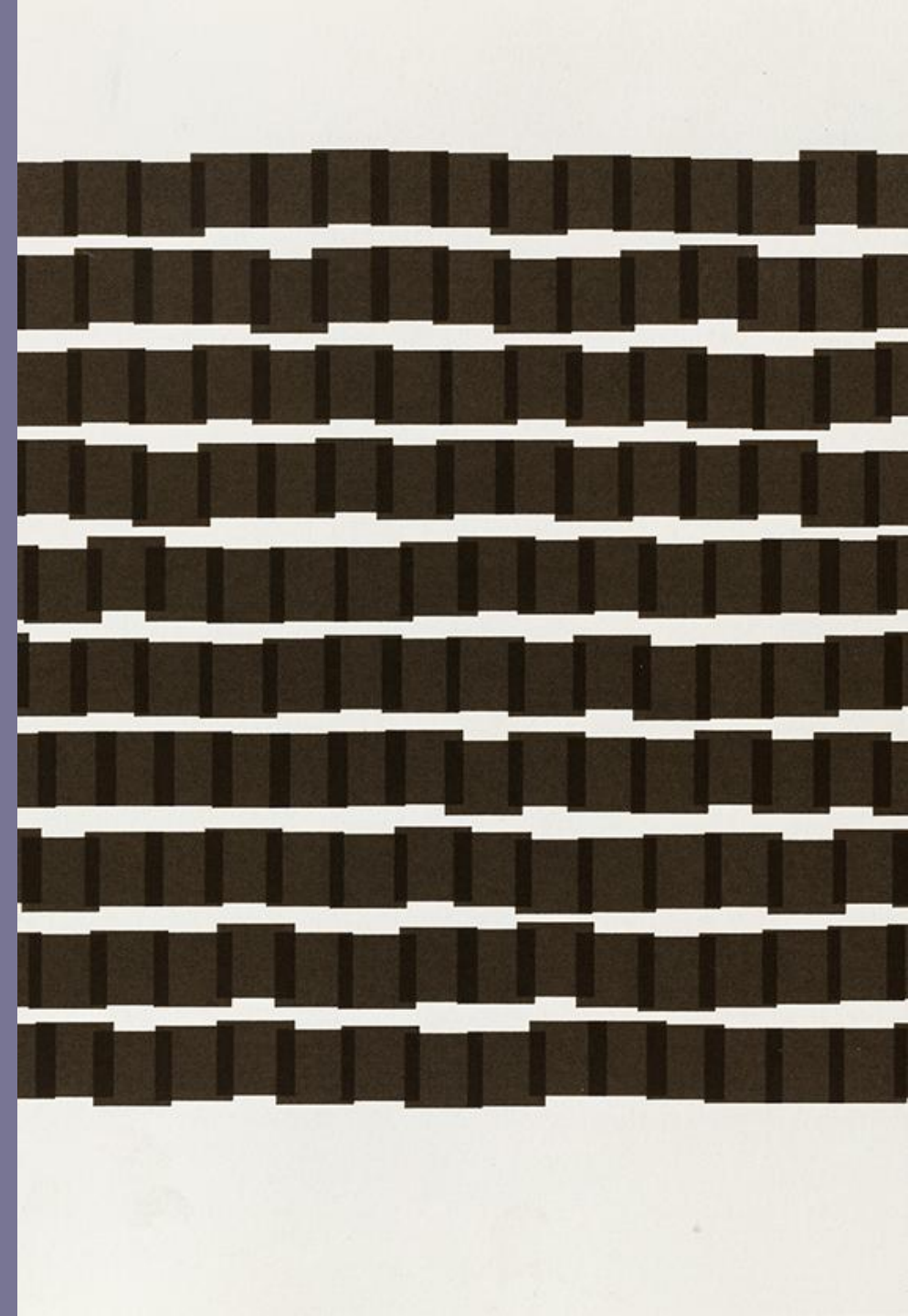
Tension between what the human being essentially is, and what its existence actually achieves.

THE COURAGE TO BE

Tillich's most widely read work '*The Courage to Be*' (1952), demonstrates with unusual accessibility how his ontological and existentialist categories come together coherently to address the actual condition of modern human beings.

The central argument is that courage, that is the self-affirmation of being in the face of non-being, is the fundamental act by which human existence maintains itself against the threat of annihilation.

It is only by self-affirming our existence, that we stave off the anxiety produced by the recognition of our own inevitable negation.



THE COURAGE TO BE

Tillich identifies three forms of anxiety that generate the corresponding need for courage in us.

The third form, he argues, is the characteristic anxiety of specifically modern culture – the experience of the dissolution of meaning, the collapse of the structures that previously gave human life its orientation and worth.

The 'courage to be' in the face of meaninglessness is not derived from any particular set of beliefs or doctrines, but from the ground of being itself, the power of being that underlies every particular act of self-affirmation.

The threat to our ontic being

- The anxiety of fate and death

The threat to our moral being

- The anxiety of guilt and condemnation

The threat to our spiritual being

- The anxiety of emptiness and meaninglessness

THE COURAGE TO BE

Tillich's three forms of anxiety deserve attention as a diagnostic framework for understanding the different historical forms in which the human encounter with non-being has been experienced and responded to.

The anxiety of fate and death dominated the ancient world and generated the classical religious responses of participation in the divine life, mystery cult, and Stoic courage.

The anxiety of guilt and condemnation dominated the medieval Christian world and generated the religious responses of penance, absolution, and the Reformation's forensic account of justification.

The anxiety of meaninglessness and emptiness has become dominant in the twentieth century, generated by the collapse of the cultural and metaphysical frameworks that previously gave human life its orientation and meaning.

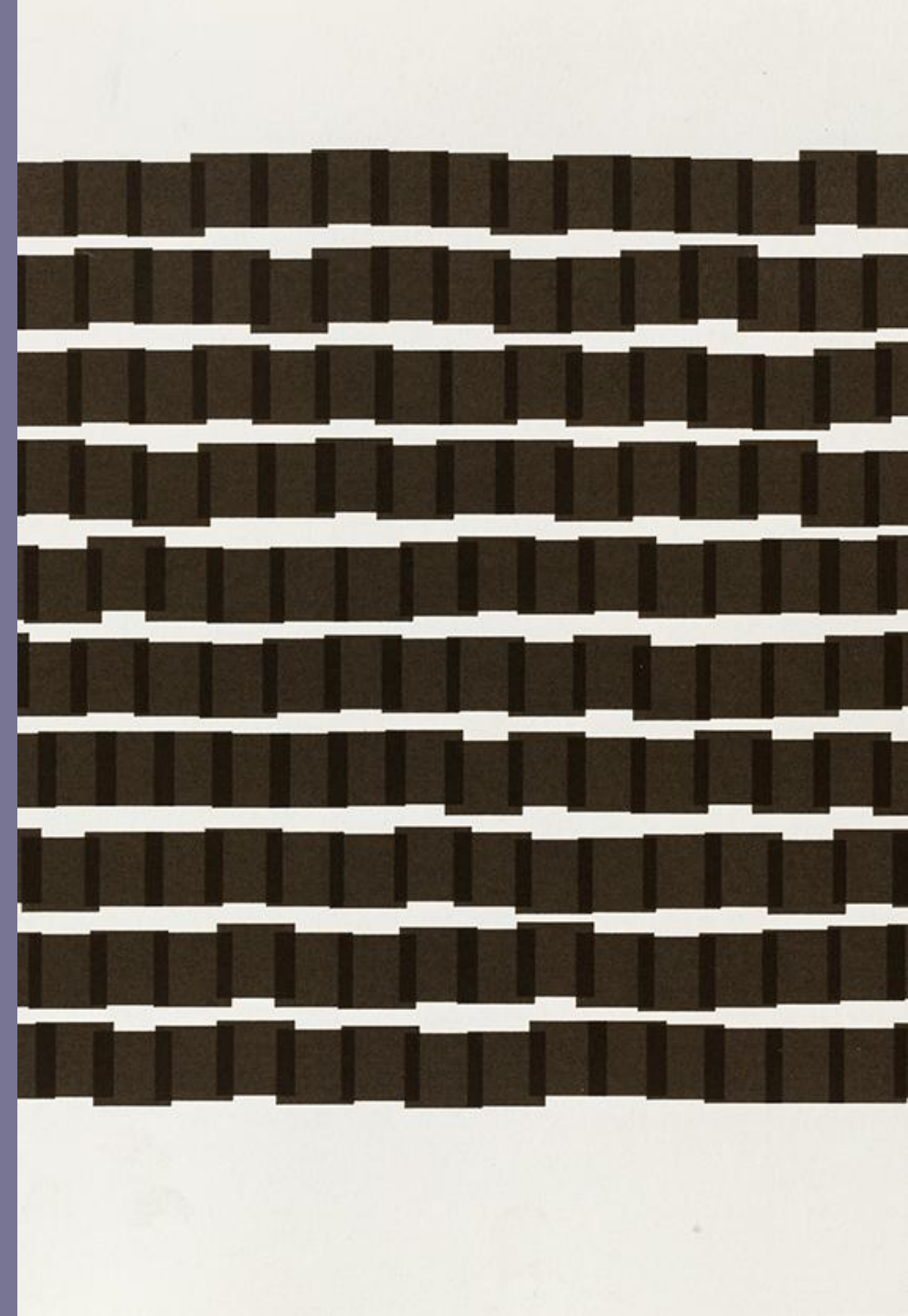


GOD BEYOND THEISM

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One of Tillich's most provocative and theologically significant moves is his insistence that the God of Christian faith must be understood as God beyond traditional theism – beyond the conception of God as a supreme being existing alongside other beings, available for human examination and either confirmed or denied by empirical or metaphysical inquiry.

Tillich argues that the God of popular theism – the supernatural person who intervenes in natural processes, hears and answers prayers, and punishes or rewards according to a divine moral calculus – is an idolatrous projection: the hypostatisation of the human person onto an infinite scale



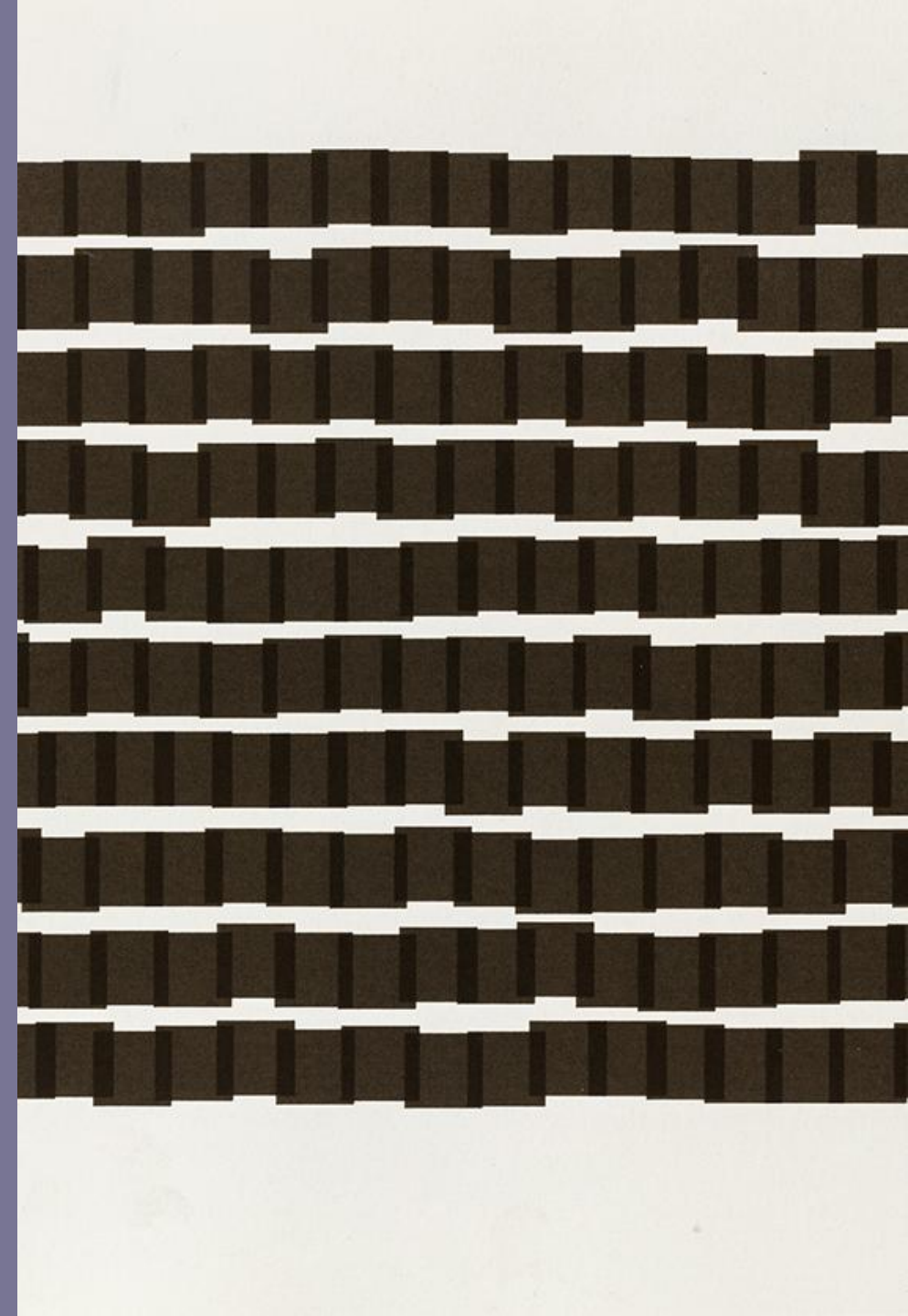
GOD BEYOND THEISM

In order to avoid this collapse of the description of God into idolatry, Tillich relies heavily on an account of symbolic language.

He makes the claim that all theological statements except one are symbolic. The one non-symbolic theological statement is that God is being-itself: this is a direct ontological claim that can be made literally.

But everything else that theology says about God e.g. that God is personal, that God is loving, that God is creator etc. is symbolic.

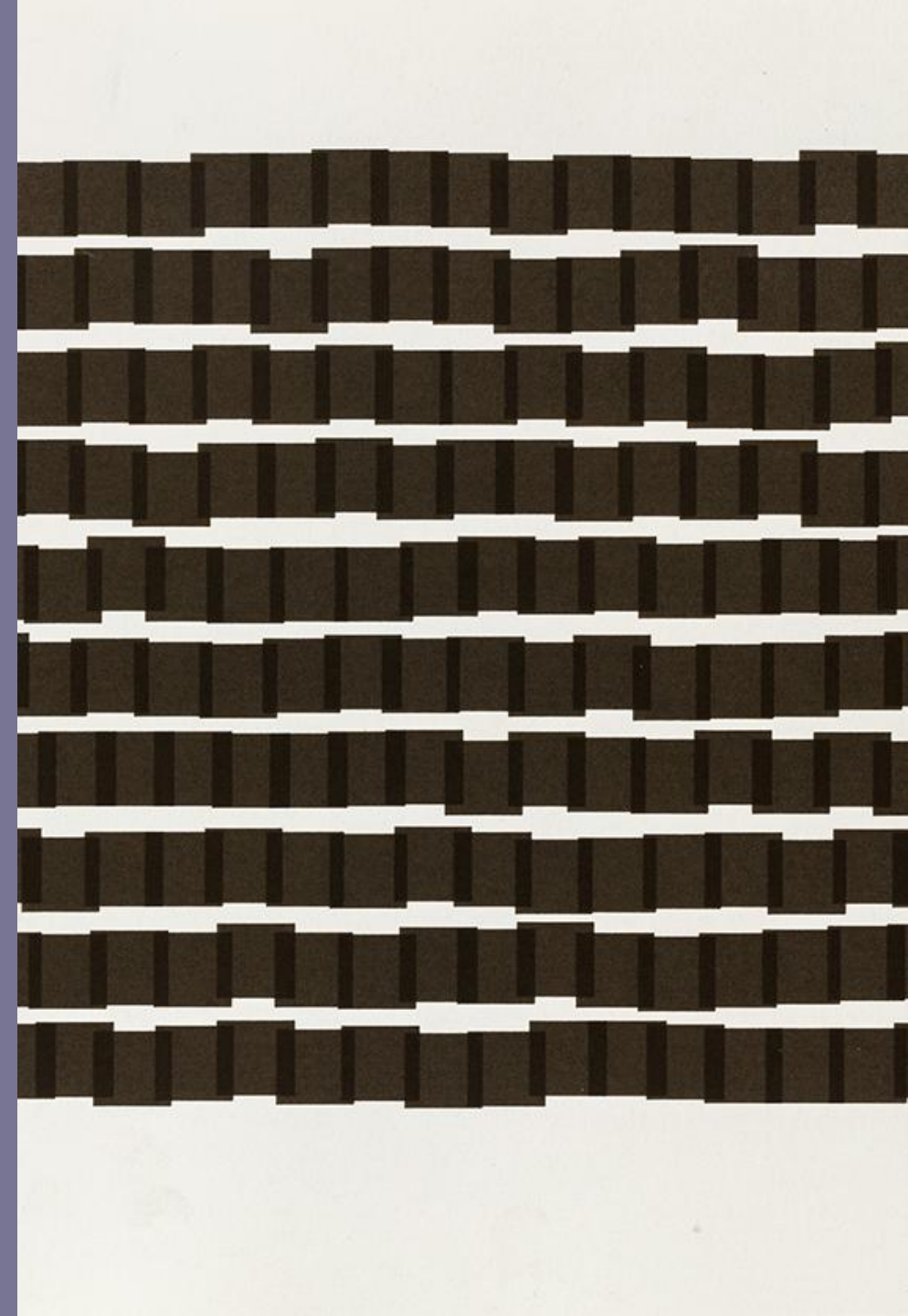
A symbol, for Tillich, is not merely a sign that points toward something other than itself; it participates in the reality it symbolises and makes that reality present in a way that no straightforwardly literal statement could.



GOD BEYOND THEISM

Religious symbols like the cross, the resurrection, the imagery of the kingdom, are not mythological projections to be dissolved by critical reason; they are the irreplaceable vehicles through which the ground of being makes itself present to human consciousness.

To demythologise them entirely, as Bultmann (another 'modern theologian') proposed, would be to cut theology off from its proper means of expression.



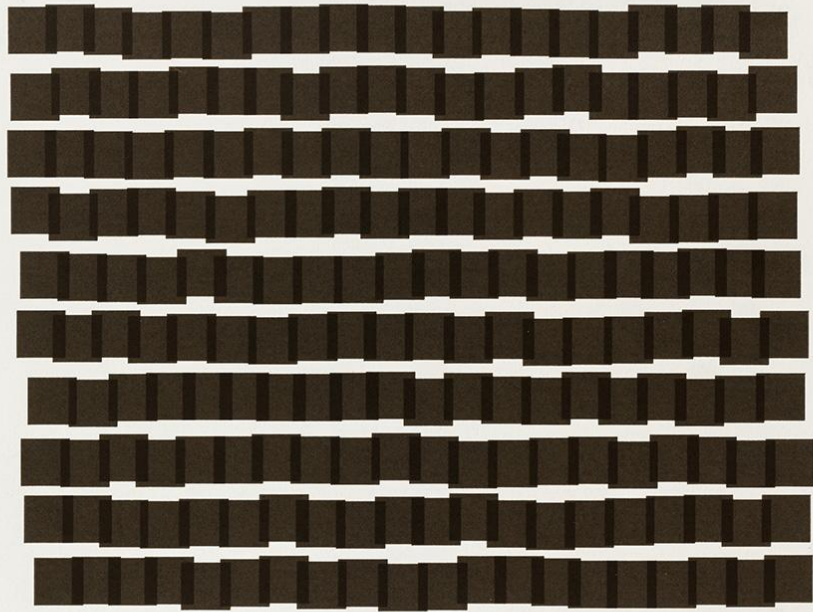
TILlich AND BULTMANN

The relationship between Tillich and Rudolf Bultmann (1884-1976) illuminates both thinkers by contrast.

Both sought to make the New Testament's message accessible to modern human beings shaped by scientific and secular culture. Both drew on existentialist philosophy as the key to unlocking the existential significance of the biblical material. But their strategies diverge at a crucial point.

Bultmann's programme of demythologisation aims to strip away the mythological world-picture of the New Testament in order to recover the existential core.

Tillich resisted this stripping-away: for him, the mythological and symbolic language of religion is not an expendable husk encasing a philosophical kernel, but an irreducible mode of expression for which no purely conceptual substitute is available.

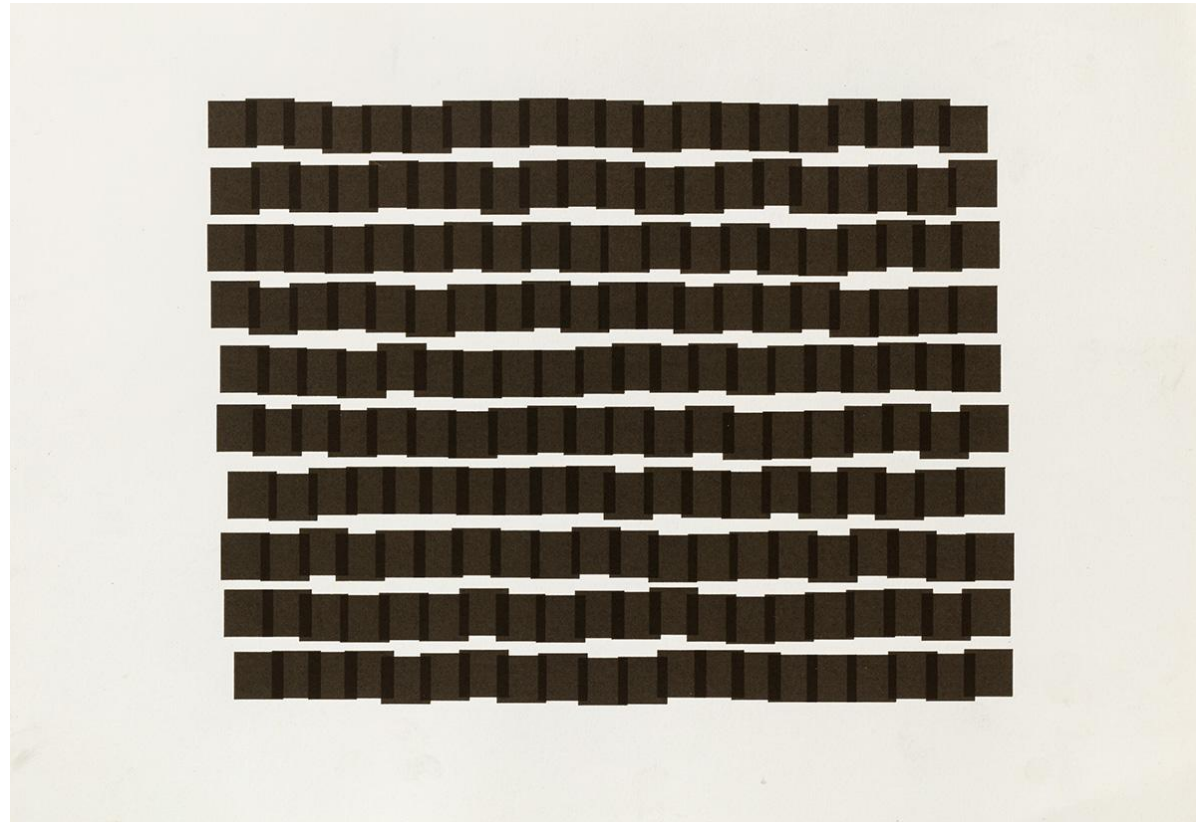


NEW BEING AND CHRISTOLOGY

One of the places where this distinction becomes most clear is in Tillich's treatment of Christology in his *Systematic Theology* (1951).

For Tillich, the human situation is characterised by estrangement: the gap between what human existence essentially is (e.g. its created goodness, its orientation toward the ground of being) and what it actually achieves in its finitude, freedom, and sin.

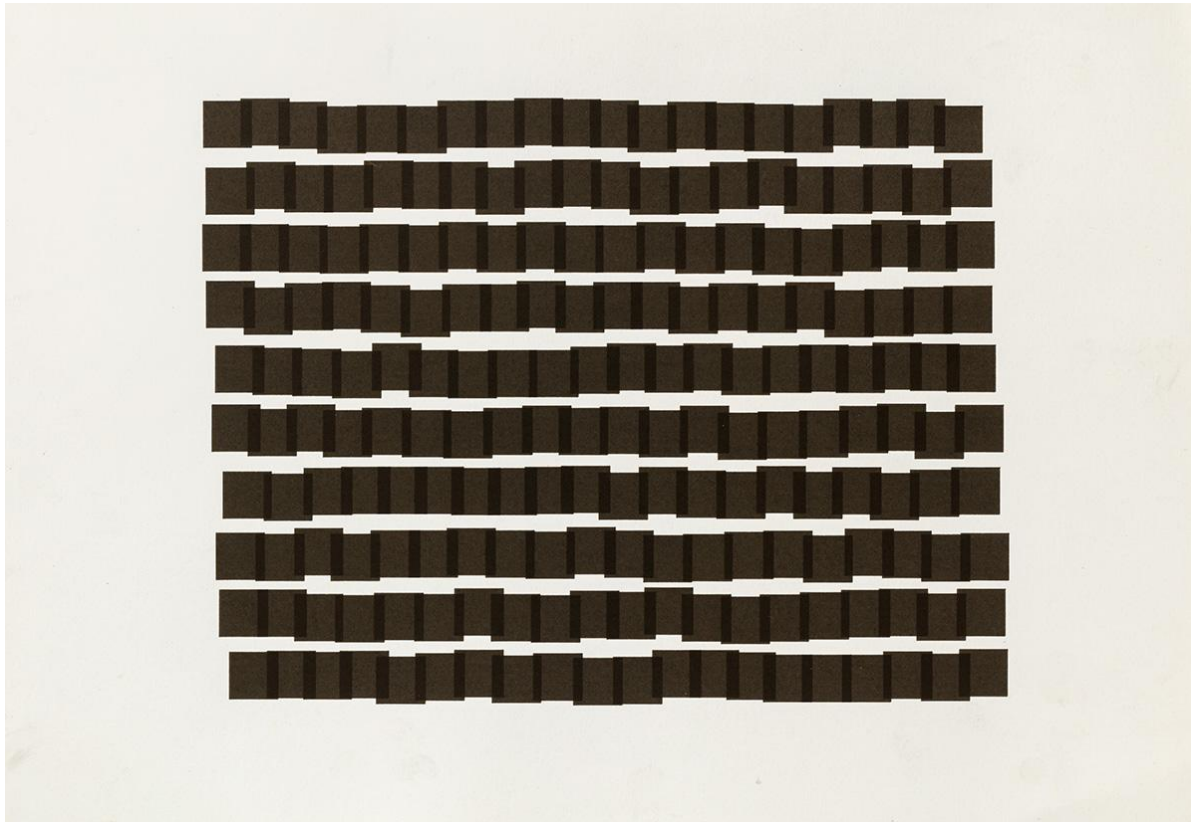
Estrangement is Tillich's existentialist reformulation of the doctrine of sin, and it encompasses not only moral failure but the ontological condition of being cut off from the ground of one's own being.



NEW BEING AND CHRISTOLOGY

The New Being is the appearance in history of an existence in which this estrangement has been overcome – a human existence that maintains its unity with the ground of being under the conditions of finitude.

Jesus Christ is the bearer of the New Being: the historical person in whom the essential humanity (e.g. the unestranged relation to God) is actualised under the conditions of existence.



NEW BEING AND THE CROSS

The Cross, for Tillich, is the event in which Jesus as the Christ negates himself as Jesus – when he subordinates his particular historical existence to the New Being he bears, demonstrating that the Christ is not identical with any particular finite manifestation but with the power of the New Being itself.

The crucifixion is therefore the supreme expression of the paradox of the incarnation: the New Being appears under the conditions of finitude and death, is subject to the full force of estrangement and non-being, and yet is not conquered by them.

CRITICISM

Tillich's theology has unsurprisingly attracted a substantial range of serious criticisms.

The most fundamental is the charge that his ontological reconception of God as being-itself, rather than a personal being, amounts to a philosophical abstraction that drains the God of Christian faith of the personal, historical, and morally demanding character that the biblical witness consistently attributes to God.

A God who is being-itself does not speak, command, forgive, or love in the sense that the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob does; the personal language that Christian prayer and worship presuppose becomes, on Tillich's account, thoroughly symbolic – which raises the question of whether prayer (or any other practice) itself remains coherent.

CRITICISM

A second major critique, pressed by Barth and by various post-liberal theologians, is that the method of correlation subordinates the content of revelation to the prior demands of the human situation: the God who answers is constrained by the shape of the questions humanity poses, rather than being free to address humanity with the sovereign priority and strangeness of genuine revelation.

For Barth, theology must move from God to humanity, from the sovereign act of divine self-revelation to the human reception of that revelation.

For Tillich, theology moves correlatively, from the human situation to its divine answer and back again.

READINGS

Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951), "Introduction," Part II: "The Method and Structure of Systematic Theology," p. 34 – 70.

Paul Tillich, *The Courage to Be* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1952), Chapters 1–2

If you can access:

Rowan Williams, "Tillich's Legacy and the Task of Theology," in *Wrestling with Angels: Conversations in Modern Theology*, ed. Mike Higon (London: SCM Press, 2007)