

RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE AT THE LIMITS OF LANGUAGE:

LÉVINAS, MARION, AND CAPUTO FROM A

POST-PHENOMENOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

by

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For my mother, who had few, if any, unanswered questions on this topic.

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In my dissertation, I explore the thinking of Emmanuel Lévinas, Jean-Luc Marion, and John D. Caputo, three late twentieth-century philosophers who consider the manner in which human desire for the divine is experienced within consciousness. I endeavor to provide a balanced reading of their views and then explore the question of whether phenomenology, rigorously applied, can provide a means for properly understanding religious experience. These three philosophers were influenced by the views of Nietzsche, Husserl, Heidegger, and Derrida, and accordingly, my dissertation considers the manner in which those views are understood and then followed or rejected by Lévinas, Marion, and Caputo. In my view, contemporary philosophy of religion struggles to find its voice, often facing criticism for its theological tenor and hyperbolic language. I attempt to offer a reasoned analysis of the way in which philosophy, properly considered, can view language-formation (the creation of meaning within consciousness) as an essential component of religious experience. In my analysis of the writings of Lévinas, I explore how he finds in language the means to articulate an experience of the divine that begins outside of Being in “saying” and culminates within Being in the “said.” I then delve into the philosophical basis for his break with Heidegger and his expanded reading of Husserl and

consider the possibility that he failed to fully justify his arguments through phenomenology. Next I consider Marion's attempts to provide convincing arguments for an expansion of phenomenology to include all phenomena "given" to consciousness, a project grounded in his readings—or possibly his misreadings—of Husserl and Heidegger. I will evaluate Marion's argument that phenomenology may properly recognize the possibility of revelation from a divine source that resembles the God of Western religion. Marion contends that such phenomena are incomprehensible and, paradoxically, impossible; I explore the way in which this contention supports an expansion of phenomenology to consider the experience of meaning-creation that occurs when phenomena are manifested to consciousness in the manner claimed by Marion. I then consider the contributions of Caputo to this debate and his premise that experience of God occurs (if at all) through a deconstructionist undertaking; in particular, I explore the way in which his "radical" hermeneutics supplements the philosophical contributions of Lévinas and Marion. Each of these three philosophers offers contemporary philosophy a different means for describing the possibility of religious experience; however, all of them conclude that human consciousness experiences God—or the idea of God—as largely incomprehensible. My dissertation asks whether phenomenology could potentially embrace impossibility as so depicted. Similarly, it considers whether a fundamental unanswered question regarding a phenomenological understanding of religious experience is this: how can truth and meaning be found in divine manifestations that defy language and are claimed to be beyond human comprehension?

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CHAPTER 1

OVERVIEW

“And what does the saint do in the forest?” asked Zarathustra.

The saint answered: “I make songs and sing them, and when I make songs, I laugh, weep, and mutter: thus I praise God....”

[W]hen Zarathustra was alone, he spoke thus to his heart: “Could it be possible! This old saint has not yet heard in his forest that *God is dead!*”

Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*

The physical world appeared to be a far simpler place in 1888 when Friedrich Nietzsche proclaimed in *Twilight of the Idols* that the apparent world—the world manifested to us through the evidence of our senses—is the only world (46).¹ The end of the nineteenth century marked a triumphant entry by philosophers into an age of science in which they were able to boldly voice their allegiance to cold truth gleaned through modern thinking. Such philosophical undertakings not only rejected most historical understandings of the God of Western religion, but also the very questions of metaphysics, finding such questions to no longer be worthy of consideration. Many philosophers endeavored to mold philosophy into rigorous science, embracing phenomenology as an important means for ascertaining truth. Fundamentally, phenomenology ascertains the meaning of lived experience from that which is manifested to the senses, an approach not unlike the scientific method that allows modern thinkers to reject unsubstantiated belief systems.

¹ Although Nietzsche argued for embracing the world as it is, he was not simplistic in his views on establishing *meaning* for the world as it is. He rejected the view that “brute facts” exist that defy the need for interpretation (1994, 119) and criticized realists who believe that “the world really is the way it appears to you[, ... a]s if reality stood unveiled before you only” (1974, 121). Many writers make Nietzsche a straw man for all manner of atheistic viewpoints, given his blunt and colorful quips regarding the frailties of much of Western religious tradition. I will endeavor not to do so in this dissertation.

Unexpectedly, however, this period of philosophical infatuation with science, this twilight of religious dogma, coincided with the twilight of classical physics. Classical physics understood our world to be a place of mathematical precision whose remaining mysteries would one day be solved by science. However, as philosophers were coalescing behind perspectives that increasingly rejected unprovable religious premises, scientists were finding that much in the physical world cannot be observed and measured, cannot be reduced to mathematical formulas, and cannot even be concretely thought. In the early twentieth century, Albert Einstein offered the concept of special relativity that changed physicists' concept of time as something static. Discovery of enigmatic principals of quantum physics revealed that particles of matter simultaneously exist in multiple places—in fact in infinite variations. From a mathematical standpoint, string theory came closer to supporting unifying theories of matter and energy than did “point” particle theories, provided that one accepts the possibility that the universe has more dimensions that we can perceive—potentially ten space dimensions in addition to the dimension of time. Adding to the uncertainty, physicists began to imagine existence as we know it originating out of a “Big Bang” in which matter and energy instantaneously emerged from nothingness. Just as philosophers attempted to think of that which is outside of Being, physicists were forced to puzzle over how to depict what existed as the precursor to the fabric of space and time.²

While physicists have the language of mathematics to convey their perceptions of our complex world, philosophers generally rely on our system of language in which words are sought or created for the signification of thoughts and ideas. Sometimes language is found to be inadequate to the task; sometimes meaning derived through language is ultimately deemed to be indeterminate. While philosophers through the centuries have explored the nature of language

² My brief summary of twentieth-century advances in physics is derived from Brian Greene's excellent book *The Elegant Universe*.

and thought, modern psychological and biological study of consciousness has revealed added complexity in the manner in which the formation of meaning occurs in consciousness. It allows—possibly requires—philosophers to consider perception as a layered process that may include an experience of meaning-formation as a prelude to thought. That possibility is something that I will consider as a means of evaluating and connecting the views of philosophers cited in this dissertation. Meaning-formation becomes an increasingly important issue in connection with ethics, if one accepts the possibility that divine manifestations may lack comprehensibility. How could divinely-inspired truth possibly be conveyed in the context of incomprehensibility?

The complexity and even incomprehensibility of the world in which we exist—and the manner in which it is perceived by consciousness—allows and even requires philosophy to continue evolving. Our age of science has, justifiably, changed the way in which we talk about the things we don't fully understand. There are parallels between the ultimate mysteries of science and those of theology. Clearly, beliefs that originated in an era of superstition or faulty science should be questioned and discarded, if found lacking. The methodology for evaluating that which cannot be proven is an appropriate task for philosophy. How should we address questions for which concrete answers are elusive? Questions of ontology defy answer, whether from science, theology or philosophy, yet I believe each of these disciplines offers insight into such questions. Ontology seeks to understand fundamental concerns. Why is there something rather than nothing? What is the true essence of existence? What is the source of human consciousness? What is the nature of the transcendent God that human consciousness throughout history has perceived?

That last question confounds contemporary philosophy: how should philosophy address the widespread and age-old enigma of a God for which no scientific evidence exists but that human consciousness nevertheless perceives? To be clear, there is no universal consensus that

philosophy has any work left to do in considering questions relating to God. Sigmund Freud famously categorized perceptions of God as illusions (1989, 703),³ and many respected thinkers as well as ordinary individuals would argue that any claimed religious experience is, at most, fanciful thinking. However, for individuals who claim that they have experienced *something* of a divine origin such questions are important. For philosophers who have, personally, perceived a “call” from a divine Other—or simply have curiosity as to the origin of such perceptions—it is of vital interest to find a way for philosophy to consider such things with the same rigor and respect as would be taken with any other important concern.

Throughout its history, philosophy has struggled and has been subject to justified criticism in its endeavors to find credible words to describe God and the experience that one may have of God. Following the Enlightenment, that struggle was shaped by celebration of the power of human reason and a rejection of myth and superstition. As the factual underpinnings of Western religion became subject to greater scrutiny, some assertions were found lacking, in that they were demonstrably inconsistent with empirical evidence. Fundamental beliefs—most notably belief in a transcendent, powerful being that is concerned with the affairs of humankind—were rightly recognized as having no empirical or compelling rational support. If the existence of God simply cannot be affirmed by the scientific method or irrefutable logic, is all thinking that allows for the possibility of God suspect? If so, how do we treat ethical beliefs

³ Freud clarified in *The Future of an Illusion* that in describing religious ideas as “illusions,” he was not thereby claiming them to be erroneous, but rather observing that they are derived from mere human wishes as opposed to rational proof (704). However, he considered that “the time has now come [for the] rational operation of the intellect” to replace the “historical residue” of religious belief (713-14). Jean-Luc Nancy characterized this narrative of humankind as “the most resolutely non-religious narrative” (2013, 100). Nancy argues that Freud’s writings on psychoanalysis should be viewed as a “way of thinking” about human drives and not as a quest for knowledge, scientific or otherwise (99). While Freud acknowledged possible weaknesses in the capacity of scientific endeavors to answer all questions regarding reality in the world, he proclaimed that “science is no illusion. But an illusion it would be to suppose that what science cannot give us we can get elsewhere” (722).

gleaned from our beliefs about God's nature? Do traditional conclusions meet modern standards? For some thinkers, they do not. Richard Dawkins, speaking for many in the community of science, considers much contemporary religious apologetics to be "obscurantist, disingenuous doublethink" (1997, 399). Such a view illustrates the divide that has existed over the past century between those who share the atheism of Nietzsche and Freud and those who reject the scientific method as the ultimate arbiter of all religious beliefs. Jean-François Lyotard captured the perspective of theorists in a variety of fields when he questioned the capacity of science to provide complete answers to the question of what is true (1984, xxv), arguing that a philosophical approach that mirrors the scientific method is largely inadequate to address areas of thought for which systematic observation and measurement do not provide meaningful answers.⁴ Although Lyotard described the hubris of science and demonstrated its limitations, he did not—and likely could not—provide a means superior to empiricism and reason to evaluate the claims of religion. That is the quandary of contemporary philosophy: the tools of science are relevant, but not adequate to respond to ontology's concerns.

Given this quandary, what is one to do? How should philosophy consider the possibility of religious experience? Although there are accounts in sacred texts of physical manifestations of the divine in the form of a burning bush, a thundering voice, and even as a companion in a stroll through paradise on earth, credible claims of these types of encounters in contemporary times are rare to non-existent. The more common depiction of religious experience is as described by William James: "the feelings, acts, and experiences of individual[s]...in their solitude, so far as

⁴ Lyotard's important book *The Postmodern Condition* delved into the manner in which discourse with regard to certain topics has been constrained by institutional conventions in order to meet the standards to be declared "admissible." In his analysis, these "constraints function to filter discursive potentials, interrupting possible connections in the communication networks: there are things that should not be said. They also privilege certain classes of statements (sometimes only one) whose predominance characterizes the discourse of the particular institution: there are things that should be said, and there are ways of saying them" (17).

they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider the divine” (1999, 36). My view, shared by James, is that such occurrences are best understood as experiences within consciousness—as opposed to phenomena that are manifested to the ordinary senses. He explains that “[i]t is as if there were in the human consciousness *a sense of reality, a feeling of objective presence, a perception* of what we may call ‘something there,’ more deep and more general than any of the special and particular ‘senses’ by which the current psychology supposes existent realities to be originally revealed” (66-67).

Although philosophers are greatly concerned with the workings of consciousness, as I will argue, they have inadequately addressed the possibility of genuine experience of a transcendental nature occurring there. The very possibility of religious experience is largely at odds with modern thinking. It involves a type of phenomenon that is not testable, not generally repeatable, and not necessarily representative of typical human experience. Contemporary theologians have struggled, as well, in their attempts to acknowledge the mysteries of faith while accommodating the factual conclusions of modern science with respect to the nature of consciousness. Perhaps one area of greatest importance—but least clarity—for both philosophers and theologians is the manner in which we should depict that which occurs within consciousness. There is great potential for confusion if philosophy were to adopt the vocabulary of theology and equate the unconscious and the realm of the soul. Conversely, there is equal potential for misdirection, if theology were to abandon its devotion to the concept of transcendence.

Perhaps contemporary philosophers and theologians are asking the wrong questions about the workings of the unconscious. How can we best understand an experience of the divine that is perceived as an interruption of consciousness? Does the interruption somehow appear as a fully-formed thought? The response by consciousness to ordinary things seen and heard is brain activity which interprets the image or sound. There is a component of thought formation in which the raw data provided by the senses is given meaning. A hovering, amber shape is a

moth—and not a wasp. A warbling sound behind a door is a voice singing—not weeping. We typically perceive the sense of surprise that follows a thunderclap or the sense of awe that occurs when encountering a wonder of nature as being virtually instantaneous; yet brain function has provided meaning and emotion to the sights and sounds. The brain generates a sense of recollection and an emotional response from dream activity. Yet nothing in the dream-state occurs outside of the brain. None of these depictions of brain activity in human consciousness are controversial. Within consciousness, the brain provides meaning to everything that is manifested to consciousness, whether through the senses or through abstract thought. If human consciousness is believed to sometimes be the recipient of divine revelation, what would that mean in the context of the modern understanding of the biological functioning of the brain? If one has religious experience of the somewhat unremarkable kind described by James, how is the meaning gleaned by consciousness formed? Many philosophers and theologians appear to largely ignore the possibility that religious experience may be better understood as an experience of language within consciousness, rather than as a supernatural experience of transcendence as consciousness is invaded by something other. The aspect of cognition that consists of meaning-formation is sometimes overlooked as a somewhat independent component of thought. Would a focus on language and meaning-formation within consciousness add to the contemporary philosophical and theological dialogue as to the nature of religious experience?

My dissertation will consider this possibility. A difficulty in this endeavor that should be candidly noted is that much of the justification that can be provided for philosophical acceptance of the possibility of religious experience consists of mere words—arguments on paper. As I will try to show in the following chapters, certain fundamental arguments made by leading voices appear circular; some consist of only mental constructs; some ultimately are only thinly-disguised statements of faith. Epistemological discipline is needed when questions of divine manifestation are revisited. We need to be clear as to how we know what we claim to be true.

1.1 Evolution of Thought Regarding God's Nature and Existence

There is an enduring epistemological tension between philosophy and theology: how do we know what we know about the nature of humankind and the possibility of the divine? In his *Meditations* of 1641, René Descartes explored human consciousness and the existence of God—and purported to do so solely through an exercise of reason. After offering his proof, he nevertheless acknowledged revelation as a source of truth, since “God is not a deceiver and therefore...there can be no falsehood in my beliefs” (63). Descartes’s attempted logical proof of the existence of God was found to be flawed by later generations of philosophers. Similarly, his views on the separation of mind and body have generally been discarded by psychologists; however, his concept of the human mind as an arbiter of what is real and what is not continues to influence modern thinking. In a simplistic way, Descartes offered perspectives that are relevant to understanding Being. To what extent are my perceptions sufficient to define Being—and to withstand refutation from those who do not share my perceptions?

European philosophers who followed Descartes provided increasing clarity on the role that pure reason could play in evaluating religious claims as to the existence and nature of God. Eighteenth-century philosopher David Hume effectively refuted any assumption that reason can affirm a deity that is benevolent in the manner depicted by Western religion—or any deity, for that matter. The evidence at hand, objectively viewed, is insufficient to prove common religious beliefs as to the nature of God. As Hume’s skeptical character Philo caustically observes, “This world, for aught [anyone] knows, is very faulty and imperfect, compared to a superior standard, and was only the first rude essay of some infant deity who afterwards abandoned it, ashamed of his lame performance; it is the work only of some dependent, inferior deity, and is the object of derision to his superiors; it is the production of old age and dotage in some superannuated deity, and ever since his death has run on at adventures, from the first impulse and active force which it received from him” (1948, 41). Immanuel Kant, a contemporary of Hume, provided a rigorous

and detailed denunciation of each of the then-common logical arguments for the existence of God in his *Critique of Pure Reason*. He found that “all attempts to employ reason in theology in any merely speculative manner are altogether fruitless and by their very nature null and void” (528). An essential conclusion of Kant was that the objective reality of God should not be considered as a topic to be addressed by reason; it cannot be proved or disproved by reason applied to empirical data (531).

Many nineteenth-century philosophers moved beyond the relative neutrality that philosophers from prior centuries had displayed toward the premises underlying religious faith. While Hume and Kant published works that refuted the faulty logic that had historically been applied in support of the teachings of the Christian faith, neither sought to demonstrate the non-existence of a divine supreme being. Hume was willing to accept the possibility of revealed truth (1948, 94); Kant acknowledged the possibility of transcendental theology to supplement reason (2003, 351). By contrast, nineteenth-century philosophers found the lack of empirical support for the existence of God sufficient to warrant a rejection of the possibility of God—or at least the rejection of God as understood by Western religion. Ludwig Feuerbach emphasized the lack of empirical evidence for the existence of God and rejected the possibility of divine revelation offsetting that lack, arguing that any such belief is simply a revelation of the human nature to oneself (1989, 207). As such, it is only an “indirect form of self-knowledge” (13).

In the latter part of the nineteenth century, for many influential thinkers, there was no need for argument as to the fundamental question as to the existence and nature of God. Atheistic philosophers such as Karl Marx and Friedrich Nietzsche appeared to assume that the question of God’s existence had been decided: there is no God. The remaining philosophical questions for Marx were social and political and for Nietzsche were largely ethical. Such questions were highly relevant in modernity—increasingly so in the chaos that ensued during and after the two world wars—however, the atheistic perspective that guided much of the early twentieth-century

philosophy may have been overly confident. For Feuerbach, the lack of empirical evidence for God's existence together with a credible explanation for humankind's widespread (assumedly mistaken) belief in God was sufficient to demonstrate God's non-existence. In an era in which the advances of experimental science were seen as a fundamental part of human destiny, deference to the scientific method in matters of philosophy and theology were common. We know now that nineteenth-century physics was virtually clueless with respect to the nature of the invisible world—the subatomic particles and forces that are now the focus of quantum physics. Lord Kelvin, a prominent late nineteenth-century physicist supposedly remarked, “There is nothing new to be discovered in physics now. All that remains is more and more precise measurement.” That smug viewpoint probably reflected the perspective of the philosophers of that era, as well: truth with respect to ontological concerns was to be gleaned through empirical methods. Lyotard observed that in this era there was a “shattering of belief” in that for which scientific knowledge did not exist; it was a time in which there occurred a “flight of reality out of the metaphysical, religious, and political certainties that the mind believed it held” (1984, 77).

Emblematic of this perspective was Edmund Husserl's effort to incorporate science's reliance on empiricism into philosophy's understanding of truth: proffering a methodology that claims to discern between what is real as opposed to unreliable conjecture. Husserl's phenomenology was intended to align philosophy with science, yet it resulted in a reframing of philosophical thinking to allow consideration of the possibilities of phenomena that could not be understood in the context of science. This was almost certainly not Husserl's intention. He aspired for his methodology to be comprehensive and expanded his thinking to include all manner of phenomena that one could encounter. In that endeavor, he struggled to properly account for phenomena that cannot be observed empirically, but nevertheless appear to consciousness, such as mathematical theories.

As a student of Husserl, Martin Heidegger recognized the value of his mentor's approach to knowledge, but questioned one's ability to fruitfully engage in the scientifically-inspired reductions that Husserl proposed, reductions through which a thinker is required to sift out "transcendental" beliefs—preexisting assumptions regarding things and factors not actually perceived by the subject. Heidegger expanded Husserl's methodology to address Being itself, delving into how Being is experienced. In doing so, he reframed the questions propounded by phenomenology to highlight the fundamental questions of Being. Heidegger's project was not motivated to any significant degree by any intent to supplement modern philosophy's understandings with respect to the possibility of God. He did, however, view his work as an ontological exploration—it was, after all, focused on Being—but not on any metaphysical explanation that seeks to locate a ground of being outside of the physical world. His approach was consistent with an atheistic perspective but, ironically, he gave later generations of philosophers a credible vocabulary to argue for the possibility of a divine presence.⁵ One may concede that scientific evidence suggests that there is no God within Being; however, such evidence is wholly inapplicable to that which is outside of Being. Virtually any traditional understanding of the God of Western religion assumes a deity that is not subject to the restraints of the physical world, and so depictions by twentieth-century philosophers and theologians of a God that is explicitly outside of Being were not ground-breaking. Yet, that perspective allowed thinkers to sidestep the fundamental empirical arguments derived from science.

Indeed, God, as defined and understood by many late-twentieth-century theologians is wholly beyond Being. My concern with such a viewpoint is that conclusions derived from this perspective are sometimes little more than purely mental constructs. How does one know what is

⁵ Heidegger's exploration of the relationship between language and Being also set the stage for the projects of the three philosophers on which my dissertation primarily focuses. In Section 34 of *Being and Time* Heidegger delves into the manner in which meaning and language are interconnected with the disclosedness of Dasein (203).

outside Being? Unless that which is outside of Being is a subject of revelation, it becomes a matter of faith. Possibly such considerations are traditional theology expressed in Heideggerian language. Or perhaps not. As described earlier in this introduction, contemporary science now acknowledges mysteries arguably greater and more paradoxical than the mysteries associated with metaphysics—states of existence or non-existence that the mind cannot grasp and words cannot articulate. In this dissertation, I will explore whether contemporary philosophy of religion takes undue liberties with arguments that skirt contradictions with definitions that assume that which cannot be known. Just as Christian mystics such as Meister Eckhart find God to be beyond comprehension, certain contemporary phenomenologists argue for the recognition of phenomena that are, by their definition, incomprehensible. One must at least question the utility of such arguments. What of value do we glean from incomprehensibility?

Yet I am also concerned that modern philosophers who have rejected the possibility of a God that possesses any of the characteristics assumed by Western religion have done so out of an unjustifiable conclusion that a modern, scientific perspective *must* properly reject that which cannot be demonstrated by tangible, empirical evidence. As noted above, many of the fundamental premises of quantum physics and string theory cannot yet be proven empirically; indeed, much of it cannot even be concretely thought. One might well say that the marriage of philosophy and the scientific method appears to be in a mid-life crisis. However, even if the scientific method is inadequate to fully answer ontological questions, the discipline of scientific thinking is nevertheless instructive to contemporary philosophers. If philosophy is to consider the possibility of religious experience, it should endeavor to do so with language and methodological self-awareness appropriate to its unique phenomenological features.

1.2 Possibilities of Religious Experience

Very little of philosophical relevance can be said about the existence or non-existence of the God of Western religion that has not already been said by philosophers and theologians over

the last three thousand years. Accordingly, my dissertation is far less concerned with evaluating arguments for the existence of God than it is with exploring the possibilities of religious experience. Paraphrasing James's definition quoted above, I will define religious experience in my dissertation as experiences within consciousness that are perceived by the subject as having a divine source. James wrote *The Varieties of Religious Experience* at the turn of the twentieth century. In some ways, however, it serves as a precursor to the thinking that underlies the so-called theological turn in phenomenology embodied in the thinking of a number of contemporary French phenomenologists. This French phenomenological movement will constitute the focus of the next two chapters. In his study of the nature of religious experience, James simply accepts for his analysis whatever manner of phenomena occur in the consciousness of his subjects. There he acknowledged a pervasive belief among men and women in the United States and Europe in the reality of religious experience.⁶ He does not find in philosophy or theology a basis for reason to validate claims of religious experience, but his study produced a substantial number of anecdotal accounts of religious experience of many varieties. He found widespread conviction in otherwise rational humans of the existence of a "germinal higher part" of oneself with which a "union" with the divine can be formed (1999, 552-53).

Theology has little hesitation in embracing religious experience. Although cautious about the possibility that certain individual, highly personalized experiences are of uncertain objective validity—and possibly delusional—theologians have generally acknowledged religious experience as something affirmed by faith. Philosophy, by contrast, is somewhat at a loss for

⁶ James quoted James H. Leuba approvingly for the view that belief in the actuality of religious experience is widespread—regardless of the intellectual content of various religions. Leuba said, "The truth of the matter can be put in this way: *God is not known, he is not understood; he is used*—sometimes as a meat-purveyor, sometimes as moral support, sometimes as friend, sometimes as an object of love. If he proves himself useful, the religious consciousness asks for no more than that. Does God really exist? How does he exist? What is he? Are so many irrelevant questions" (1999, 550-51).

appropriately depicting and rigorously considering the possibility of religious experience. If we exclude claimed experiences of altered reality in the physical world, such as inexplicable healings or miraculous escapes from peril, we are mostly left with the kind of religious experience that occurs within the confines of one's consciousness and cannot be observed and verified by third parties. Does that mean that serious thinkers should abandon the topic? I would say no. Exploration of consciousness is a relevant and important area for philosophers—one with many unresolved questions. Even human awareness of self—a fundamental aspect of consciousness—is not well understood. It is not a concession to ignorant superstition to consider the possibility that awareness of a divine Other can exist in consciousness to the same extent as awareness of self. The philosophers discussed in the following three chapters each report a “call” perceived in consciousness. Each depicts the call somewhat differently and differs as to how the source of the call should be understood. Certain contemporary philosophers who have attempted to contribute to this debate have arguably confused the situation by positing experiences of a nature that appear to ignore or even contradict what is known with respect to the biological aspects of consciousness. Others choose words that imply a literal separation between mind and the physical body, a framework that is of questionable value to modern thinking. Others couch their explanations in paradoxical language to such an extent that little of what has been posited can be understood.

Why has this happened? To a limited extent, the answer is that philosophers have difficulty expressing themselves other than through the familiar language of their profession. The traditional vocabulary of Western philosophy for addressing concerns relating to the existence and nature of God is largely found in the writings of Plato and other ancient Greeks and from the Jewish and Christian sacred texts. Words and concepts that originated in a mythical context are heavily-freighted with sacred meaning and are thus disadvantaged in writings that attempt to offer philosophy that is free of theological assumptions. Words such as “God,” “soul,” “mind,”

and “truth” contain a richness of meaning—and malleability—that allows such words to be prominent in philosophical thought century after century. But that is not a complete explanation. The twentieth-century focus on Being itself has vastly complicated the way in which philosophers and theologians are required to express ideas with respect to any divine presence or force that may exist outside of the physical world—a God that is outside of Being and time.

1.3 Implications of a God Outside of Being

Few contemporary philosophers assert that God exists as a being residing within the physical world or that one may experience God’s presence through the ordinary senses of perception, such as sight and hearing. Such a God would exist, by definition, *within* Being, having shown itself to (some of) us. Most contemporary philosophers and many theologians have been persuaded by nineteenth-century thinkers that empirical evidence of God cannot be found in today’s world, and therefore the possibility must be considered of a God that exists outside of Being. Superficially, such an approach resolves many problems; foremost, it explains the apparent lack of empirical evidence for the existence of God. It also allows theologians to distance themselves from mythical accounts of God that involve physical presence, accounts of appearances within the physical world that no longer occur. There is also a satisfying rationality in a depiction of God as a force or essence not constrained by the laws of physics, precisely because God is outside of Being.

Arguably, understandings of a God that is outside of Being should not strain the credulity of scientists—and agnostic philosophers. Such a God may fully coexist with the cosmos understood by modern physicists. Indeed, the mysteries being uncovered by researchers as to unseen and unfathomable dimensions, and even far-flung physical worlds that obey inconsistent physical laws, support an open mind as to—ironically—that which cannot be thought. Scientists now know that the cosmos is unimaginably more complex than was believed to be the case by the turn-of-the-century thinkers who flatly rejected the possibility of the God of Western

religion. That is the good news for those who are unable or unwilling to agree with Freud that any purported experience of the divine is an illusion.

The bad news is that philosophical arguments in support of a God from outside of Being that, nevertheless, manifests itself within Being can be considered nothing but “words, words, words.”⁷ Is a hypothesis of a God outside of Being one that purports to explain a lot, but demonstrates nothing? Is it an advance in rigorous thinking or just a clever mental construct? I would argue that responses to these challenges must carefully consider the way in which divine manifestations appear—or are claimed to appear—to consciousness. Arguments that brain activity functions in a supernatural manner when confronted with the divine should be met with appropriate skepticism. Arguments that phenomena from a divine source are literally incomprehensible should be evaluated as to validity of conclusions that may be drawn from incomprehensibility. Finally, I would argue that one should question whether there is the possibility of a simpler explanation for religious experience: that it is fundamentally an experience of language-formation and meaning creation that occurs within consciousness.

Modern philosophers of religion cannot escape the need to situate their thinking within a framework that embraces both the possibility of divine mystery that cannot be fully comprehended as well as near certainty as to important aspects of the physical world—and the ways in which it is reliably manifested to consciousness. For many contemporary philosophers, the consideration of Being itself has provided a point of intersection for those diverse perspectives to be considered together. In imagining the divine in this way and evaluating the possibility of manifestations to consciousness from outside of Being, philosophers have the opportunity to supplement twentieth-century thinking with respect to ethics.

During the decades that followed the publication of Heidegger’s *Being and Time*, Western philosophers continued to struggle with ethical questions relating to the human

⁷ As cynically depicted by Dominique Janicaud (2000, 42).

condition. Nihilism was perceived by some as creating a vacuum in which there was no framework whatsoever upon which to build an authentic system of ethics, one without the underpinnings of discarded religion. For philosophers such as Martin Buber, the complexity of comprehending one's place in the world could be alleviated by thoughtfully perceiving the "I" and contrasting the I with what is not the I: the "It" and the "You." In his most famous work *I and Thou*, Buber explores human experience of the other—both the human other and a mysterious "eternal You" that has been revealed only as "I am there as whoever I am there" (159-60).⁸ His writing depicts our perception of the world and of being in a manner familiar to readers of Husserl and Heidegger using the language of phenomenology; however, Buber finds a form of "nothingness" in a measured and ordered world that is inadequate as "truth" (82-83).

Such ethical concerns underlie the groundbreaking project of French philosopher Emmanuel Lévinas. Beginning with *Totality and Infinity*, Lévinas argued for a philosophical recognition of a divine Other outside of Being in order to account for an ethical responsibility toward the human other. Unlike most of his contemporaries—as well as most philosophers from prior decades—Lévinas finds a means for philosophy to accommodate human experience of the divine. His thinking is largely based on Husserlian and Heideggerian phenomenology that explores the nature of experience from the perspective of ethics. He finds human experience to involve an ethical call that he does not label as divine, but clearly depicts as other-worldly. This perspective is important in that it breaks from then-modern thinking as to the capacity of philosophy to talk about God in any meaningful manner. He challenged twentieth-century philosophy's conclusions gleaned from apparent lack of empirical evidence of God's existence, boldly asserting that a divine Other is, in fact, manifested to consciousness—outside of Being. As I will discuss in Chapter 2, Lévinas's arguments are not without flaws; however, they are

⁸ This is an English translation of Buber's German translation of Exodus 3:14: "*Ich bin da als der ich da bin*" (160n1).

noteworthy in their ability to bring metaphysical questions back within the realm of serious philosophical discourse.

A fundamental premise behind Lévinas's thinking was that philosophers had improperly ignored the possibility—and implications—of an approach by a divine Other because the accepted methodology of phenomenology had been too restrictive. He offered an expanded role for phenomenology and proffered an approach that gave legitimacy to philosophical consideration of phenomena of a divine origin manifested within consciousness, but otherwise invisible to the senses. This non-traditional deployment of phenomenology was embraced by a number of late-twentieth-century French philosophers, including Jean-Luc Marion. Their conclusions often blurred the lines between philosophy and theology and were, by no means, widely accepted by other contemporary philosophers. Marion, in particular, endeavored to frame a rigorous argument for philosophy to acknowledge *all* that is *given* to consciousness—and in so doing, to acknowledge the possibility of divine revelation. Marion's expansion of phenomenology offers a means for philosophy to consider virtually any phenomenon that is claimed to have been manifested to consciousness.

Philosophers such as Lévinas and Marion helped develop terminology with which contemporary philosophers can frame a discussion of religious experience. They broadened consideration of influences in earthly affairs to include—even presume—the possibility of phenomena originating from outside of Being. In so doing, they arguably removed stigma attached to a philosophical consideration of phenomena that cannot be proven by empirical evidence. Although influenced by the Judeo-Christian tradition, they approach the subject matter with neutrality as to what extent a divine Other resembles the God of Western religion. While the terminology employed by Lévinas, Marion, and their followers creates a means for discussing phenomena that cannot be observed—and moreover, are often depicted as beyond comprehension—such arguments often border on being no more than aspirational mental

constructs. It is unclear to me that arguments will withstand the test of time that merely posit paradoxical depictions of unknowable and incomprehensible forces. I have found that the idea of incomprehensibility of the Other is a theme that runs through much postmodern philosophy of religion—a perspective that can be found in the writings of first millennium Christian mystics. This idea has a central place in contemporary thought with respect to the nature of God—perhaps inevitably so. However, a common corollary to this perspective of incomprehensibility is an attempt through faith to, nevertheless, find meaning and truth. Critics of French “new” phenomenology argue that faith and theological assumptions are interwoven into the arguments of Lévinas, Marion, and their followers. To some degree, the critics are likely correct; however, in other instances, they are simply expressing a Nietzschean-flavored disdain for any endeavor that attempts to bring consideration of God back into a philosophical discussion. In the following two chapters, I will attempt to evaluate to what extent Lévinas’s and Marion’s views add to philosophy if one strips out faith-based assumptions and highlights for scrutiny all concepts that are, arguably, only mental constructs.

To be clear, in this so-called “theological turn” by contemporary French philosophers, I find no renunciation of science, nor any call to return to pre-Enlightenment principles. What I do find is a lack of clarity in their thinking, particularly in connection with the way these philosophers understand human consciousness. If consciousness is a high-order function of the brain, largely, but not completely understood by biologists and psychologists, how should one depict anything that is manifested to consciousness from beyond the physical world? Should philosophers offer a guess or, instead, delegate that inquiry to science—or theology? If one were to posit that God is manifested to each of us (or even some of us) *prior* to consciousness—as does Lévinas—how could that possibly square with the empirical understandings of biological science? If one were to assert, along with Marion and Christian mystics, that any manifestation of God is incomprehensible to consciousness, what would that mean? If the brain can be

understood, even imperfectly, as an organ that functions like a computer, what actually occurs in the brain when the brain attempts to think the impossible? Is it a religious experience or a cosmic short circuit?

American philosopher and theologian John D. Caputo largely avoids these difficult questions by offering a view of religious experience that is relatively indifferent to the existence or non-existence of God. While Lévinas and Marion offer a philosophy that presumes the existence of a divine Other, Caputo presumes no such thing. He rejects the possibility of a God as understood by Western religion, a deity that is instrumental in the workings of the physical world and the course of human affairs. Neither does he appear convinced of the likelihood of a divine Other outside of Being—he considers phenomenological evidence as hyperbole (2008, 67-70). Yet his project overlaps with certain concerns of Lévinas and Marion relating to the incomprehensibility of what we call God and perhaps adds clarity to their tangential—but I believe important—ideas regarding the importance of language-formation in religious experience. Caputo offers an explanation of human longing for the God of Western religion couched in terms of Derridean deconstruction. By looking to deconstruction, Caputo relocates the discussion of human perception of God to the realm of language—in Caputo’s words through “radical” hermeneutics. For him the experience of the hoped for presence of God is an experience of impossibility, a perplexing experience of language, but nevertheless an experience that is accompanied by meaning.

What does the conversation among these postmodern voices add to contemporary philosophy of religion, rigorously considered? Are the French phenomenologists overstating their case? Are their critics too fixated on the failings of Western religion to even consider the possibility of a divine Other that is outside of Being? Lévinas, Marion, and Caputo consider the way in which the incomprehensibility of God—or of the name of God—is experienced in human consciousness. Each recognizes, at least to a limited extent, that a moment occurs within

consciousness in which the subject engages in the innate human compulsion to create meaning out of that experience. This experience of meaning creation is an aspect of religious experience that I believe warrants further attention. In the following chapters I will explore the explicit and implied views that these thinkers have with respect to the role that language plays within consciousness in the human experience of the divine. In so doing, I will consider the possibility that expanding our philosophical view of that aspect of consciousness in which meaning is created would allow recognition of manifestations of a divine Other.

1.4 My Project

In the following chapters, I will explore in some detail the thinking of Lévinas, Marion, and Caputo, three late twentieth-century philosophers who, each in his own way, rejected modern philosophy's prevailing views on religious experience. In particular, I will endeavor to articulate a balanced reading of their views on language-creation within consciousness as an important component of religious experience—acknowledging that their views on language were generally not central to their projects. In this task, I have had the benefit of reading texts in which each directly or indirectly critiques the views of the others. I also found it to be valuable that each of these philosophers lived and wrote in the same era and framed their arguments in light of the same prior canon of philosophy, largely that of Nietzsche, Husserl, Heidegger, and Derrida.

In the following chapters I will attempt to offer a reasoned analysis of the way in which the creation of meaning within consciousness—language-formation—is an essential and often overlooked component of religious experience, properly considered by philosophy. In Chapter 2, I will begin by discussing Lévinas's groundbreaking rejection of modern philosophy's refusal to consider phenomena of a divine origin. In particular, I will explore and question how Lévinas finds in language the means to articulate an experience of the divine that begins outside of Being in "saying" and culminates within Being in the "said." I will delve into the philosophical basis for his break with Heidegger and his expanded reading of Husserl and consider, as others have,

the possibility that he failed to fully justify his arguments through phenomenology, despite his claims to the contrary. I will also question whether Lévinas's conclusions—groundbreaking though they may be—are based on philosophy or, instead, on a postmodern form of theology. However, I will attempt to show that his conclusions with respect to the “call” that may originate from a divine Other provide valuable insights into how the divine may be manifested to human consciousness.

I will consider in Chapter 3 whether phenomenology, rigorously applied, can provide a means for properly understanding religious experience. There I will consider Marion's attempts to provide convincing arguments for an expansion of phenomenology to include *all* phenomena “given” to consciousness, a project grounded in reason and in reliance on the thinking of other respected philosophers to a far greater degree than can be found in Lévinas's writings. I will explore Marion's argument that phenomenology may properly recognize the possibility of revelation from a divine source that resembles the God of Western religion—a position defiantly at odds with modern secular thought. I will argue that Marion's central claim that philosophy must consider all that is given to consciousness can be considered a credible expansion of phenomenology—an expansion of phenomenology that allows for the possibility of a divine giver that may be recognized by phenomenology. Marion contends that such phenomena are incomprehensible and, paradoxically, impossible; I will explore the way in which this contention supports an expansion of phenomenology to consider the experience of meaning creation that occurs when phenomena are manifested to consciousness in the manner claimed by Marion.

In Chapter 4, I will consider the hermeneutic contributions of Caputo to the debate among philosophers and theologians as to the nature of human perception of the divine and consider the way in which Caputo's radical hermeneutics can be understood as supplementing the philosophical contributions of Lévinas and Marion. I will explore Caputo's premise that experience of God occurs (if at all) through a hermeneutic experience of the *name* of God—a

deconstructionist undertaking. I will broadly consider experiences of language, in the manner described by Caputo, to consider how meaning is created within consciousness. In focusing on language—and in particular on the *name* of God—I found Caputo to provide an alternate way to understand a fundamental concern of Marion: the incomprehensibility of God when (or if) manifested to consciousness. I also consider such a hermeneutic analysis to be highly relevant in a reading of Lévinas that attempts to evaluate the implications of the concepts of the saying and the said. I will conclude that chapter by considering the possibility of greater integration of thinking among phenomenologists and hermeneuts.

Contemporary philosophy of religion struggles to find its voice, often facing criticism for its theological tenor and hyperbolic language. Lévinas, Marion, and Caputo are three postmodern voices who have reframed modern philosophy's traditional questions regarding the possibility of human perception of the divine. Each in his own way offers contemporary philosophy an approach for describing the possibility of religious experience. Yet for each of these thinkers, consciousness finds God—or the idea of God—to be largely incomprehensible. In this way, the fundamental question that arises from this whole phenomenological/hermeneutical debate concerning religious experience may be framed as follow: how can an honest discourse find words to properly account for that which is potentially beyond human comprehension?

I will begin my exploration of this question by considering the writings of Lévinas, a philosopher and theologian who was at the forefront of a movement of contemporary thinkers who recognize, for purposes of philosophical discussion, a “call” by a divine Other, an experience in which consciousness is interrupted by an approach from something akin to the God of Western religion. Such a call is almost certainly not experienced by everyone and is perhaps experienced most vividly by those who are predisposed by their religious conviction to matters of faith. William James described this state of mind as one known to religious men and women

“in which the will to assert ourselves and hold our own has been displaced by a willingness to close our mouths and be as nothing in the floods and waterspouts of God” (1999, 54).

CHAPTER 2

EMMANUEL LÉVINAS: RETHINKING TRANSCENDENCE

I told myself: “I am surrounded by unknown things.” I imagined man without ears, suspecting the existence of sound as we suspect so many hidden mysteries, man noting acoustic phenomena whose nature and provenance he cannot determine. And I grew afraid of everything around me – afraid of the air, afraid of the night.

Guy de Maupassant, *Letter of a Madman*

Emmanuel Lévinas brought critical questions regarding truth and ethics to the forefront of contemporary philosophy—and did so in a way that boldly challenged then-accepted understandings of the appropriate role for philosophy in addressing questions regarding the existence and nature of God. Shouldn't all concerns relating to human perception of the divine be relegated to theologians and historians of religion? Lévinas said no. Haven't all questions regarding the possibility of divinely-inspired ethical imperatives been adequately addressed by modern philosophers? Again, Lévinas said no. Don't Husserl's and Heidegger's respected and authoritative works on phenomenology give us a sufficient means for ascertaining the meaning of lived experience? Once again, Lévinas said no.

To be clear, however, Lévinas was no mere naysayer in framing his arguments with early twentieth-century philosophy; rather, his project was fundamentally affirmative in its uncompromising recognition of an ethical obligation to the human “other.” For Lévinas, the source of that obligation is a divine Other that calls to each of us from outside of Being. Throughout his writings, he contended with conviction that each of us has an inescapable ethical obligation to all humankind. He rejected the possibility that we have freedom to decide otherwise; our obligation to the human other is, for Lévinas, unconditional. It is not something that we choose through an exercise of free will or based on reason; applying psychological analysis or cold logic to fundamental ethical questions posed by Lévinas could not have provided

this conclusion. Nor is it based on hermeneutics; gleaning truth from a hermeneutic reading of a sacred text would have required a faith-based acceptance of its teachings. Although Lévinas was a philosopher shaped by his Jewish heritage, he did not ask his readers to accept truth-claims based upon the authority of the Torah. Perhaps phenomenology was the only discipline that offered the possibility of supporting Lévinas's desired conclusion. Phenomenology offered the opportunity to argue—without rejecting the totality of modern philosophical thought—that ethical truth can be understood as something revealed as an experience of consciousness. However, in a departure from the thinking of most phenomenologists, Lévinas considered consciousness to be something capable of perceiving manifestations from beyond Being. For him, meaning and truth are found within Being, but also outside of Being. These views have become the foundation for a movement within Continental philosophy to expand the scope of phenomenology to include ideas about God that modern philosophy had considered to be outside of what rigorous philosophical thinking can recognize—a movement labeled by some as “new” phenomenology.

In this chapter, I will first offer context for Lévinas's views by providing brief biographical information that describes life experiences from which his thinking emerged and by summarizing the phenomenological and Platonic ideas that largely influenced his trajectory of thought. Next, I will discuss what I believe to be Lévinas's most important contributions to philosophy qua philosophy: how one should approach the idea of the “otherwise than Being” and the truth and meaning that may exist there. Finally, I will explore his thinking relating to one's encounter with the Other outside of Being and the ethical implications of such an encounter. Throughout this chapter, I will explore the possibility that formation of meaning within consciousness—or the struggle to do so—is an integral part of the encounter with the divine Other that Lévinas depicts.

2.1 Biographical Information⁹

Lévinas was born into a large and important Jewish community in Kovno, Lithuania in 1906. He and his family became refugees in the Ukraine during World War I after the Germans invaded Kovno, returning to Lithuania after the war. He emigrated to France in 1923 to pursue his education at the University of Strasbourg, where he ultimately narrowed his studies to focus on philosophy. He studied the works of Edmund Husserl and Henri Bergson, in particular, and chose Husserl's theory of intuition as the topic for his dissertation. In 1928 he undertook a year of study at Freiburg-in Breisgau in Germany in order to participate in a seminar conducted by Husserl. There he attended a seminar taught by Heidegger (who was to be Husserl's successor at the university). While in Freiburg, Lévinas had the opportunity to engage in depth with Heidegger's arguments contained in *Being and Time* which had been published only a year earlier.

After becoming a French citizen in 1930, Lévinas obtained a teaching position in Paris. He helped edit and translate into French Husserl's *Cartesian Meditations*. He also began writing a book on Heidegger's philosophy, but abandoned the project when Heidegger embraced Germany's National Socialism. Many years later he wrote, "One can forgive many Germans, but there are some Germans it is difficult to forgive. It is so difficult to forgive Heidegger" (Critchley 2002, xviii).

He was drafted into the French army in 1939 and taken prisoner by the Germans in 1940. Other than his wife and daughter, most of his extended family in Lithuania were killed by the Nazis or in pogroms conducted in collaboration with Lithuanians. According to Adriaan Peperzak, "Lévinas maintained that the forebodings, the reality, and the memory of the Holocaust always dominated his thinking" (1996, ix). About this era, Lévinas wrote, "1941!—a

⁹The sources for all otherwise unattributed biographical information in this section are Adriaan Peperzak (1996) and Simon Critchley (2002a).

hole in history—a year in which all the visible gods had abandoned us, in which god was really dead or gone back into his nonrevealedness” (1996, 51).

After World War II he became director of the Ecole Normale Israelite Orientale, a school in Paris established to train teachers. He was involved in the Jewish communities in Paris and published a variety of works on the Talmud, but viewed his philosophical works as something apart from his Jewish faith. As we will see throughout this chapter, his philosophical views are nevertheless intertwined with theological considerations. However, Christina Gschwandtner believed that he made “every attempt in his philosophy to ‘secularize’ his faith and to appropriate any religious insights for purely philosophical purpose and ends” (2013, 40). Until the publication of *Totality and Infinity* in 1961, his contributions to philosophy were less widely recognized than his contributions to the field of Jewish thought. Aaron Simmons, a writer who has delved into broader ethical implications of Lévinas’s thinking observed that “Lévinas repeatedly deploys his own Jewish tradition, but he makes very clear that he does not do so as appeals to their authority as *religious*. Indeed, if they are to be authoritative, it is because they accord with what the inquiry into lived existence has already affirmed” (2011, 143). *Otherwise than Being*, a difficult book that refines arguments from his earlier works and endeavors to provide a more rigorous phenomenological grounding for his thinking, was published in 1974.

2.2 Philosophical Influences

Lévinas chose to work within the framework of phenomenology and found inspiration—as well as significant points of disagreement—in the writings of Husserl and Heidegger. One of the most fundamental premises of phenomenology thoroughly informed his project: truth is to be ascertained from that which is revealed to consciousness. However, he found the methodology of Husserl to incorrectly exclude transcendent truth, due to its rejection of phenomena that are not amenable to cognition. Following the lead of Heidegger, Lévinas considered Husserl’s works to inadequately address phenomenology’s handling of the implications of Being. However, he used

Heidegger as a foil for his argument that understandings with respect to Being should not preclude recognition of transcendent truth from beyond Being. Lévinas, at the point in time in which he published *Totality and Infinity*, was a relatively lone voice among philosophers for the possibility of accessing transcendence. He buttressed his claim for the existence of transcendent truth through a reading of Plato's explanation of the Good as existing outside of Being [*epekeina tes ousias*].

Philosophy has long considered the realms of immanence and transcendence, finding theological implications in those concepts, in some cases defining the realms simplistically as the distinction between the divine manifesting itself within the world or remaining outside of the world. As twentieth-century philosophers began to assume the non-existence of God, discussion of transcendence, as such, waned. Lévinas characterized this trend as a “destruction of transcendence” (1996, 130). He observed that “[i]n conformity with the whole tradition of the West” transcendence had been excluded from philosophy (2013, 99). He argued for re-examination by contemporary philosophy of transcendence—not as an endorsement of the belief system of Western religion, but as an exploration of the limitations of human cognition.¹⁰ He questioned classical phenomenology's reliance on human cognition as the only reliable means for ascertaining truth. In his readings of Husserl and Heidegger, Lévinas found unfounded reliance on cognition—what is intelligible by consciousness—as the means for ascertaining truth and rejecting superstition.

¹⁰ Michel Henry also seeks to expand the scope of what phenomenology recognizes, but argues instead for the recognition of a radical immanence that is free from all aspects of transcendence. He contends that “pathos” (the feeling and passion of life experience) provides the phenomenological basis for thought (2008, 93); in fact, the “essence of truth is life” (97). For Henry, life, as such, gives itself: “what it gives is given to itself and that what it gives to itself is never separated from it, not in the least. . . . No road leads to life except life itself” (120). He finds that phenomenology establishes “the quasi-identity of the essence of man and that of God, namely, Life[, which] begets man as a man who knows God” (2000, 225-26).

Accordingly, he argued for a modern re-acceptance of the idea of transcendence, a re-thinking of what transcendence embodies. For Lévinas, transcendent meaning was not relegated to the realm of religion as being solely based upon faith; however, as I will argue, the dividing line is not clear between what Lévinas finds to be known through phenomenological analysis and what could only be known through divine revelation.

Given his rhetorical style of framing his views as challenges to what he viewed as “contemporary Western philosophy,” it may be useful to single out Husserl, Heidegger, and Plato as philosophers who are perhaps most notably integrated into his thinking—either as influences or assumed antagonists—and summarize their relevant views.

2.2.1 Challenging Husserl’s and Heidegger’s Phenomenology

Phenomenology provided Lévinas with a means to argue for recognition of human experience of a divine Other—and of the implications of any such experience. However, Lévinas believed—no doubt correctly so—that the guiding works on phenomenology did not lend full support to his conclusions. After decades of studying and evaluating the works of Husserl and Heidegger, Lévinas argued for an expansion of phenomenology to acknowledge transcendence.

Phenomenology is, fundamentally, the study of phenomena. Such a study delves into the conscious experience of a “subject” in order to ascertain meaning and truth. The “subject” is the person whose consciousness is being considered, and the topic of “subjectivity” addresses what enters into the awareness of the subject’s consciousness. Lévinas was heavily influenced by the thinking of Husserl and Heidegger in the approach he took in framing his discussion of subjectivity and of truth perceived through subjectivity. As Lévinas’s own thinking evolved, he became critical of limitations that Husserl’s methodology placed on subjectivity and of limitations that Heidegger’s view of Being placed on meaning and truth. Lévinas characterized his response to contemporary phenomenology as an “overcoming of the subject-object structure” (1996, 41), but his concern was more nuanced than that. He concluded that the approach to truth

taken by contemporary phenomenology, if unchallenged, excluded consideration of any manner of transcendent meaning.

The phenomenological method defined by Husserl was a highly disciplined approach to experience and consciousness, coupling an attention to meaning derived through lived experience with various “reductions”: intellectual techniques for removing mere thoughts or external factors from consideration. Husserl’s methodology attempted to consider what consciousness perceives without the influence of any presuppositions by excluding from consideration everything that is transcendent to the workings of intentional consciousness. What would be deemed the “transcendent,” such that it would be excluded from consideration through the so-called transcendental reduction? For Husserl, this reduction was intended to exclude all preconceived ideas about the object—beliefs founded in superstition and imagination, as well as ordinary biases. Husserl sought a means for science to exclude unreliable presuppositions, believing, according to Cohen, that “[s]cience could no longer reduce and presuppose but would have to expose all evidences, including the evidences of consciousness *taken on their own terms*. Vast domains of signification hitherto dismissed as unscientific or prescientific, mere perception, mere imagination, mere worldliness, mere duration, etc., reduced to one form or another of illusory subjectivism, would be restored to scientific status by a phenomenology rigorously investigating and uncovering the invariant structures (‘essences’) constitutive of their meaning” (2013, xiii).

Lévinas viewed his own analyses as being “in the spirit of Husserlian philosophy” (2012, 183) and, indeed, employs the terminology of phenomenology in his arguments. Yet, against the intellectualism of Husserl, Lévinas claims that not all truth can be comprehended through a Husserlian methodology (1996, 104). Husserl endeavored to create a strict methodology for understanding the world, a methodology through which knowledge can *only* be derived from what appears to the subject, recognizing only knowledge gleaned from the relation between

knower and known, between consciousness and what one is conscious of. Like Husserl, Lévinas placed great importance on how consciousness approaches that of which it becomes conscious. However, Lévinas expanded the concept of knowledge to include experiences that cannot be seen or comprehended by consciousness and, as such, cannot be “intended” in the manner defined by Husserl—allowing the possibility for phenomenological experience to include an encounter with the Other (2013, 56).

Heidegger embraced the discipline of Husserl’s approach, but increased the complexity of phenomenological thought by formulating an understanding of truth that is inextricably interconnected with Being. Heidegger’s analysis is concerned with the uncovering, the revealing, the bringing to light of that which is relevant—but obscured—in the question of Being. Lévinas appropriates a number of phenomenological concepts from Heidegger’s writing, but largely uses Heidegger’s work, *Being and Time*, as a claimed source of error in the understanding of truth in all its sources. Lévinas claims that “*Being and Time* has argued perhaps but one sole thesis: Being is inseparable from the comprehension of Being (which unfolds as time)” (2012, 45). He reads Heidegger as essentially equating truth with the manifestation of Being to consciousness, and that distilled view of humankind’s source of truth becomes Lévinas’s target.

Lévinas gives short shrift to Heidegger’s more nuanced view, perhaps to give clarity to the distinction between his own conclusions and what he sees as the ramifications of Heideggerian thinking—or perhaps simply to frame the question that he wanted to answer: can a source of truth exist outside of Being? Lévinas understands Heidegger as viewing subjectivity and consciousness as the modality through which essence manifests itself, very much in accord with Husserlian methodology. Lévinas characterizes Heidegger’s thinking almost as a tautology: “manifestation of essence is what is essential in essence; experience and the subject having the experience constitute the very manner in which...essence is accomplished, that is, manifested.” For Lévinas, such a framework for truth and meaning is wholly inadequate (1996, 123-24).

Jeffrey Bloechl, who has studied Lévinas extensively, explains Lévinas's break with Heidegger by summarizing Lévinas's fundamental disagreement as follows: "I am not simply, as Heidegger clearly states, the bare fact or event of comprehension, but also that by which it is enacted in one or another particular way" (2000, 108). As I will explain in Section 2.4 below, Lévinas argues for the possibility of meaning that is revealed but not comprehended, a possibility that Lévinas finds inconsistent with Heidegger's views: "Heidegger will contest the possibility of [a philosophical discourse] where the movement begins in Being instead of coming from man, where it is not a question of leading man to the presence of Being, but where Being is in the presence of man in *parousia*" (2013, 20).

Lévinas's arguments with the thinking of Heidegger are not with the details of Heidegger's philosophy as it evolved in Heidegger's later works; in fact, Bloechl argues that Lévinas's portrayal of phenomenology's methodology allowed him to avoid the complexity in Heidegger's views (2000, 107).¹¹ While Heidegger maintains the primacy of cognition ("outside of which one cannot go"), Lévinas argues that cognition does not account for all that which is sensible (2011, 66-67) and offers the idea of subjectivity independent of cognition and the limitations of manifestation. He questions the adequacy of subjectivity and the manifestation of Being as understood by the Western tradition to account for everything which each of us encounters.

According to Bloechl, Lévinas's argument "is made possible first by taking sides with Heidegger against Husserl's alleged 'theoretism,' which considers identifying with oneself an inescapable and inevitable fact to be addressed within the powers of theory, but then moving without pause over Heidegger's sense of a profound intimacy with oneself discovered only by finding oneself already in anxiety—thus, without considering a mineness anterior to any question

¹¹ Derrida also considered misunderstandings of Heidegger to be embedded in *Totality and Infinity* (1978, 97).

of exercising it—directly to the idea that any defense of primary ipseity whatsoever wrongly encloses us within being” (2000, 110-11). In opposition to the views of Husserl and Heidegger, Lévinas endeavors to describe a phenomenological process for recognizing the Other, notwithstanding that the Other cannot be perceived by ordinary consciousness or even be comprehended. How is this even phenomenology? Gschwandtner, who has authored a number of well-researched works on postmodern philosophy of religion, considers the interaction that Lévinas depicts to be a manner of phenomenological assimilation, where the Other appears “not by becoming ‘present’ and ‘comprehensible’ but by making an impact that can be felt and experienced (phenomenologically) and yet remain truly other and different” (2013, 57). As I will discuss in Section 2.3 below, human comprehension of the Other is put into question by Lévinas, not just because of its “otherness,” but because its approach is from outside of Being. The possibility of manifestations from outside of Being—transcendence, as loosely defined by Lévinas—was not being seriously addressed by modern philosophers. Accordingly, he looked to Plato for inspiration as to the way in which philosophy could conceive of a realm other than Being.

2.2.2 Looking to Plato for Transcendent Meaning

Phenomenology as understood by Husserl and Heidegger is unlikely to find God or any divine Other within Being. Although Jean-Luc Marion will argue for an expanded understanding of phenomenology that would explicitly acknowledge manifestation of the Other as a phenomenon, Lévinas does not choose to pursue such a line of argument. Rather, he draws upon Platonic fundamentals to support an understanding of an Other that is and remains *outside* of Being. The mythical Platonic belief in a divine world outside of the visible world is not shared by contemporary philosophy, nor is it shared by Lévinas. Rather, his thinking is a “return to Platonism in a new way” (1996, 58). Lévinas found relevance there in understanding transcendence: “In the light of contemporary philosophy and by contrast with it, we understand

better what the separateness of the intelligible world means in Plato, over and beyond the mythical sense ascribed to the realism of the Ideas: for Plato the world of meanings precedes language and culture, which express it; it is indifferent to the system of signs that one can invent to make this world present to thought” (42). Lévinas thus finds in Plato inspiration for a view of Being in which meaning—and ethical meaning in particular—are revealed outside of Being.

To overcome what he considers as Heidegger’s ontology, Lévinas draws upon the idea of the Good in Plato’s *Republic*—in which the Good is characterized as beyond Being. Plato claims there that “[t]he good therefore may be said to be the source not only of the intelligibility of the objects of knowledge, but also of their being and reality; yet it is not itself that reality, but is beyond it, and superior to it in dignity and power” (509b). This perspective of the Good beyond Being informed Lévinas’s view of the transcendent: that which is outside of totality and cannot be encompassed (2012, 293). Despite mythical origins, Lévinas found philosophical guidance to be found there, but he acknowledged that his contentions were not based on a literal reading of Plato’s texts: “The beyond Being, *being’s other* or the *otherwise than Being* ... has been recognized as the Good by Plato. It matters little that Plato made of it an idea and a source of light” (2013, 19).

In establishing this new framework for consideration of transcendence, Lévinas is aware that his project could be seen as solely a theological endeavor. He rejects any such categorization of his arguments: “The Place of the Good above every essence is the most profound teaching, the definitive teaching, not of theology, but of philosophy” (2012, 103). In positing the existence of the Good outside of Being, Lévinas is not conflating the concept of the Good with God or another divine being. However, he is equating the concept of the Good with transcendent meaning, thereby finding in Plato inspiration for the premise that meaning is given outside of Being. In the same way as which Lévinas finds inspiration in the idea of the Good beyond Being for a means by which to understand meaning revealed outside of Being, he also finds inspiration

in the idea of the Same and the Different for a means by which to understand meaning that is not comprehended within Being (in the manner contemplated by Heidegger). In explaining the manner in which meaning is revealed outside of Being, Lévinas finds Plato's concepts of the Same and the Different to be illustrative. He accuses phenomenology of ignoring the fundamental relationship between the Same (which can be comprehended by consciousness) and the Different (which if it were to be comprehended by consciousness would no longer be Different). Through that perceived error, he finds that phenomenology attempts to fuse the two categories. As Gschwandtner explains:

Lévinas argues that the major problem in Western philosophy is that it has closed off all access to the other and instead reduces all difference to sameness. Even phenomenology, although it emphasizes the essential relationship between consciousness and the objects of consciousness, between the activity of perceiving and what is being perceived, still attempts to grasp and comprehend as fully as possible what appears to consciousness as a phenomenon. The goal of phenomenology, as that of most of philosophy, is comprehension or knowledge, evidence and understanding. Lévinas claims that Western philosophy (including phenomenology) has always been obsessed with light, presence, and the self. Philosophy attempts to enlighten, to bring to light, to make present, to understand fully, to lay out plainly, to grasp. ...Lévinas finds that this desire to comprehend another person or subject matter fully and to reduce something to complete evidence or appearance implies that what is other or different becomes assimilated to my own understanding and therefore reduced to me—it becomes a version of myself ... [T]he phenomenon loses its alterity (otherness) or difference from consciousness and instead becomes a part of it. (2013, 42)

One could argue that Lévinas finds his sole support in Plato for the premise that philosophers may credibly consider the possibility of the existence of anything outside of Being. Certainly, such a premise—the existence of a realm for the gods outside of the physical world—has been an underlying faith-based understanding of Western theology for millennia; however, after Nietzsche few modern philosophers have ventured into rethinking the possibility of any world outside of the apparent world. As we shall see in the following section, Lévinas did not envision that which is outside of Being as a place of eternal reward for humankind—or a “place” at all. Yet there is a concreteness to Lévinas's conclusions about the human encounter with the

Other outside of Being that is likely beyond what Plato contemplated when he posited the Good—an idea and not the name of a divine being—existing outside of Being.

2.3 Otherwise than Being

As philosophy has explored the nature of Being, it has sometimes also considered *absence* of Being, including the possibility that in the absence of Being there would be nothingness. From an ontological perspective, one may then be compelled to ask, “*Why* is there something rather than nothing?” That question is commonly attributed to Heidegger, although his precise question was “Why are there beings at all instead of nothing?” It was for him the fundamental question of metaphysics (2000, 1). Lévinas would likely have viewed that juxtaposition of options as a trick question, a verbal sleight of hand, because it is formulated to posit *nothingness* as the implied sole alternative to beings [*das Seiende*, literally “that which is”]. One of the most significant contributions of Lévinas to philosophy—and to phenomenology in particular—was to challenge a framework of thought in which the categories of Being and nothingness are sufficient to account for all that approaches or is approached by subjectivity. Lévinas instead offered a framework in which there also exists that which is *outside* of Being. To be clear, for Lévinas, “outside of Being” is not a realm outside of the natural or apparent world. In his view it is characterized largely by the way in which subjectivity functions “there.” To the extent to which one can conceptualize Being as that which is revealed to cognition, one is forced to then conceptualize that which is outside of Being as *that which Being is not*. Is this an unhelpful tautology? Possibly, if one’s goal is to fully grasp the concept of a “realm” outside of Being—a place where the physical laws of our world do not apply. However, Lévinas’ interest appears to lie in contrasting meaning as revealed within Being—a phenomenological objective—with a source of truth and meaning that are manifested differently. In particular, Lévinas’s depiction of that which is outside of Being is rather narrowly focused on describing the manner in which the Other is manifested there.

In *Totality and Infinity* the existence of the Other is to a great extent presupposed by Lévinas—in that work the nature of that which is outside of Being is barely explored. Instead, Lévinas focuses his discussion on the relationship between the individual and the Other and the ethical implications of that relationship. However, in *Otherwise than Being*, he strives to justify recognition by philosophy of subjectivity that does not exclude that which is—by Heideggerian definition—unrecognizable within Being. Lévinas challenges the idea that truth consists only in the exposition of Being to itself, observing, critically: “It is as though subjective life in the form of consciousness consisted in being itself losing itself and finding itself again so as to *possess itself* by showing itself, proposing itself as a theme, exposing itself in truth” (2013, 99). In other words, he rejects the view—which he attributes to Heidegger—that all truth is derived from experience or resolves into a manifestation of Being. To the contrary, he argues that subjectivity is not irreducible to consciousness and thematization;¹² the Other which signifies in its approach does so in a manner that cannot be thematized—is not “tamed or domesticated by a theme” (100). *Otherwise than Being* was not merely a rehash of the earlier works. As I will discuss below, it explores human perception of the Other by means of language, in other words, by exploration of how one’s consciousness encounters meaning as that consciousness forms thought about or directs thought toward things outside of oneself.

In his body of work, Lévinas describes how philosophy should consider a divine Other that is manifested to consciousness outside of Being, and perhaps, in so doing, Lévinas conceives of an Other more radical in its otherness than had been significantly considered in modern Western philosophy. While this Other may resemble God in some respects (2012, 293), it is not the father-figure God found in Judeo-Christian theology. Lévinas describes the Other as incommensurable with perception and transcendent to the point of absence. As we have seen, he

¹² Thematization was a concern shared with Heidegger, who distinguished in *Being and Time* between pre-ontological understanding of being and the explicit articulation of its meaning.

viewed transcendence as an idea that has been improperly discarded by contemporary philosophers. Although the concept of transcendence is not framed identically by all philosophers, it commonly refers to an experience of God or the divine. By contrast, Lévinas describes transcendence without explicit theological overtones, viewing it merely as human experience of that which is beyond Being and not an event of Being: it is “passing over to being’s *other*” (2013, 3). Given his criticism of classical phenomenology’s focus on intentionality and cognition as requirements of phenomena, perhaps Lévinas views transcendence simply as manifestations that fail to meet these standards. However, much contemporary phenomenological thought can be interpreted as creating a view of Being that leaves no room for the concept of transcendence of any definition; many contemporary philosophers would find it to be futile and unscientific to explore a subjectivity that is open to anything outside of Being. Such a mindset is Lévinas’s target for challenge; he rejects such limited horizons and argues for an understanding of subjectivity that allows the Other to be apperceived and acknowledged.

2.3.1 Source of Meaning and Truth

One of Lévinas’s most significant contributions to phenomenology was his exploration of that which is outside of Being—and corresponding rejection of limitations that concepts of Being might impose on quests for truth. As a contemporary of Heidegger, Lévinas was well acquainted with Heidegger’s seminal work *Being and Time* and the framework for understanding Being offered there. Following Heidegger’s lead, contemporary philosophers had largely refused to acknowledge the possibility of anything worthy of modern consideration existing outside of Being, equating such pursuits with a theological endeavor to recognize God. Lévinas argued that that philosophy had come to recognize as truth only what can be known after having been unveiled by Being, ignoring the possibility of any other source of truth.

In a response to Heidegger's question "Why are there beings at all rather than nothing?" he found there to be a prior, more relevant question: "How does it stand with being?" (2000, 35-44). That latter question contemplates an answer that broadly considers that which is outside of Being: the transcendent. Although Heidegger's fundamental question of metaphysics names nothingness as the alternative to the existence of beings, Lévinas does not look to the idea of nothingness as an inspiration for that which is outside of Being. Otherwise than Being is not nothingness; it is not to "not-be." Rather, transcendence "claims to state a difference over and beyond that which separates being from nothingness" (2013, 3). Much of Lévinas's discussion of that which is otherwise than Being is a direct or indirect challenge to Heideggerian views regarding truth. Heidegger found the source of truth to be in Being: "The true as such is in being. ... *Truth belongs to the essence of Being*" (2000, 107). He found the way to truth to lie in unconcealment and comprehension (205-6). Lévinas disagrees and repeatedly asks "[W]hat shows itself, in truth, under the name of being?" (2013, 23). Perhaps this question should be considered an intended refinement of Heidegger's fundamental question: "How does it stand with being?" Lévinas answers his own question, in part, by proposing the *otherwise than Being* as a modality of subjectivity and as an additional source of truth.

In discussing the nature of what is "other," *Totality and Infinity* provides little more explanation or definition of the other than one would find in Plato's writings; Lévinas acknowledges that his own view of the other "recalls Plato's Ideas" (2012, 38). Lévinas considered the Greek idea of the Good to be a correlate to the other as that which is outside of totality. He found inspiration there for the possibility of truth that originates outside of Being: "Greek metaphysics conceived Good as separate from the totality of essences, and in this way ... it caught sight of a structure such that the totality could admit of a beyond. ... Plato nowise deduces being from the Good: he posits transcendence as surpassing the totality" (102-3). Otherness is basically depicted by Lévinas as a state that contrasts with the *same*. The other is "a

reality infinitely distant from my own reality, yet without this distance destroying this relation and without this relation destroying this distance, as would happen with relations within the same” (41). The existence of a state of otherness is largely presupposed by Lévinas in his early works; he does not consider arguments that the Greek view—which serves as the foundation of his premise—is mythical or somehow results in an overstatement of the case for an Other. Indeed, he argued that Plato’s idea of the Good ensured “the notion of the being above being” with “the dignity of philosophical thought” (2012, 218).

I would argue that Lévinas may have engaged in an intentional misreading of Plato in order to find support for his view of the Other—and has conflated to some degree the ethical nature of the Good with divinity which the Greeks may have attributed to the concept of the Good. How do Plato’s views support human subjectivity outside of Being? Lévinas does not say. Conceiving the Good as an ethical imperative outside of totality does not seem to imply the possibility of subjectivity outside of humanly-perceived totality. It could, however, be seen to inspire an understanding of ethical obligation that has its roots outside of totality—Lévinas’s understanding. Categorizing the Good as an idea outside of totality would be consistent with Lévinas’s treatment of the approach by the Other as occurring in pre-original consciousness as an ethical undertaking, as discussed in Sections 2.4.1 and 2.5.1.

Lévinas makes clear that he does not view that which takes shape beyond Being as occurring “behind the scenes in a hinter world” (1996, 101)—a reference no doubt to the Biblical view of heaven—or to the Platonic idea of a realm of Ideas existing in a literal sense. Nor is it conceived by Lévinas as the abode of God; in his opinion, such a theological viewpoint would be a “bankruptcy of transcendence” (2013, 5). In fact, that which is outside of Being is not to be found in a “place” at all, such as some kind of alternate world with different attributes. It is not simplistically to be understood as merely a place without time and sensory perception. The nature of that which is beyond Being is depicted in *Otherwise than Being* by contrasting the

experience of subjectivity that occurs in Being with that which occurs outside of Being. Perhaps one can best comprehend Lévinas's understanding of that which is beyond Being in the context of his search there for truth. His view is based upon a declaration that truth is found outside of the temporal manifestations that contemporary phenomenology recognizes. Phenomenality *within* Being cannot be disassociated from time; Lévinas emphasizes the temporality of lived experience: "Being's essence is the temporalization of time" (2013, 29). This is because "[i]n the sensible as lived, identity shows itself, becomes a phenomenon, for in the sensible as lived is heard and 'resounds' essence, the lapse of time and the memory that recuperates it, consciousness; the time of consciousness is the resonance and understanding of time but this ambiguity and this gnoseological function of sensibility, this ambiguity of the understanding and intuition that does not exhaust the signifyingness of the sensible and of immediacy, is its play, logical and ontological, as consciousness" (36).

The crux of Lévinas's argument, however, is that other significations, "forgotten in ontology" are to be found in the immemorial—outside of Being and its monstration (2013, 38).¹³ Lévinas largely accepts contemporary phenomenology's definition of Being, but posits the need to allow for subjectivity outside of Being. He finds outside of Being a modality of signification that is not "knowing" or "cognition" (87); such significations outside of Being provide truth not manifested within Being. His is not an argument against modern understandings of Being, but rather that contemporary philosophy has ignored that which is outside of Being. Lévinas's position is bold in its argument for subjectivity outside of Being. It is more radical than merely

¹³ Jean-Louis Chrétien expands upon Lévinas's thinking in connection with the immemorial by considering in more detail the nature of what is recollected by consciousness out of an "immemorial without history that reaches me in my very constitution as a subject" (2002, 31). He considers there to be a manner of recollection that perceives the truth that was manifested anterior to consciousness: "Platonic thought thus supposes a forgetting that is first and founding. Such a forgetting, itself one with our human condition, does not come from an already constituted memory, and could not be defined as its failure. It precedes and renders possible our authentic memory of the truth, which is recollection" (37).

identifying a realm outside of Being—doing so could be viewed as essentially an endeavor pursued through definitions. One could define Being (through Heideggerian terms or otherwise) and then describe that which is outside of Being as precisely that: otherwise than Being. Such would result in a rather unedifying, tautological premise, if Lévinas’s position were not coupled with the concurrent claim that a form of subjectivity occurs outside of Being as well. As I will discuss below, this claim potentially eliminates his thinking from all recognized parameters of phenomenology. Contemporary phenomenology rejects the possibility of perception outside of Being, in the same manner as it would likely reject the possibility of perception within nothingness—were that the subject of consideration.

In summary, Lévinas argues that contemporary philosophy unnecessarily limits truth to perceptions and meaning gleaned from within Being. Despite the obvious difficulties in articulating the nature of that which could be considered outside of Being, Lévinas contends that additional truth is revealed there and challenges any phenomenological limitations to subjectivity that would reject the possibility of subjectivity outside of Being. He describes such truths as Being transcendent in nature, but perhaps that label is more distracting than helpful in evaluating Lévinas’s philosophical arguments regarding the possibility of subjectivity outside of Being. Traditionally, use within philosophy of the word “transcendent” has been generally reserved for experiences of the divine. For Lévinas, the defining feature of transcendent truth is that it is manifested outside of Being; its transcendent nature is not a function of a purported divine source—although as discussed in more detail below, in his view, the source does resemble the God of Western religion. Indeed, his project allows for recognition of the “Other” as a fundamental source of ethical truth outside of Being.

2.3.2 Subjectivity Outside of Being

Pushing the boundaries of contemporary phenomenological thinking, Lévinas finds that the Other is made known to subjectivity—notwithstanding that the Other is *absolutely* other and

cannot be an object of cognition. Such a view is significantly at odds with phenomenological methodology which only recognizes phenomena that can be made known to consciousness. Gschwandtner finds in Lévinas's writings a challenge to Western philosophy's focus on totality and on that which can be comprehended and the correlative disregard for that which is different and incomprehensible. Lévinas finds in Western philosophy a determination to assimilate into consciousness all that is encountered—even that which is beyond comprehension. In striving to do so, the essence of alterity is lost. Lévinas views the attempt to comprehend the Other as futile—in effect, through one's effort to comprehend, that which becomes part of consciousness through such effort is *no longer other*. When the other is encountered, according to Lévinas, “we assimilate, comprehend (encompass), make like us—so the stranger really becomes merely another version of the self. [Western philosophy has] closed off all access to the other and instead reduces all difference to sameness” (2013, 42).

In *Totality and Infinity* Lévinas explores the manner in which an Other that is outside of totality can be experienced. Although he discusses the existence of a broad otherness, he finds particular relevance in understanding the “absolutely other” which he differentiates by capitalizing the term: “The other qua other is the Other” (71). He is clear that the Other cannot be understood by reference to Husserlian methodology; it is outside of the subject-object correlation. In other words, the Other does not, through the subject's awareness, become an object observed intentionally in the manner described by Husserl. Lévinas argues that the Other is not manifested as an object within phenomenological horizons (70); rather, the Other is separated from totality, in a “separation resistant to synthesis” (293). Indeed, the Other is not a phenomenon as commonly understood by phenomenology—it does not appear in the world; rather, it is an “interruption” of Being. Lévinas also introduces the word “disturbance” to depict the disruptive way in which the Other manifests itself to consciousness:

Disturbance is a movement that does not propose any stable order in conflict or in accord with a given order; it is movement that already carries away the signification it brought: disturbance disturbs order without troubling it seriously. It enters in so subtle a way that unless we retain it, it has already withdrawn. It insinuates itself, withdraws before entering. It remains only for him who would like to take it up. Otherwise, it has already restored the order it troubled—someone rang, and there is no one at the door: did anyone ring? (1996, 70)

He contrasts the disturbance by the Other with the “indiscreet and victorious appearing of a phenomenon” by describing such a disturbance as a “way the Other has of seeking my recognition while preserving his *incognito*, disdaining recourse to a wink-of-the-eye of understanding or complicity, [a] way of manifesting himself without manifesting himself” (70).

As I have noted elsewhere, certain philosophers have criticized and even ridiculed his hyperbolic and sometimes imprecise language. He offers passionate phenomenologically-based justifications for recognition of the Other, arguing, credibly, for a relaxation of Husserlian standards, to consider what occurs within consciousness outside of Being. Yet perhaps he offers insufficient clarity as to how an experience of the Other within consciousness comes to pass outside of Being—how *subjectivity* outside of Being comes to pass. In *Otherwise than Being*, Lévinas argues that the Other approaches each of us outside of Being and prior to all experience and consciousness. For him, it is “pre-original” and “on the hither side of consciousness...older than any present, any beginning.” The pre-original cannot be assembled in a representational present, but rather, refers to an irrecoverable, pre-ontological past. Because the relationship with the Other exists *prior* to any act or apperception, the Other is incommensurable with cognition and comprehension (1996, 115-117). It becomes known to subjectivity through its approach to consciousness—“over and beyond form”—and not as an object perceived by the senses (2012, 66). Although not capable of being perceived by the senses as an object of cognition, the Other nevertheless approaches each of us outside of Being (2012, 65). The way in which the Other manifests itself Lévinas names the “Face”; in other words, one’s orientation toward the Other is

presence before the Face (50). The Face (like the Other which is manifested by the Face) is not an object; it is not perceived; it does not appear. It is incommensurable with the present.

To further depict the separation that the Other maintains from the senses, Lévinas describes human awareness of the Other by reference to its *trace*.¹⁴ The trace of the Other, where alterity has passed without evidence, is all that remains of which one can be aware, yet for Lévinas, paradoxically, “properly speaking has never been there” (1996, 63). He describes the trace as something always radically past: “[T]he trace qua trace does not simply lead to the past but is the very passing toward a past more remote than any past and any future which still are set in my time—the past of the Other in which eternity takes form, an absolute past which unites all times” (63). Moreover, the trace of the Face is a trace of illeity. The term “illeity” is a neologism formed with *il* (he) or *ille* and “indicates a way of concerning me without entering into *conjunction* with me” (1996, 119).

Gschwandtner emphasizes the intangible nature of such a trace:

God is the “trace of illeity,” what has always already passed and cannot be identified. The divine has only left a trace and we are always too late. The trace indicates the utter absence and obscure alterity of God. Direct relationship between God and the self is not possible. Lévinas goes out of his way to emphasize the obscurity of this trace and speaks of it as the *absolutely Absent*. No relation or signification is possible. The trace of illeity indicates absolute alterity that escapes any kind of revelation or appearance and is completely without measure. (2013, 50)

Is this manifestation of the Other that occurs outside of Being somehow analogous to religious experience of the presence of God? Is the Other the God of the Jewish faith? Lévinas would say no. He does not explicitly name God as the Other or use the names interchangeably: “God is not simply the ‘first other,’ the other par excellence, or the ‘absolutely other,’ but other than the other, other otherwise, other with an alterity prior to the alterity of the other, prior to the

¹⁴ The revealed God of the Jewish tradition sometimes shows itself only by its trace: “ [W]hile my glory passes by I will put you in a cleft of the rock, and I will cover you with my hand until I have passed by; then I will take away my hand and you shall see my back; but my face shall not be seen”(Exodus 33:22-23).

ethical bond with the other and different from every neighbor, transcendent to the point of absence, to the point of a possible confusion with the stirring of the *there is*” (1996, 141). There is, nevertheless, a strong connection in Lévinas’s thinking between God and the Other. In fact, he states that “the Other, in his signification ... *resembles God* [emphasis added]” (2012, 293). Gschwandtner interprets Lévinas’s view of God as being the most extreme other: “God is so absent, so utterly other, so transcendent, that thought about the divine becomes almost indistinguishable from thought about nothing or terrifying absence” (2013, 54).

Lévinas finds in contemporary philosophy a rejection of that which is outside of cognition. In the realm of cognition—that which can be thematized and known—nothing can remain absolutely other. Lévinas therefore concludes that contemporary philosophy is incapable of addressing the other qua Other, given that the Other cannot be thematized. Everything that is other—whether a being or thing—would have to be accessible to perception or at least theoretical contemplation in order to be known. Such efforts would be misguided attempts to reduce the Other to the Same—and would be unsuccessful. However, without a great deal of explanation, Lévinas contends that subjectivity exists outside of Being in the occurrence of “substitution.” As I will discuss in Section 2.5.2, Lévinas contends that the approach of the Other results in substitution in which each of us becomes responsible for all others. He does not explain why substitution should be considered *subjectivity*, a concept that implies perception by the subject. I would argue that he does not make a phenomenologically-based argument for that conclusion at all. Rather, he describes substitution as something that occurs prior to, or simultaneously with, the formation of consciousness and thought.¹⁵

I find fundamental concerns with this aspect of Lévinas’s project: an approach by the Other outside of Being—in the manner described by Lévinas—cannot be recognized by

¹⁵ In Section 2.4, I will explore this difficult issue by looking at the possibility that subjectivity outside of Being occurs—if at all—in the formation of language.

phenomenology (as understood by contemporary philosophy) or otherwise deduced through a rigorous application of logic or reason. Bloechl, paraphrasing Derrida, writes, “what will be the meaning of what neither reveals or signifies, and is neither a metaphor nor a figure, yet is the living presence of the other, his expression of himself?” (2000, 57). Lévinas’s contention that the Other can be detected “on the hither side” begs for more clarity as to how one may gain awareness of such an occurrence other than through revelation given to Lévinas. How can one know that the idea of beyond Being and the possibility of approach by the Other on the hither side is not simply a philosophical construct—or a mind game? Is a Platonic philosophical tradition sufficient? As discussed in Section 2.5.1, even those who are deemed to have been approached by the Other are unable confirm the existence of the Other, since the approach was pre-original and, therefore, prior to consciousness. In Simmons’ view, the characterization in *Otherwise than Being* of the manner in which subjectivity beyond Being is depicted by Lévinas pushes the conception to “its linguistic and conceptual breaking point” (2011, 110).

John Llewelyn, writing from the perspective of a philosopher of language, was not troubled by these questions, finding them to reflect a too literal reading of Lévinas. He wrote, “[T]he absolute forgetting and unrecollective remembrancing always already effected in the trace does not hark back ... to an event like some proto-ethical Big Bang in, at or before the time of historiography. When, against the structuralist’s stressing of synchrony, Lévinas emphasizes diachrony, he means that every moment of the recollectable time of my going forward toward my own death is cut through by the interlocution of other mortal human beings” (2002, 136). If, as Llewelyn contends, one should not go so far as to attempt a literal reading of Lévinas’s depictions of beyond Being, then is it merely metaphorical? Lévinas would no doubt object to that manner of apologetic reading of his work (2013, 57).

However, if a generally literal reading of Lévinas work is offered, one must question whether the underlying logic for the idea of that which is otherwise than Being begins and ends

with the definition of Being and the contrasting definition of otherwise than Being. Given the definitional impossibility of consciousness or cognition of anything outside of Being, as asserted by Lévinas, it is not clear to me why philosophy should recognize Lévinas's thinking on pre-original subjectivity. Not all commentators share that concern. Gschwandtner appears to accept the possibility that philosophy can consider the pre-conscious perceptions described by Lévinas: "Although we cannot 'constitute' or 'intend' the other in Husserl's sense, we can still engage in the kind of patient and careful description that is a hallmark of the phenomenological method. [...] I can feel myself envisioned and interrupted by the other instead of treating the other as an object I envision or intend" (2013, 44). Perhaps the manner of engagement that Gschwandtner recognizes is "sensing," as opposed to comprehension. According to Simon Critchley, the "entire phenomenological thrust of *Otherwise than Being* is to found intentionality in sensibility" (2002, 21). Lévinas writes, "In the sensible as lived, identity shows itself, becomes a phenomenon, for in the sensible as lived is heard and 'resounds' essence, the lapse of time and the memory that recuperates it, consciousness" (2013, 36). Lévinas broadly discusses the distinction between comprehension and the sensible in connection with his explanations of the saying and the said, which I will consider in Section 2.4.

2.3.3 Dualistic Overtones

Although Llewelyn properly cautions against a too-literal reading of Lévinas, one is still inclined to ask: when the Other approaches consciousness on the hither side of Being, where is the physical body? Lévinas does not say. If human consciousness is a natural function of brain activity occurring between birth and death, then it is difficult to comprehend when and how such an approach occurs. To answer that it occurs at a pre-original moment is not to offer a concrete answer. To answer that it is prior to consciousness implies a time element—but that is contrary to Lévinas's description of the approach occurring outside of time. Only if mind and body are separate does the nagging question become one that can easily be avoided. Lévinas looks to the

writings of Descartes for inspiration on topics such as the capacity of human thought, but he does not explicitly adopt the dualistic views of Descartes that treat the mind as functioning independently from the body—described by Gilbert Ryle, Daniel Dennett, and others as the persistent widespread belief of a “ghost in the machine” (Ryle 2000, 15; Dennett 1991, 33).

In *Otherwise than Being*, Lévinas portrays a pre-original approach by the Other to the human psyche, one that occurs prior to formation of consciousness, prior to the existence of a will. Because the occurrence is prior to consciousness, one has no memory or comprehension of the event. He describes it as a formative occurrence that provides meaning to the “unicity” of one’s ego: “[W] have moved from the ego to me who am me and no one else” (13-14, 92).

Although Lévinas uses the terminology of psychologists to describe the workings of the unconscious, he does not attempt to provide a scientific depiction of it. Accordingly, it is not clear precisely what facet of human existence is exposed to the Other on the hither side of Being—the ego, the psyche, the unconscious, the mind, or the soul. These concepts do not have mutually exclusive meanings, and so selection of one term would not preclude reference to the other terms. Perhaps arguments framed in precise, scientific language were not Lévinas’s goal. He acknowledges that a relationship with the Other cannot be understood in a manner consistent with “totalizing and systematic thought...concerned with ‘understanding the unity of the soul and the body’” (2013, 69). Since cognition is not assured on the hither side of Being, there is much about the approach of the Other that cannot be known. One *cannot* say that it is associated with a state of soul or is inseparable from a state of consciousness. In fact, one cannot precisely say what the ego or I is—in this context (82). One could make the case that Lévinas is satisfied with depictions of exposure to the Other that are more lyrical than scientific. For example, he states that “the psyche in the soul is the other in me” and exposure to the Other “is only possible as an incarnation” (69). Is lyrical, imprecise language fatal to Lévinas’s objective of articulating a source of ethical obligation? Dominique Janicaud would likely say yes, given his complaint

that Lévinas frequently provides only “words, words, words” (2000, 42). Certainly for any modern reader of philosophy, the use of theological language raises concerns.

Lévinas frequently refers to the soul in his discussion of the encounter that the psyche has with the Other, but there is lack of certainty as to his view of the nature of the soul. It is possible that he is using it interchangeably with the concept of the psyche in order to add emphasis to ethical consequences that occur in the psyche upon the approach by the Other. Notwithstanding his references to the soul in his depiction of the approach of the Other, he does not equate the soul with the ego, noting that the ego is not the soul as understood by theology (2013, 187n12). Yet he does illustrate the nature of the “cleavage” that occurs after meaning becomes thematized—in dualistic terms: “They mark two Cartesian orders, the body and the soul, which have no common space where they can touch, and no logical *topos* where they can form a whole” (70). Perhaps this is only one more reference to an approach by the Other that Lévinas believes to occur in “time immemorial”—without reference to any aspect of the demands of time.

Regardless of the word chosen to describe the human psyche prior to consciousness and outside of the limitations of time, I find in this aspect of Lévinas’s thinking an important contribution to fundamental concerns with language-formation. He argues that the interruption of consciousness caused by the approach by the Other results in an experience for which words are inadequate. As I will explore in the following Section, his depiction of a pre-conscious experience of “signification” that culminates in an inadequate “said” provides potential insight into the nature of religious experience.

2.4 Language

The decades in which Lévinas authored his works were also a time in which philosophers such as Derrida and Ludwig Wittgenstein were re-evaluating classic Western understandings of the signification and meaning found in language. Bloechl believes it to be likely that Derrida’s

article “Violence and Metaphysics” influenced Lévinas’s premise that language constitutes an integral part of one’s encounter with the Other, as presented in Lévinas’s subsequent work *Otherwise than Being* (Bloechl 2000, 214). In *Otherwise than Being*, Lévinas relies on philosophy of language to describe subjectivity in a pre-original realm, a context in which consciousness is not yet fully formed. This and his later works delved into questions of signification to such an extent that Derrida observed that there is no element of Lévinas’s thought which is not engaged by questions of language (1978, 109).

Essentially, Lévinas argues that human language is incapable of adequately conveying transcendent meaning, particularly in the context of an approach of the Other occurring outside of Being. He perceives a loss of meaning and truth as consciousness attempts to thematize transcendence. In other words, whatever is manifested in that context, once thematized, potentially loses its transcendent meaning. From the standpoint of philosophy of language, one might say that there is not a complete correlation between signification and the signified—or, as Lévinas prefers to say, between the “saying” and the “said.” These dichotomies likely echo Derrida’s thinking; however, if they do not, they clearly interested Derrida. Much of Derrida’s commentary on the works of Lévinas relate to Lévinas’s concerns with language and alterity.

Lévinas perceived a false egocentrism in our perception of the world in which we do not recognize the possibility of truth that cannot be the subject of cognition, meaning that cannot be thematized through language. He describes this egocentric approach to truth as follows: “Knowledge is a relation of the *Same* with the *Other* in which the Other is reduced to the Same and divested of its strangeness, in which thinking relates itself to the other but the other is no longer other as such; the other is already appropriated (*le propre*), already *mine*. ... It is immanence” (1996, 151). Against such an approach to knowledge, Lévinas takes the position that transcendent truth—that which is manifested by the Other—cannot be reduced to the same, that is, cannot be thematized in language.

For philosophy, such a claim proves to be problematic. How can a relationship that is, in fact, beyond comprehension be understood and described? How can it be reduced to writing by philosophers and communicated in books and articles? That is indeed part of the puzzle, because Lévinas argues that the attempt to thematize that which cannot be thematized is a flaw in philosophical approach. Is phenomenology largely indifferent to this concern? Alternatively, is there a phenomenological advance to be found in recognizing experience of language as a phenomenon—even when language is arguably inadequate to convey meaning? Lévinas’s contributions to that inquiry will be considered in Section 2.4.1, where I will discuss Lévinas’s concerns with the manner in which thought—particularly outside of Being—is thematized and becomes expressed in spoken or written language. Lévinas has concerns about the adequacy of language that echo concerns expressed by other philosophers; however, Lévinas considers those concerns primarily in the context of significations that have arisen outside of Being. In Section 2.4.2, I will address possible implications that his views on language have for phenomenology, considering the possibility that formation of language can be an experience that is recognized as a phenomenon.

2.4.1 Saying and the Said

Philosophers have long considered the manner in which thought emerges within consciousness and is transformed there into language. Lévinas finds such concerns to be highly relevant to his project to explain gaps that he perceives between experience of the Other and cognition. His exploration delves into the human experience that occurs at the point of transformation of thought into language, considering the possibility of utterances that occur out of the unconscious and even utterances that occur prior to consciousness. In *Otherwise than Being*, Lévinas deploys the dichotomy of the *saying* and the *said* to distinguish between such utterances and the imperfect cognition that follows. In explaining the role of language in one’s encounter with the Other, Lévinas finds critical importance in distinguishing between the saying

and the said, a distinction explained by Gschwandtner in this way: “The ‘saying’ refers to what is at the verbal or even pre-verbal level, what cannot be expressed, what may precede even thought itself. The ‘said’ is the language into which the ‘saying’ immediately becomes solidified when it is expressed in statements and especially in writing” (2013, 47).

Lévinas argues that the saying—a sincere utterance triggered by the approach of the Other—occurs in one’s pre-original encounter with the Other: “Saying opens me to the other (*autrui*) before saying what is said, before the said uttered in this sincerity forms a screen between me and the other” (1996, 145).¹⁶ The saying occurs “without words” (145), but as an attempt is made to find language to express the saying, the said “neither harbors nor expresses its ultimate meaning” (103). The said, as a thematization of verbal or pre-verbal meaning, as described by Lévinas, fails to embody these sincere utterances; through the process of thematization, the meaning to be found in the saying becomes wholly inadequate. However, Lévinas finds this inadequacy to be inherent in the approach by the Other: “[T]he subordination of the saying to the said, ... is the price that manifestation demands” (2013, 6).

Simmons refers to these views in a tongue-in-cheek manner as “attempts to torture language” (2011, 113), but does not contest the possibility of inadequacy of language to convey the ontology of ethical obligations. He paraphrases the implications of Lévinas’s thinking in this way: “By developing the distinction between ‘the said and the saying’... Lévinas provides an account that makes it impossible to *say* what you really mean, because the meaning is precisely not a *statement*, but a *relation* prior to language (though only considered therein)” (113). By contrast, Bloechl challenges Lévinas’s fundamental premise of a saying that occurs in the absence of a said:

¹⁶ Peperzak emphasizes Lévinas’s characterization of these sincere utterances as *exposure*: “In directing myself to another person saying exposes me. ... Through and behind or beyond all my masks and appearances, I am present to the other as a naked subject whose ‘essence’ is to be given, delivered up, and extradited to the other” (1991, 61-62).

But to observe that every expression consists of a Said animated by a Saying is not to defend the existence of a Saying without a Said. Without the Said, Saying is an empty proposition, an aiming that neither departs nor arrives because it has neither a destination nor any content. Unless there is at least a desire to speak, which already implies minimal content and an imagined interlocutor, there simply is no Saying. Saying, then, requires the Said, even if the Said can never satisfy or contain it. (2000, 216)

While the dichotomy of the saying and the said is no doubt relevant *within* Being, it is important to remember that Lévinas is depicting a manner of saying that occurs by the ego at a pre-original moment outside of Being, outside of memory and experience, and beyond consciousness. From a purely definitional standpoint—and presuming that such a form of saying does in fact occur—this may well suffice to describe an experience of transcendence. If such an occurrence of language does in fact occur outside of Being and beyond consciousness, then must it not properly be labeled as transcendence? It is by definition not within the horizon of the world or the boundaries of the mind. This is the nature of transcendence that Lévinas seeks to persuade others to recognize: perceptions that transcend Being. The possible divinity of the source is *not* the basis for a claim of transcendence. However, in a likely blurring of this distinction, Lévinas depicts the approach by a divine Other as a transcendent manifestation.

The relationship with the Other, as understood by Lévinas, is formed out of the saying. Possibly borrowing from theological terminology, he calls this experience of saying “testimony,” and in the saying he finds testimony to the unthematizable idea of Infinity: “My responsibility for the other is precisely this relation with an unthematizable Infinity. It is neither the experience of Infinity nor proof of it: it *testifies* to Infinity” (1996, 103). For Lévinas, testimony is a sign given to the other; it comes out of a saying that is “unencumbered by any possessions in being”; it is not appended to a subjective experience (103). This saying is characterized by Bloechl as a linguistic trace of the Other (2000, 217).

Lévinas does not mean for the saying—or testimony—to denote a Husserlian subjective experience of the Infinite; rather, it precedes any such experience:

Saying, before setting forth a said, is already the testimony of this responsibility—and even the saying of a said, as an approach to the other, is a responsibility for him. Saying is therefore a way of signifying prior to all experience. ... A pure testimony, it does not testify to a prior experience, but to the Infinite which is not accessible to the unity of apperception, nonappearing and disproportionate to the present. Saying could neither include nor comprehend the Infinite; the Infinite concerns and closes in on me while speaking through my mouth. And the only pure testimony is that of the Infinite. (1996, 145)

While many philosophers acknowledge the distinction between the meaning found in consciousness and its thematization in language, few have addressed the possibility of significations occurring anterior to consciousness—as did Lévinas. From a theoretical standpoint, there is no reason why the dichotomy could not exist both inside and outside of consciousness, but a pre-conscious state as envisioned by Lévinas—if such a state exists—cannot be observed and described. Perhaps more consideration should be given as to the way in which saying is experienced by the subject. How can one explore the anterior workings of consciousness, particularly if, as Lévinas asserts, little memory of the experience remains? Is such an experience within or outside of the realm of phenomenology? Are there, in fact, phenomena for which language is inadequate—or is this inadequacy, itself, a phenomenon?

2.4.2 Limitations of Language

Lévinas explores the age-old concern of philosophers of religion and theologians that language may be inherently inadequate to convey an experience of the transcendent.¹⁷ According to Lévinas, the “experience par excellence” of the encounter with the Face requires a rethinking of how—and even whether—language can express infinity and other aspects of the approach by

¹⁷ In Lévinas’s exploration of language-formation and the origin of words, there appear to be parallels with deconstructionist thinking. Possibly Lévinas’s goal of *unsaying* the said can be considered a deconstructive pursuit. Critchley described *Otherwise than Being* as Lévinas’s “deconstructive turn,” describing the ethical perspectives of Lévinas as the “persistent deconstruction of the limits of ontology and its claim to conceptual mastery, while also recognizing the unavailability of the Said” (2002b, 18). Arguably, like deconstruction, Lévinas’s approach discounts the adequacy of language and points the listener/reader back to the source.

the Other (2012, 196). In a 1981 interview later published in *Ethics and Infinity*, he explains that one's experience of the Other occurring, as it does, outside of totality is "uncontainable" for purposes of meaning creation; it creates a "signification without context" (86). In *Otherwise than Being*, he provides his view of the process that occurs in cognition prior to the formation of words that signify what is being thought. As he explains it, experience is first perceived in symbols, symbols that—in the context of an experience of the Other—are inadequate to convey the whole of what is perceived. Yet the *symbolic* is the means by which perceptions are thematized into language; he characterizes the said as the symbolism of knowing. As he describes the process, the saying is the first activity in the process of knowing, followed by a thematization in which "words of living language inventoried in dictionaries ... find their connections" (62). Lévinas argues that through this process, the saying is "absorbed into the said" (62).¹⁸

As depicted by Lévinas, the saying in utterances that occur in the context of an approach by the Other are "pre-original" and outside of Being. As will be discussed later in this chapter, these utterances, according to Lévinas, signify the response: "Here I am." However, after meaning in such a saying is thematized and becomes a said, it is no longer outside of Being. Lévinas finds that once cognition has reduced experience to language, the resulting said is within Being: "The said of language always says being" (2013, 196n20).

¹⁸ Derrida is less willing to abandon language than Lévinas, but acknowledges the inadequacies of language to encompass concepts important to Lévinas, such as infinity. Derrida describes these quandaries of language with which Lévinas must deal: "it is necessary to state infinity's *excess* over totality *in* the language of totality; ... it is necessary to state the other in the language of the Same" (1978, 112). Highlighting the difficulty that language has in encompassing the idea of "infinity," Derrida notes that the word itself, "*in*-finite," is not a positive descriptor, but rather is negative in its naming of this concept as that which is not finite: "As soon as one attempts to think Infinity as a positive plenitude ..., the other becomes unthinkable, impossible, unutterable. ... In any event, that the positive plenitude of classical infinity is translated into language only by betraying itself in a negative word (*in*-finite), perhaps situates, in the most profound way, the point where thought breaks with language" (114).

For Lévinas, the saying can be reduced to the said within Being because cognition within Being accommodates thematization; however, outside of Being—on the hither side of ontology—the saying cannot be reduced to the said. Lévinas explained this distinction as follows:

This saying has to be reached in its existence antecedent to the said, or else the said has to be reduced to it. ...What does saying signify before signifying a said? ...Our task is to establish its articulation and signifyingness antecedent to ontology. In correlation with the said (in which saying runs the risk of being absorbed as soon as the said is formulated), the saying itself is indeed thematized, exposes in essence even what is on the *hither side of ontology*, and flows into the temporalization of essence. And this thematization of saying does indeed bring out in it the characteristics of consciousness: in the correlation of saying and said the said is understood as a noema of an intentional act, language contracts into thought, into thought which conditions speaking, thought that in the said shows itself to be an act supported by a subject The saying and the said in their correlation delineate the subject-object structure. (2013, 46)

Some writers question the fundamental presumptions of Lévinas's views on "pre-original" formation of language, disputing depiction of the nature of consciousness at such a stage. Lévinas describes the encounter between consciousness and the Other that occurs as resulting in an *an-archic*¹⁹ relationship, one that excludes comprehension or mediation by ideality. This is because it is thought by Lévinas to occur prior to consciousness, but also because of immensely disruptive nature of the encounter. He explains that the "blow" from the approach that affects consciousness "makes an impact, traumatically, in a past more profound than all that I can reassemble by memory, by historiography, all that I can dominate by the a priori—in a time before the beginning" (2013, 88). However, Bloechl questions the premise of a pre-original state of consciousness: "[I]f we persist with the hypothesis of a temporal succession from 'innocence' to 'thought,' it remains unclear just how we are to think about that first way of being. Is it or is it not capable of speech? What sort of words would—or *could*—be uttered in a state of solitude undisturbed by any serious challenge? ... The difficulty here is evident: If the strictly innocent

¹⁹ As used by Lévinas, "an-archic" means not having an ontological ground or origin.

being, solitary and self-sufficient, does indeed think and speak, it is no longer clear how the face of the other can function as the absolute condition of thought” (2000, 179).

Whether or not one accepts Lévinas’s premise that human experience of phenomena from outside of Being occurs *prior* to consciousness, one may still acknowledge possible insight in his contention that meaning may be gleaned from outside of Being. As already discussed, Lévinas’s major works argue for philosophical recognition of a divine Other that approaches consciousness from outside of Being. He situates this argument within phenomenology, while at the same time challenging methodological limitations laid out by Husserl and the egocentric perspective that he finds to exist in Heidegger. In doing so, he is, in his words, attempting to “overcome the subject-object structure.” Although he depicts encounters with the Other as experiences of consciousness—and hence phenomenologically relevant—he looks to philosophy of language to flesh out his arguments. He finds in language the means to articulate a variety of experience that begins outside of Being in the saying and culminates within Being in the said. Is this a sufficiently rigorous expansion of phenomenology—or is it a new breed of theology, as contended by his critics? In this dissertation, I will explore the possibility that phenomenology has inadequately considered the extent to which creation of meaning within consciousness—regardless of the impetus for such an undertaking by consciousness—can be viewed as a phenomenon. Perhaps in his project, Lévinas makes broader claims than necessary to demonstrate his fundamental hypotheses regarding human experience of the divine.

Elements of an argument to expand phenomenology to include experiences of language are found within his works. As discussed above, Lévinas’s approach to ascertaining truth recognizes the saying—sincere utterances of consciousness—as a source of perception. As Jean-Luc Marion observed, Husserl acknowledged matters of intuition as valid phenomena, but left unresolved the manner in which phenomenology should evaluate intuition that is “unfulfilled,” in other words, intuition that lacks affirmation from the senses. The possibility of expanding the

categories of thought which can be considered as intuition appears to be a plausible expansion of phenomenology. However, one may well accept the premise that unfulfilled intuition may be recognized as a valid phenomenon without accepting Lévinas's conclusions regarding the precise manner in which truth is revealed to consciousness—and without necessarily accepting Lévinas's beliefs regarding the manner in which humankind encounters the Other. In any event, I would argue that a reading of Lévinas that points the reader to formation of language as a source of truth and meaning is a valuable pursuit—separate and apart from an exploration of the profound ethical implications which Lévinas finds there.

Fundamentally, his project offers an expansion of phenomenology that accommodates all that is encountered by subjectivity outside of Being. To echo various critics of Lévinas, except as a mental construct, the idea of experience occurring outside of Being may be entirely fallacious. Even as a mental construct, is it something that can be understood as following from a phenomenological analysis? For philosophy to address that which is outside of Being from a phenomenological perspective, the Husserlian concept of horizons that limit subjectivity must be radically reconsidered or eliminated. Further, the idea of subjectivity must be expanded to encompass intuition gleaned in a manner different than what Heidegger describes. If one accepts such an expansion of phenomenology and considers the premise that philosophy may recognize that which occurs outside of Being, one may nevertheless question the conclusions drawn by Lévinas as to what is to be found there—as have Derrida and John Caputo. However, the ethical conclusions drawn by Lévinas were central to his project; demonstrating an ethical foundation for human consciousness.

2.5 Ethical Signification of the Other

Lévinas's project can be seen as an expansion of the role of the unconscious in phenomenology's ascertainment of meaning and truth. This is not an inconsequential expansion; a basic quest for modern times is the search for any credible source of ethical truth. Lévinas

offers an answer: his writings depict an ethical foundation for human consciousness, describing all perception of alterity as an ethical relationship. In his expansion of modern philosophical thought to better accommodate alterity, he finds the truth therein to contain ethical consequences. In fact, ethics is *first* philosophy—this claim, frequently made by Lévinas (1989, 75), summarizes the guiding perspective that underlies his major works. The meaning of this claim according to Hillary Putnam is “not only that ethics must not be derived from any metaphysics, not even an ‘ontic’ metaphysics ... like Heidegger’s, but also that all thinking about what it is to be a human being must begin with such an ‘ungrounded’ ethics” (2002, 34-35). His thinking and writing clearly reflect his Judaic perspective, but all allusions, Biblical references and digressions that refer to the divine ultimately refer the reader back to the premise of ethical responsibility. He finds inspiration in this sentence from Dostoyevsky’s *The Brothers Karamazov*²⁰: “every one of us is guilty before all, for everyone and everything, and I more than others...” (2002, 264). For Lévinas, responsibility takes the form of an accusation by everyone and responsibility for everyone: “accused of what the others do or suffer, ... responsible for what they do or suffer”—bearing the fault of others (2013, 112). As he explained, “I am bound to others before being tied to my body” (76).

Much of this chapter has been focused on arguments in the works of Lévinas that condemn perceived deficiencies in contemporary phenomenological thinking, unwarranted limitations on subjectivity, and unjustified rejection of transcendence. However, his primary purpose in challenging modern philosophy is not to counterbalance perceived excesses of scientism. Rather, it is to define an ethical relationship through which fundamental tenets of philosophy can be properly understood—and ultimately to avoid the possibility that a societal misconstruing of truth would enable a world to ignore and repeat horrors such as those Lévinas

²⁰ Quoted in *Otherwise than Being* (146), *Ethics and Infinity* (98), and “God and Philosophy” (1996, 144).

experienced in the two world wars. In contrast with many philosophers of his era who were uncertain as to what grounding could possibly exist for ethical obligation, Lévinas finds an uncompromising and unlimited responsibility for our neighbor that is undertaken by each of us—as a consequence of an encounter with the Other. This contention is more than a theological overlay onto phenomenology of an ethical imperative; it is seen by Lévinas as a means by which philosophy can regain access to truth.

2.5.1 Approach by the Other

Classical phenomenology finds it problematic to acknowledge the existence—or even the possibility of existence—of God or any divine Other. Husserlian phenomenology generally requires a subject-object correlation or, in other words, a relationship in which an object is perceived by or revealed to the subject. Within certain guidelines, described by Husserl as reductions, intuition can also be considered as a phenomenon perceived by the subject; however, even following the application of those reductions, intuition with respect to the nature of the divine is generally not acknowledged by philosophers as meeting Husserl’s standards. As discussed above, Lévinas rejected those limitations on subjectivity and posited not only the possibility, but the certainty of an encounter between human consciousness and the Other outside of Being. It is Lévinas’s contention that each of us is approached on the “hither side” of Being by the Other—and that such approach and its aftermath can be categorized as subjectivity. Lévinas’s recognition of subjectivity outside of Being allows for possible philosophical consideration of the nature of the Other which is manifested in that encounter. He also finds that a fuller understanding of infinity results from recognition of the limitations of Being—and that the idea of infinity is interrelated with understanding the Other. Lévinas asserts that the Other does not manifest itself as a set of qualities forming an image, but rather “expresses itself” by allowing one to receive from the Other the “idea of infinity” (2012, 50-51).

The Cartesian idea of the infinite found in his “Third Meditation” (38-40) provided Lévinas with language to describe transcendence that appears in desire—desire by one for the infinite—rather than appearing in cognition. He interpreted Descartes’s idea of the infinite as designating “a relation with a being that maintains its total exteriority with respect to him who thinks it” (2012, 50). In other words, the very idea of the infinite constitutes, for Lévinas, “thinking beyond what is capable of being contained in the finitude of the *cogito*” (1996, 155). In words inspired by Descartes, he writes, “The idea of the Infinite would somehow think beyond what it thinks. ...The idea of the Infinite is a thought released from consciousness: ...a relation without a hold on being and without subservience to the *conatus essendi* [the struggle of living], contrary to knowledge and to perception” (156). Critchley explains that Descartes’s *Meditations* provided Lévinas with the formal structure for framing his conclusions; however, Lévinas did not fully adopt Descartes’s theology. While Descartes attempts a proof of the existence of God, describing a relationship between *res cogitans* and God, Lévinas employs that structure to describe a relationship between human thought and the Other. Critchley emphasizes that “Lévinas is not saying that I actually do possess the idea of the infinite in the way Descartes describes, nor is he claiming that the other is God, as some readers mistakenly continue to believe” (2002, 14). As Putnam explains, “It isn’t that Lévinas accepts Descartes’s argument... . The significance is rather that Lévinas transforms the argument by substituting the other for God. So transformed, the ‘proof’ becomes: I know the other [*l’authrui*] isn’t part of my ‘construction of the world’ because my encounter with the other is an encounter with a *fissure*, with a being who breaks my categories” (2002, 42).

As words frequently capitalized by Lévinas (in part to denote the absolute character of those attributes), the “Other” and the “Infinite” could be misconstrued by readers as referring to God or the divine to some extent—and perhaps they do, in Lévinas’s usage. However, they are not identical concepts. Nor does Lévinas use the idea of infinity interchangeably with the

concept of the Other.²¹ The plain meanings of the words are certainly different; however, confusion could exist as to the extent to which the terms are interrelated as a result of Lévinas's capitalization of the terms in some contexts, denoting special categories of the "other" and the "infinite." Lévinas adds to the possible confusion by the religiosity of the language that he employs when describing human perception of the Other and the Infinite and by his interrelated references to God. Perhaps he views Western religion's understandings of God to be relevant, but inadequate for modernity. In later writings, he described his work as a superior manner of thinking about God: "a mode of access to a non-ontological notion of God" (2000, 180). Are there theological questions that he is addressing? Possibly, but with an attempt to bring philosophical clarity: "We are attempting, here, to think about God without the help of ontology. That is, we are looking for a thinking that contrasts with the philosophical tradition in which God is understood as being ... *par excellence*, as being that is in a superior sense being, and in which the idea of God draws its philosophical signification from its conformity with the rational rules of knowledge" (153). One could conclude that, in Lévinas's view, what philosophy can credibly say with respect to God may best be expressed with reference to the ideas of the Other and of Infinity.

To adequately understand Lévinas's view of the Other, one must also understand his interpretation of the idea of the Infinite. Following Descartes, Lévinas described the Infinite as an idea—however, paradoxically, an idea that comes from thinking beyond what may be contained in thought and, therefore, not capable of being the object of cognition (2012, 62). In an important distinction for Lévinas, "[i]nfinity does not first exist, and *then* reveal itself. Its

²¹ Derrida, in his reading of *Totality and Infinity*, interprets Lévinas's perception of infinity as equating infinity and the Other: "[T]he other is the other only if his alterity is absolutely irreducible that is, infinitely irreducible; and the infinitely Other can only be Infinity" (1978, 104).

infinite is produced as revelation, as a positing of its idea in *me*” (26).²² Its “revelation” comes out of saying—sincere utterances that result from the approach by the Other. For Lévinas, the experience of the Other occurs through one’s saying, through utterances triggered by manifestations of Infinity: “This is no psychological wonder but the modality according to which the Infinite comes to pass, signifying through the one to whom it signifies, ordering through the one to whom it orders. Not just an incomprehensible inconsistency or ruse of the Infinite resorting to the medium of humans to reveal itself, and to their psalms to glorify itself—but the very way in which the Infinite passes the finite, or the way in which it comes to pass” (1996, 104).

How is the Infinite revealed in connection with the approach by the Other? Lévinas contends in *Totality and Infinity* that the approach by the Other is related to a human metaphysical desire for an absolutely other that is aroused by infinity (50). This is a desire that cannot be satisfied, a desire which “understands the remoteness, the alterity, and the exteriority of the other” (34). Lévinas finds support for this human desire for the other in the Platonic dichotomy of same and other. Lévinas defines metaphysics as the relation between the same and the other and finds in the primal identity (the “I”) a metaphysical desire (2012, 38-39). We exist in the world; however, metaphysics is “turned toward the ‘elsewhere’ and the ‘otherwise’ and the ‘other’ ... The metaphysical desire tends toward *something else entirely*, toward the *absolutely other*” (33). In his view this desire for the other is a desire to assimilate the other as the same: “The possibility of possessing, that is, of suspending the very alterity of what is only at first other, and other relative to me, is the *way* of the same” (38). Yet Derrida finds “equivocity” in such an idea of desire for the Other (or God), asking “does it come from God in us, from God for

²² This “positing of an idea in me” is understood by Levinas to have been expressed in the Biblical prophecy of God inscribing the law into consciousness found in Jeremiah 31:33: “But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people.”

us, from us for God?” Derrida concludes that such desire is, in addition to being a reflection on the idea of God, also “a reflection on self, an autobiographical reflection” (1995, 37).²³ Lévinas’s views on the nature of the approach by the Other evolved after the writing of *Totality and Infinity*—possibly in response to questions and criticisms posed by Derrida and others. The relationship he had depicted there between the subject and the Other can be viewed as symmetrical, commencing with desire by the subject for the Other. As I will discuss in Section 2.5.2, however, *Otherwise than Being* depicts a much more asymmetrical relationship in which human desire for the Other plays little role.

Although the Other embodies absolute alterity, Lévinas contends that the Other is within subjectivity. Yet language is inadequate to signify what is revealed to subjectivity by the Other. Lévinas uses the term “face” to describe the manifestation of the Other: “The way in which the other presents himself, exceeding the idea of the other in me, we here name face” (2012, 50). Although the Other is revealed in the face (51), Lévinas clarifies in *Otherwise than Being* that the face is only a trace of the Other and cannot function as a sign of a hidden God (94). As discussed earlier in this chapter, Lévinas sees language as inadequate to signify what is manifested; the face and the approach by the Other cannot be thematized. However, Lévinas holds the ambiguity in the trace of the Other to be “an invitation to the fine risk of approach qua approach, to the exposure of one to the other, to ...saying” (94). According to Bloechl, “[W]hat the face causes to be ‘born’ is neither subjectivity nor language, but the possibility for one to commit both of them to the dictates of the ethical relation which in any event defines them” (2000, 189). For Lévinas, the subjectivity in which the approach of the Other occurs is independent of cognition. The idea of the Infinite cannot be reduced to an act of consciousness or

²³ The viewpoint that “God is only man’s intuition of his own nature” was famously articulated by nineteenth-century philosopher Ludwig Feuerbach in *The Essence of Christianity* (154). Feuerbach similarly observed that any claimed revelation of God “is nothing else than the revelation, the self-unfolding of human nature” (118).

to thematizing intentionality—to attempt to do so would be a failure to recognize the alterity of the Other. The idea of the Infinite, according to Lévinas, “would contain more than it is capable of containing, more than its capacity as a *cogito*...[it] would somehow think beyond what it thinks” (1996, 156).

Despite Lévinas’s general avoidance of theological conclusions, taken as a whole, his writings seem to divinize the complex human relationship with alterity. Although he does not equate God and the Other or the Infinite, he does acknowledge that the Other and the Infinite described in his works resemble the God of Western religion (2012, 293). He describes the idea of the infinite as “thought addressed to God” and as “the sense of what we designate by God” (1996, 156-7). His writings depict “the I” as separated from the Other in much the same way as humankind is separated from God in the Jewish tradition (2012, 65-66). Not surprisingly, many readers of Lévinas, including Derrida, Janicaud, and Gschwandtner, interpret his writings in a manner that identifies the Other as being God for purposes of discussion of the implications of Lévinas’ philosophy. Yet Lévinas distances himself from traditional theological claims regarding God by defining the Other and the Infinite as concepts for which thematization and cognition are not possible. That view is, in fact, consistent with Husserlian phenomenology by excluding God from that which may be treated as a phenomenon—unless the boundaries of phenomenology are to be expanded to include the “phenomenology of the inapparent,” a phrase coined by Heidegger, but criticized by Janicaud. Perhaps that is Lévinas’s goal. Simmons takes that view: “Lévinas’s philosophy is a long demonstration of what a phenomenology of the inapparent might look like. ... [I]t is immediately clear that this entire account requires that we somehow apply phenomenological description to that which can’t properly be ‘experienced’ (viz., the constitutive relation to alterity) and does not ‘appear’ as such (viz., the ‘command’ of God and/or the ‘call’ of the Other)” (2011, 140).

2.5.2 Responsibility for the Human Other

For Lévinas, the ethical concerns of philosophy are not esoteric questions—in fact, they are not questions at all. They are demands: each one of us is summoned for responsibility for the other. In *Totality and Infinity* and other early writings, Lévinas perceived a call by the Other to which each of us is obligated to answer, “Here I am.” One’s relationship with the Other was depicted as being symmetrical in nature, a reciprocal encounter that allows one to grasp the ethical obligations which one has to his or her neighbor. Each of us experiences desire for the Other, and upon the call by the Other then responds, “Here I am.” However, Lévinas’s thinking in *Otherwise than Being* moves away from that relatively benign characterization of one’s experience of the other as being somewhat symmetrical, to a characterization that emphasizes the asymmetrical and sacrificial nature of the experience in which one involuntarily becomes a hostage to the other qua neighbor.

In *Otherwise than Being* each of us is depicted as being exposed to the Other against our will. Lévinas characterizes this exposure in extreme terms: “a denuding beyond the skin, to the wounds one dies from, denuding to death. . . . This being torn up from oneself in the core of one’s unity, this absolute noncoinciding, this diachrony of the instant, signifies in the form of one-penetrated-by-the-other. The pain, this underside of skin, is a nudity more naked than all destitution. It is sacrificed rather than sacrificing itself, for it is precisely bound to the adversity or suffering of pain. This existence, with sacrifice imposed on it, is without conditions” (2013, 49-50). This encounter with the Other is described as a “substitution” where each of us is compelled to *take the place* of the other. Lévinas argues that we are literally called to sacrifice ourselves for our neighbors: the Other “provokes this responsibility against my will, that is, by substituting me for the Other as a hostage. All my inwardness is invested in the form of a despite-me-for-another [and a]gainst my will for-another” (1996, 118). Each of us is called as one-for-the-other; each has a virtually unlimited responsibility to the other—to his neighbor—to

the point where one is responsible for the other's death. Lévinas describes this as an incredibly broad ethical responsibility: "It is as though I were responsible for his mortality, and guilty for surviving" (2013, 91). For Lévinas, the obligation extends to others with whom I have no familial or national kinship:

The neighbor concerns me before all assumption, all commitment consented to or refused. I am bound to him, him who is, however, the first one on the scene, not signaled, unparalleled; I am bound to him before any liaison contracted. He orders me before being recognized. Here there is a relation of kinship outside of all biology, "against all logic." It is not because the neighbor would be recognized as belonging to the same genus as me that he concerns me. He is precisely other. The community with him begins in my obligation to him. The neighbor is a brother. A fraternity that cannot be abrogated, an unimpeachable assignation, proximity is an impossibility to move away without the torsion of a complex, without "alienation" or fault. (2013, 87)

Lévinas views this substitution for the other as *subjectivity* (2013, 144), a bold contention not widely shared by other philosophers. There is no assertion here that a Husserlian subject-object structure can be found in this radically asymmetrical encounter. For Lévinas, responsibility resulting from this encounter is passive in its origin—one is summoned for responsibility for the other by which one must be answerable for everything and everyone: "In this substitution whereby identity is inverted, a passivity more passive still than all passivity, beyond the passivity of the identical, the self is freed from itself. ...At the extreme of passivity, it escapes passivity or the inevitable limitation to which every term in a relation is subject" (1996, 90).

Bloechl paraphrases this concept as follows:

I am susceptible to an appeal that reaches me like a command there from the beginning precisely because the one who voices it has indeed been there from before the beginning. It is that anarchic presence, that constant anteriority of the other person—suppressed but waiting—that renders me susceptible. Between the other and me, there is a relation older than being and time, a relation in which I belong to the other before belonging to myself. And this timeless belonging, this pre-originary debt, determines that later, when the other confronts me, my identity will be a function of what I catch sight of in her face. Not that the face actually makes me what I am: I will already have been what she in her otherness

as an other *person* awakens. I will have already been this responsibility that I must now accept. (2000, 62-63)

In connection with this responsibility to the neighbor—one's exposure to the other—cognition by the subject is not involved; thematization within consciousness does not occur. Instead, it is the "passivity" of exposure—which is radically different than thematization—that for Lévinas "signifies, becomes signifyingness, exposure in response to..., being at the question before any interrogation, any problem, without clothing, without a shell to protect oneself, stripped to the core as in an inspiration of air, an ab-solution to the *one*, the one without a complexion" (2013, 49). In this substitution, the ego is reduced to the "'here I am' ... as a witness of the Infinite, but [as] a witness that does not thematize what it bears witness of, and whose truth is not the truth of representation. ... The Infinite does not appear to him that bears witness to it. On the contrary the witness belongs to the glory of the Infinite. It is by the voice of the witness that the glory of the Infinite is glorified" (2013, 146). What does the phenomenological method offer in a truly passive experience in which the subject cannot fully comprehend and thematize what he or she has experienced? Gschwandtner describes this as a phenomenology that would allow one to "examine and depict the impact this phenomenon makes on consciousness instead of describing the phenomenon itself" (2013, 43).

One could imagine an experience of the Other that emanates from outside of Being, yet is manifested to consciousness *within* Being. In fact it is difficult to think in concrete terms of consciousness functioning in any manner outside of Being. Yet Lévinas portrays one's experience of the Other as one in which consciousness itself exists outside of Being. Lévinas argues that one's response to the Other "comes from the hither side of my freedom, from an 'anterior to every memory,' an 'ulterior to every accomplishment,' from the nonpresent par excellence, the nonoriginal, the anarchical, prior to or beyond essence" (1996, 117). Is this depiction of one's pre-conscious encounter with the Other outside of what can be considered phenomenological subjectivity? Simmons offers an explanation of Lévinas's rationale:

“Subjectivity is, thus, not a matter of consciousness, but of an exposure to the other person that awakens the self to consciousness. There is not first a waking subject who then falls asleep only to be awakened by the Other, but instead there is only a self at the moment of waking up. ... This is how the response [to the Other] can ‘precede’ consciousness ... and the self can be engaged without yet being within the domain of ontology” (2011, 112).²⁴

2.6 Philosophy or Theology?

Lévinas’s writings have inspired many philosophers and theologians who have come after him. In particular, as we will see in the following chapters, his exploration of that which is beyond Being has served as a foundation for endeavors by others to more radically expand phenomenology.²⁵ Lévinas firmly situates his arguments in phenomenology, claiming that “[t]he presentation and development of the notions employed owes everything to the phenomenological method” (2012, 28). But can his project be characterized as rigorous philosophy? Although he generally employs the terminology of Husserl and Heidegger, he offers a framework that is largely at odds with classical phenomenology for recognizing—and understanding—religious experience. The variety of religious experience upon which he focuses is humankind’s exposure to transcendent truth: he contends, without equivocation, that our ethical obligations originate in an encounter with a divine Other that occurs outside of the limitations of Being.

Various writers have criticized his conclusions as being driven by religious ideology and being less than rigorous in logical support. Janicaud doesn’t mince words. He views the works of philosophers such as Lévinas as engaging in theological hijacking, warning that

²⁴ Jean-Yves Lacoste characterizes these obligations to others as “the primordial duties that bind me to the others...as soon as I open my eyes” (2004, 71). He acknowledges the possibility of the ethical “givens of consciousness,” but finds that view of ethics to be inadequate: “We cannot deduce the entirety of moral experience from our opening into the world” (75). Lacoste finds in liturgy—the “order and ceremonies of divine worship”—a more comprehensive source of ethical reason (2).

²⁵ The ongoing expansion of phenomenology that resulted is often described as modern phenomenology’s “theological turn,” a phrase likely coined by Janicaud (2000, 17).

“phenomenology has been taken hostage by a theology that does not want to say its name” (2000, 43). Janicaud, together with Simmons, consider the “theological turn” in phenomenology to no longer plausibly represent phenomenology (Janicaud 2000, 17; Simmons 2011, 136). Even if presented as arguments grounded in phenomenology, Lévinas’s contentions can be criticized as not always adhering strictly to strict standards for philosophical argument. Janicaud considers Lévinas’s writings to be an assimilation of metaphysics into phenomenological premises, with phenomenological assertions predicated on metaphysical definitions (47). He ridicules Lévinas’s passionate language that explains the nature of one’s experience of the Other by saying, “This concept has an awful lot to bear. If only it were demonstrated to us, to begin with, that the notion of pure or absolute experience makes sense and does not collapse into words, words, words” (42).

Certainly, there are theological concerns addressed in Lévinas’s writings. Do those concerns taint his arguments and therefore exclude them from the realm of philosophy? Some would say yes. Bloechl considered theological assumptions to dominate Lévinas’s work to such an extent that one must question its relevance to philosophy:

[H]ow, to begin with, is this relation with religious transcendence not simply a dogma? What in me and my experience justifies attributing my original lack to the initiative of the absolute? Where is the evidence that such a conclusion is necessary, even if possible? Are there phenomena that cannot be explained otherwise? And, even if so, how are we to reach their supposed framework beyond Being without immediately losing it in the same ontological field whose presence occasioned the problem in the first place? By what exercise can the absolute appear as the horizon for all horizons? (2000, 113)

I would disagree with a condemnation of Lévinas’s project as falling outside of phenomenology; I would argue, instead, that he is offering an expansion of the scope of that which may be properly evaluated by phenomenology. I am not alone in that view. Gschwandtner accepts Lévinas as an important contributor to phenomenology, contending that he “changes the thrust of phenomenology radically and opens it in directions that are not present in Husserl or

Heidegger” (2013, 56). Echoing such a view, Cohen describes Lévinas’s thinking as “surpassing” phenomenology (2013, xiii). Lacoste takes the middle ground on this topic, agreeing that phenomenology can provide guidance as to the divine making itself present in the world, but he considers Lévinas to be guilty of overstatement, labeling Lévinas’s portrayal of the approach of the Other to consciousness as a “charitable overdetermination of it” (2004, 72). Perhaps it is a largely fruitless effort to hinge one’s view of Lévinas on a determination as to whether his contentions fit squarely within the framework of thinking that has been traditionally understood as phenomenology. He does not ask his readers to accept his arguments by virtue of being logically derived from prevailing thought. He is clear in his writing that he is challenging and departing from contemporary Western philosophy, and therefore, for writers such as Janicaud to critique Lévinas for that very departure may not add much to the discussion.

To return to the overarching question I posed in Chapter 1: how does the project of Lévinas advance philosophy’s understanding of religious experience? I would contend that Lévinas offers a valuable framework for philosophers to consider manifestations to consciousness that are not in accord with the spatial or temporal limitations of Being. This is no insignificant advance in thinking. If philosophy is to consider claims of religious experience at all, it is likely that phenomenology will provide it with the sole means for doing so. Lévinas offers a means for phenomenology to broaden its understanding of the workings of consciousness. His writings depict a human consciousness in which language is inadequate to fully signify what is experienced within consciousness. His discussion of the saying and the said advances consideration of the possibility that experiences of language within consciousness should be considered phenomena worthy of consideration. I would argue, however, that a possible weakness in his argument is its depiction of one’s encounter with the Other within consciousness that largely resembles an “invasion” by an otherworldly entity—rather than as a struggle with meaning. Is failure of cognition better described as an experience of language?

Perhaps a greater focus by Lévinas on the way in which consciousness experiences transcendent meaning would have allowed his work to avoid certain of his claims that appear to some as resembling religious dogma.

In the following chapter, I will explore the writings of Jean-Luc Marion, a philosopher who embraces the modern canon of phenomenology to a greater extent than did Lévinas, but who, nevertheless, offers an even more radical depiction of the possibility of divine manifestation to human consciousness. As we shall see, Marion shares Lévinas's belief that human cognition is inadequate to comprehend that which is outside of or otherwise than Being. However, for Marion the inadequacy is not symptomatic of any failing of language; manifestations of God are simply incomprehensible. Their projects have a common interest in expanding phenomenology to accommodate religious experience, but they pursue that goal on parallel, rather than intersecting, tracks.

CHAPTER 3

JEAN-LUC MARION: RECOGNITION OF GIVENNESS

Alice laughed. “There’s no use trying,” she said. “One can’t believe impossible things.”

“I daresay you haven’t had much practice,” said the Queen. “When I was your age, I always did it for half-an-hour a day. Why, sometimes I’ve believed as many as six impossible things before breakfast.”

Lewis Carroll, *Through the Looking Glass*

As we have seen in the preceding chapter, Lévinas has argued that phenomenology must recognize a manifestation to consciousness of an extreme Other, a manifestation beyond cognition that occurs outside the boundaries of time—hence, outside of Being. His project challenged fundamental premises of Husserl and Heidegger and culminated in an integration of ethics into philosophy in a manner that was fundamentally at odds with modern phenomenology. Jean-Luc Marion joined the dialogue roughly two decades later with a project that was intended to reconsider certain limitations in scope found in Lévinas’s depiction of phenomena of a divine origin. We can find commonalities in their thinking; however, Marion should not be mistaken for a loyal disciple of Lévinas. On the contrary, he disregards Lévinas’s core argument for a divine source for our ethical obligations to each other—in favor of a much broader view of divine revelation, a view that perhaps implicitly supports the traditional tenets of the Christian faith. He shares Lévinas’s conviction that encounters with the Other exceed the capacity of human cognition; however, Marion visualizes the outcome of those encounters in a vastly different manner than does Lévinas. In short, Marion’s project is one that attempts to demonstrate phenomenological support for acceptance of truth accessed through divine revelation.

Marion offers readings of Husserl’s and Heidegger’s seminal texts that find an “inevitable” expansion of phenomenological methodology that allows for the possibility of divine revelation, imparted through largely incomprehensible phenomena. In arguing for

recognition of phenomena that are beyond comprehension and, in fact, “impossible,” Marion introduces questions relating to the ability of consciousness to possess words to describe what the phenomena manifest. I would argue that more could be said about these questions than Marion attempts. In part, my critique of his treatment of the impossible will explore whether he adequately considers the way in which impossibility is experienced in consciousness. Marion seems to equate inadequacy of language with the mental state of lack of comprehension—in my view, an imperfect correlation.

In recognizing incomprehensible phenomena, Marion seeks to radically enlarge the domain of phenomenology; he views his project as a completion of the works of Husserl, Heidegger, and Lévinas. In that pursuit, Marion frames his undertaking as one that endeavors to overcome metaphysics. This is necessary, in his view, because in modern thinking the question of God has been conflated with questions traditionally posed by metaphysics; after the undertakings of metaphysics were completed in modernity, the question of God was deemed unworthy of further consideration. Marion observed that “the question of God could not avoid joining in the fate of metaphysics, for better or worse” (1997, 279).

Overcoming metaphysics, for Marion, entails offering a philosophy that no longer endeavors to establish a role for God in the physical world as *causa sui*—its sufficient cause. He considers the traditional concerns of metaphysics in its conception of humanity and God alike to rest on false assumptions. In this he considers himself to be aligned with the thinking of Nietzsche: “Nietzsche not only proclaimed the ‘death of God,’ he brought the grounds for it to light: under the conceptual names of ‘God’ only metaphysical ‘idols’ emerge, imposed on a God who is still to be encountered. ... [T]he ‘death of God’ exclusively concerns the failure of the metaphysical concepts of ‘God’” (2012, xxiii).²⁶ Although Marion labels such metaphysical

²⁶ Gschwandtner concurs: “When Nietzsche announces the death of God, it is the death of this specific concept of God with which he is concerned: the “God” that is the ultimate idea or form

concepts as conceptual idolatry—and rejects them—he embraces the possibility of a divine Other that is not burdened with misconceptions accumulated through prior millennia. In his view, phenomenology may properly be considered as a means of understanding God and as providing the possibility of revelation of divine origin. Marion attempts to counteract modern philosophy’s delegation of revelation to theology—and phenomenology’s corresponding dismissal of the possibility of revelation as a source of intuition worthy of consideration.

In attempting to do so, Marion is often criticized for offering philosophical premises that are heavily weighted with theology. However, he endeavored to separate his theological views from his philosophical arguments. Although *God without Being*, a work that introduced him to an English language audience, was intended as a theological work, his next major text, *Reduction and Givenness* was intended to be a strictly philosophical work. Marion occasionally took offense at the claim that his philosophical premises are disguised theology. In answer to critics who found a Catholic God lurking in the background of his concept of givenness, he responded, “I mean to say what I try to say and not the opposite of what I have said. Thus when I say that reduced givenness does not demand any giver for its given, I am *not* insinuating that it lays claim to a transcendent giver; when I say that the phenomenology of givenness by definition passes beyond metaphysics, I do *not* say between the lines that this phenomenology restores metaphysics” (2013, 5).

That said, he recognized that his philosophical and theological endeavors were closely related. In his preface to *God without Being*, Marion situated his ideas as arguments “written at the border between philosophy and theology” (xxi). For many of his critics—and adherents—that border was not a boundary that separated modes of thinking, but rather was an intersection of ideas. It was a place of joinder of phenomenological methods with Catholic perspectives.

of Christianized Platonism, the concept of the divine in which even the masses no longer believe, the supreme power that is posited as the ground of all moral values” (Gschwandtner 2007, 47).

Indeed, Marion is unabashedly Catholic in discussing the implications of his thinking. Thomas A. Carlson, the translator of two of Marion's best-known works, finds an ambiguity there, stemming from a theology that attempts to proceed phenomenologically and a phenomenology that is indebted to concepts given first in theology (1999, 18). John Caputo finds little ambiguity at all in Marion's underlying views, categorizing them as "deeply confessional, rooted in a Catholic-Christian profession of faith, in a community and a liturgy, in sacred texts and a *traditio*" (2008, 90). Given Marion's relative transparency in expressing his acceptance of Biblical accounts of the words and experiences of Christ, critics of Marion such as Janicaud concluded that the "dice were loaded" in texts in which phenomenology is asked to consider the possibility of God. Along the same lines, Graham Ward finds a pattern of "uncritical dogmatism" there (1998, 229). One should understand, though, that Marion's critics also included those from the theological community. Gschwandtner has observed that "two fundamental tenors can be distinguished. On the one hand, Marion's work is judged as too determined and as radically compromised by its particular references, either to Christianity in general or specifically because of its Roman Catholic character. On the other hand, his talk about God is seen as too undetermined, too transcendent, lacking any clear hermeneutic connection to concrete religious experience" (2007, 89).

In order to evaluate Marion's conclusions, I think we need to ask: is it productive to attempt to separate the theological from the phenomenological—to consider them separately? Although it may be useful to acknowledge the blurring of the lines between his theological and phenomenological projects, it is likely not possible to entirely separate them. His theological works are supported by phenomenological concepts, and his phenomenological works are illustrated by theological interpretations. If, indeed, his arguments result in a "theological veering" as Janicaud complains (2000, 68), then one must simply read Marion's philosophy with a clear understanding as to his underlying theological assumptions. As I read his works, if all

theological implications were excised from Marion's philosophical arguments, little would be left. While it is possible for Marion's overall body of work to be understood as a phenomenological overlay for theology—and nothing more—a more balanced evaluation might conclude that the expansions of phenomenology that he proposes are worthy of consideration, notwithstanding their predominant application to concerns shared with theology. That is my perspective in considering his contributions to a proper understanding of religious experience.

In this chapter, I will first describe and evaluate Marion's arguments for the expansion of contemporary understandings of Husserl and Heidegger, considering the possibility that his readings are polished misreadings. Second, I will explore Marion's application of phenomenology to recognize what he calls "saturated phenomena" and revelation; there I will consider the implications of his contention that all such phenomena are incomprehensible. Finally, I will discuss the extent to which Marion inherently raises—but does not fully answer—a fundamental question regarding the function of language in our perception of phenomena: what *aspect* of our encounter with incomprehensibility constitutes the phenomenological experience? Is it a fully formed experience of bedazzlement or a struggle within consciousness to create meaning?

3.1 Philosophical Influences

Marion's phenomenological project follows closely behind that of Lévinas and views conclusions with respect to the question of God drawn by pre-modern and modern philosophers through the lens of Husserlian and Heideggerian thought—as does Lévinas. However, Marion's acknowledgement of Lévinas's impact on phenomenology is infrequent and fleeting. In a rare explicit acknowledgment, he states, "It goes without saying that we owe it to Emmanuel Lévinas to have ingeniously reconfigured phenomenology so as to let it finally reach the Other as saturated phenomenon" (2013, 366n88). Despite this support of Lévinas, there are also elements of contention. Gschwandtner observes, for example, that Marion's "criticism of Lévinas is

usually much more explicit than any praise. Often one has the impression that Marion sees his own work as an attempt to surpass Lévinas, to overcome him, to finish off and complete what has been left open or undeveloped in Lévinas's work" (2005, 70).

Gschwandtner's characterization of Marion's ambition in this respect is insightful: as she sees it, Marion intended to complete much of what he viewed as unfinished and undeveloped in phenomenology. His arguments throughout his body of work explicitly endeavored to clarify and move beyond the rigid methodologies of Husserl and what he perceived as the narrowly focused perspective of Heidegger. This endeavor sought to complete what Marion considered to be the unfulfilled potential of Husserl's and Heidegger's legacies. As Gschwandtner paraphrases Marion's frustration: "Husserl seems too preoccupied with the constitution of objects, while Heidegger is too obsessed with the language of Being" (2007, 60).

In his attempt to overcome modern philosophy's disinterest in further consideration of questions pertaining to God, Marion offers close readings—often in the view of his critics, *misreadings*—of Husserl and Heidegger. To a far greater degree than Lévinas, Marion endeavored to demonstrate that his expansions of phenomenology resulted from rigorous applications of thought and logic to the existing canon of writings on phenomenology. In describing his contributions contained in *Reduction and Givenness*, Marion claims "to have been working almost as a historian of philosophy, applying my research to the history of phenomenology" (3). As we will see, Marion's knowledge of the history of phenomenology is, indeed, extensive; the question, though, is whether his application of that knowledge is disciplined and credible.

Marion's philosophical project, as he articulates it, is to overcome metaphysics and, in so doing, to expand phenomenology beyond all metaphysical restrictions in order to recognize givenness as a fundamental aspect of phenomena. The concept of "overcoming" metaphysics has not been clearly understood by all readers, in part, because of a lack of complete clarity as to

what metaphysics precisely encompasses in the context of contemporary philosophy. In Gschwandtner's reading, it is the Cartesian metaphysical system with which Marion is engaging, a system in which a *causa sui* is presumed and understood to be divine. As Gschwandtner puts it:

“Overcoming” comes to mean defining clearly, pushing this definition to its limits, playing with it and widening it, and thus finally getting beyond its boundary. ... Metaphysics is not overcome by ignoring its discourse or simplistically contradicting it. Rather, overcoming always means understanding and taking seriously the limits of a particular thought. Only by playing with those limits and by finding exceptions to them can one overcome their restrictions and discover a way beyond them. This is not a destruction of metaphysics but a transgression. (2007, 29-30)

Perhaps for Marion, “overcoming metaphysics” means the reopening of questions pertaining to God. Marion believes that Husserl and Heidegger failed to adequately understand the capacity of phenomenology to apprehend the divine, because their thinking was bound up within philosophy's rigid conclusions regarding pre-modern metaphysics. Marion believes that in their willingness to exclude God from philosophical consideration, Husserl and Heidegger were dealing with the “God” of metaphysics (1997, 290); for Marion, the concept of God found in metaphysics is inadequate. He considers the conclusions in Husserl's and Heidegger's works as providing a valuable pathway to understanding the divine, but ultimately stopping short of phenomenology's potential. Accordingly, Marion attempts, in his words, to borrow from the phenomenological way of thinking “the means to think with it beyond it” (1998, 3).

In addressing issues that have confounded philosophers of religion for millennia, Marion's expectations for phenomenology are high indeed. He asserts that phenomenology is ontology's sole method (1998, 142-43): “Only phenomenology as the bringing to light of what does not show itself immediately as a phenomenon can bridge the gap that differentiates beings, which are always already visible, from Being, which is always already invisible” (142). In proffering a phenomenological methodology that overcomes metaphysics, Marion by no means starts with a blank slate. As we will see below, he credits Husserl and Heidegger with critical

breakthroughs in thinking that provide the foundation for Marion's own "third reduction"—that of givenness, which enables phenomenology to recognize divine revelation.

The argument that underlies this third reduction is Marion's fundamental contribution to phenomenology: he offers a radical enlargement of the concept of phenomena to include phenomena that are *given* to a passive subject. Such an understanding of phenomena largely guts the carefully-crafted subject-object framework of Husserl.²⁷ For Husserl, phenomena are, by definition, things perceived by a subject who, in an act of consciousness, directs attention to an object; however, Marion rejects the limitations inherent in that framework. Accordingly, Robyn Horner claims that "Marion's subject is a subject without subjectivity" (2001, 150). Indeed, much of Marion's specific criticism of Husserl and Heidegger relates to limitations that their philosophies impose on phenomenology, limitations that would likely preclude the possibility of perception of the divine. In short, the expansion of phenomenology offered by Marion recognizes *givenness*: the passive receptivity of phenomena. Recognizing givenness is intended to give legitimacy to phenomena manifested not only from natural sources, but equally, from sources outside of the physical world or—central to Marion's project—from outside of Being. Is this only an argument to allow philosophy to recognize claims of religious experience? Not exactly. In his philosophical writings, Marion is clear that the source of phenomena manifested from outside of Being should be considered indeterminate; however, his theological writings, which follow the same logic, posit God as a source of phenomena in parallel fashion.

His project offers an expansion of classical phenomenology through a reworking of the concept of phenomenological reductions. Husserl's methodology contemplated that recipients' perceptions of phenomena be clarified by the employment of so-called reductions. As I will

²⁷ Lévinas had a similar a view: that Husserlian subjectivity was unduly restrictive in its failure to address circumstances in which a subject is fully passive in encounters with phenomena. As discussed in Chapter 2, Levinas characterized his response to contemporary phenomenology as an "overcoming of the subject-object structure" (1996, 41).

discuss in detail below, Marion argues for the use of three reductions: the first, the transcendental reduction, he credits to Husserl; the second, the existential reduction, he credits to Heidegger; and the third, a reduction recognizing givenness is his own crowning contribution. In his arguments, Marion strives to situate his project squarely within phenomenology and liberally adopts Husserl's terminology with the deployment of the concept of reductions. In Husserlian parlance, a "reduction" is meant to depict a process that allows things to appear as they are. In Marion's words, it "clears away ... the obstacles to manifestation, ... obstacles that encircle it and would hide it" (2013, 10). "[I]t suspends 'absurd theories,' the false realities of the natural attitude, the objective world, etc., in order to let lived experiences bring about as much as possible the appearing of what manifests itself as and through them. ... The reduction does nothing; it lets manifestation manifest *itself*" (10). Marion argued that a reduction that recognized givenness was an *inevitable* (1998, 204) advance in phenomenology that was necessary in order to properly recognize everything manifested to consciousness.

3.1.1 Expanding Husserl's Phenomenology

Recognizing givenness, to be clear, can be seen as a rejection of the essence of Husserl's scientific approach: that of objectivity which largely limits phenomena to perceptions obtained from the gaze of the subject directed toward an object. Even so, a foundation of Marion's argument is Husserl's transcendental reduction. What Marion has characterized as the "first" reduction is Husserl's transcendental reduction which entails eliminating psychological and transcendental influences on one's understanding of what is perceived, eliminating all that is not evident to consciousness. The transcendental reduction was considered by Husserl to be an aspect of his philosophical "breakthrough"—an accolade that Marion enthusiastically echoes. Fundamentally, the reduction employs a scientific approach and a disciplined methodology for excluding emotion, prejudice, and superstition from the understanding of our world. Husserl maintained in *Ideas I* that this reduction eliminated the consideration of God, since God, by

definition transcendent, would not appear in immanence (1982, 131-134). The result intended by Husserl for the application of this reduction was strict objectivity, the perception of phenomena as objects. Marion found this to be inadequate, but nevertheless a critical breakthrough in the trajectory toward his expansion of phenomenology.

In his endeavor to articulate a methodology that accomplishes the transcendental reduction, Husserl argued for a return to the thing itself and authored the so-called “Principle of All Principles” which claimed that “all originally giving intuition is by right a source of knowledge, that what offers itself originally to us in ‘intuition’ ...must be taken wholly as it gives itself, but also only in the limits within which it gives itself [as being] there” (Marion’s interpretation of the text: 1998, 49).²⁸ Marion explained the implications in this way: “Nothing can exert a claim (*Anspruch*) over consciousness except that which gives itself in full evidence to consciousness; and conversely, everything that gives itself in full evidence to consciousness (through and as originary intuition) can validate its claim absolutely and incontestably. To return to the things themselves means to return to the evidence given by intuition to consciousness; the certitude of that givenness anticipates the reduction itself (understood as the exemplary case of givenness, intuitive because immanent)” (1998, 49-50). Yet Marion believed that Husserl had a misunderstanding of the “return to the thing itself” (66). Marion found that Husserl’s admonition, “Return to the things themselves!” suffers from double imprecision—both as to the nature of the “things” and as to the operation of an inversion that would allow such a “return” (2002, 16).

Although Husserl’s desire in authoring the principle of all principles was no doubt to emphasize the essence of phenomenology as a scientific method that requires the subject to

²⁸ In F. Kersten’s interpretation, this passage states: “No conceivable theory can make us err with respect to the principle of all principles: that every originary presentive intuition is a legitimizing source of cognition, that everything originary (so to speak, in its ‘personal’ actuality) offered to us in ‘intuition’ is to be accepted simply as what it is presented as being, but also only within the limits in which it is presented there” (1982, 44).

consider only hard data presented to consciousness, Marion found in Husserl's language a breakthrough: "that of the intuition in play with intention in order to reach the things themselves" (1998, 108). Marion finds unnecessary limitations in Husserl's thinking, but also opportunities:

The "breakthrough" accomplished by Husserl in 1900-1901 in fact remains extraordinarily ambiguous: first, because it extends the field of presence beyond any limits, so as to dissolve the very notion of presence; then, above all, because it thereby repeats the constitutively metaphysical definition of presence—objectivity. Does not the reestablishment, or better the irrepressible consecration of objectivity by Husserl indicate the extreme difficulty that phenomenology has in remaining faithful to its own endeavor? More than the conventional debates over "realism" and the "transcendental turn," the ideal of objectivity calls into question the very objective of phenomenology—the return to things in question. For it is not at all self-evident that the things in question are given only in the form of their constituted objectification. (1998, 1-2)

Marion seizes upon Husserl's recognition of intuition to expand philosophy's understanding of what a valid phenomenon can be, claiming, "There could be no question here of determining the decisive importance of this principle... . [I]ntuition no longer intervenes simply as a de facto source of the phenomenon, ...but as a source of right, justificatory of itself. ...Intuition is sufficient for the phenomenon to justify its right to appear, without any other reason" (2000b, 180). It is important to understand that phenomenology's definition of "intuition" is different than in common English usage. For Husserl, intuition makes an object actually present to us in cognition, as opposed to daydreaming about it or talking about it. It is not a mere psychological insight that is gleaned outside of reason. As explained by Kevin Hart, Husserlian intuition "denotes something that is directly in my sphere of awareness, this laptop on which I am writing, for example, and not the house on Lake Michigan where I will spend my summer holiday" (2008, 5). In Marion's view, Husserl's transcendental reduction (which Marion designates as the first reduction) frustrates the proper recognition of givenness by too narrowly limiting the scope of intuition. This reduction "amounts to a constitution of objects. ...It thus excludes from givenness everything that does not let itself be led back to objectivity, namely the

principal differences of ways of Being (of consciousness, of equipmentality, of the world)” (1998, 204).

Accordingly, Marion criticizes the limitations of Husserl’s project by characterizing it as an “intoxication” with the constitution of objects that result in a blindness to the “ultimate destination” of phenomenology (142) and as “confusing givenness itself with ‘objectness [Gegenständlichkeit]’” (2013, 32). Echoing the thinking of Heidegger, Marion argued that Husserl “discovered a mode of thought that absolutely revolutionizes metaphysics without, however, understanding its final scope” (142) and “misses the essence of phenomenology itself” (143). Instead, Marion seeks an understanding of the phenomenon that “frees it from the requirement of presence” (1998, 62). Paraphrasing Husserl’s principle of all principles, Marion argues that “a phenomenality of givenness can permit the phenomenon to show *itself* in itself and by itself because it gives *itself*” (2013, 32). Here, Marion finds in Husserl’s breakthrough something that will anchor his own attempts at rethinking phenomenology, namely, that an intuitive return to the things themselves requires an understanding of intuition that departs from the limits of sensuous intuition (1998, 9). For Marion, Husserlian intuition is more inclusive than mere sensory experience. The breakthrough “consists in leading concepts and objects back to intuition, and thus in radically broadening the scope of intuition itself” (1998, 11).

In *Reduction and Givenness*, Marion finds the foundation for his thinking in Husserl’s principle of all principles, finding authority in the phrase “what offers itself originally to us in ‘intuition’ must be taken wholly as it gives itself” almost as one would find truth in a passage from an infallible holy text. Would it matter if the principle of all principles overstates its case? Or more to the point, would it matter if Marion overstates the implications that Husserl himself seemed to intend for those words to have. I will maintain that if we can speak of overstatement occurring, then perhaps it was more on the part of Marion than Husserl. As Marion noted frequently in his writings, Husserl’s phenomenological project was one that directed

intentionality at objects and not at unfulfilled intuition. Expanding the recognition of unfulfilled intuition was almost certainly not the intention of Husserl in his principle of all principles. Caputo finds Marion's reading of Husserl to be beyond what Husserl envisioned, resulting in a "radical liberation" of Husserl's methodology from its fundamental limitations (2008, 76-78). A more supportive observation is given by Gschwandtner: "That which Husserl thinks only implicitly and not yet rigorously, Marion seeks to think fully and explicitly" (2007, 68). However one views the logic by which Marion interpreted the words of Husserl in order to exceed previously understood limitations, clearly, Marion's goal is to persuade readers that he is working within the discipline of Husserlian phenomenology. His strategy may be seen as one that takes liberties with the ambiguities found in some of Husserl's key terms and phrases. The illogic in such an approach is in purporting to find the weight of authority in ambiguity. Marion's interpretation—of the scope of intuition, for example—may be credible, but it is not credible as a conclusion to be drawn from the body of Husserl's work. It may be credible and even influential on subsequent thinkers, but it is not truly in the spirit of Husserl's thinking. Perhaps this style of argument is one that Marion learned from theology, where one is asked to make a reading of ambiguous, but "infallible" texts. Here we can ask: is his project best considered an exercise in hermeneutics? In style, yes, but not as a comprehensive project, since the underlying texts of Husserl and Heidegger are not treated by Marion as absolutely authoritative. Marion's logic thus appears to me as contradictory in that he provides a hermeneutic reading of texts that he does not accept as authoritative.

3.1.2 Expanding Heidegger's Phenomenology

Notwithstanding his criticism of the limitations that Husserl places on the scope of the principle of all principles, Marion nevertheless considers Husserl's premises to be a genuine breakthrough. More specifically, he identifies it as the first in his series of three breakthroughs. Marion finds the second breakthrough in the work of Heidegger and, with it, a second reduction,

each a consequence of Heidegger's exploration of Being as such. Heidegger, like Marion, found Husserl's narrow phenomenological focus to be inadequate. Marion observed that "Being became the stake of phenomenology for Heidegger only first and definitively within a critique of the ideal of objectification pursued by Husserl" (1998, 2). Marion interpreted Heidegger's project as an attempt to think the phenomenality of Being, a project which (in Marion's opinion) should have acknowledged givenness as the source of Being. However, in Marion's words, Heidegger "recoils before the originality of givenness" (2013, 33). To be clear, he claims that Heidegger's writings do not recognize *givenness* as a characteristic of phenomenology—certainly not in the manner that Marion privileges. This difference in perspective with respect to givenness leads Marion to conclude that Heidegger's project—like that of Husserl—was unfinished, noting that "Heidegger thus answered the question [relating to the relationship between ontology and phenomenology] all the less insofar as he in a sense did not truly pose it" (1998, 143).

Marion does, however, credit Heidegger with the second breakthrough in phenomenology: moving from the mere apprehension of beings to the understanding of the very Being of those beings. In Marion's view, it "displaces phenomenology from the knowledge of beings to the thought of Being" (1998, 142). This second breakthrough allows phenomenology to recognize more than Husserlian methodology would permit; objectivity is expanded to include not only what is revealed by the intentional gaze at objects, but also what is revealed by perception of the Being of such objects. Marion holds that this breakthrough by Heidegger constitutes a critical advance in Husserlian thinking. Marion finds in Husserl's project an "amazing paradox": "[Husserl] discovered a mode of thought that absolutely revolutionizes metaphysics without, however, understanding its final scope. ... [T]he frenetic and programmatic conquest of new objective fields distracts Husserl from the task of clarifying phenomenologically the ways of Being" (142-43).

Marion considers the ontological difference—the difference between Being and beings—to be a condition that must be thought and not remain in a latent mode. The breakthrough that he found in Heidegger’s work came out of Heidegger’s exploration of the ontological difference (1998, 108). Marion found a phenomenological reduction in that exploration: “The ontological difference escapes all the more insofar as it is not absent, but indeed at work in a latent mode: the Being of *beings* is lacking precisely because it is at play only to the benefit of beings. We never think outside of or before the ontological difference, since even when we ignore it we still think within its concealment, which is covered up by its covering over” (109). Marion argues that the second reduction (which he attributes to Heidegger) was an existential reduction: “that of all beings to the Being of being” (76). He labeled the second reduction as existential, “in that it sets itself into operation through the existing being, or else ontological, in that it works the question of Being. ... It excludes therefore that which does not have to be, in particular the preliminary conditions of the ‘phenomenon of Being’” (204). The ultimate outcome claimed by Marion from this second reduction was the acknowledgement of Being itself as a phenomenon (75), an outcome at odds with Heidegger’s view of Being.²⁹

Marion’s reading of Heidegger’s texts was undertaken, in part, with the same hermeneutic approach as was used in connection with Husserl’s writings. Marion found support for his views in the ambiguities of Heidegger’s key terms (such as in connection with the “question of Being”), yet found Heidegger’s phenomenology to be “incomplete.” In addressing the perceived incompleteness, Marion circled back to Husserl to find a means for advancing

²⁹ It is beyond the scope of this dissertation to fully delve into the nuanced depictions of Being that are found in Heidegger’s work; however, it should be said that Heidegger does not in any manner describe Being as having characteristics of a phenomenon. Rather, he describes human apprehension of Being as “*phusis*,” a Greek term which he defines as “the emergent self-upraising, the self-unfolding that abides in itself”; thus, Being is best understood as unconcealment (*alétheia*) (2000, 64). Being is the unveiling, rather than one’s perception of what is unveiled.

Heidegger's thinking on Being. In Marion's view, Heidegger does not provide a direct path to what Marion characterized as the "phenomenon of Being." Marion explained that "[i]n privileging an indirect path—through *Dasein*—toward Being, [Heidegger's project] was not able to stage Being directly as a phenomenon" (1998, 167). Accordingly, the existential reduction, as defined by Marion cannot, alone, provide an avenue for arriving at Being phenomenologically. Marion considers this to be an aporia that creates an opening to question the completeness of Heidegger's thinking. Applying Husserlian concepts to Heidegger's project, Marion asks, "In strict phenomenology, the ultimate instance of decision remains 'the principle of all principles,' namely the givenness that is justified unconditionally by intuited presence; it is before this latter instance that it might be decided whether a 'phenomenon of Being' eventually gives itself. In short, it is necessary to examine *Sein und Zeit* according to a strict phenomenological criterion: does the 'return to the things themselves in question' lead to the 'phenomenon of Being,' does Being give itself as a phenomenon, even as the most radical of phenomena according to the most radical of givennesses?" (167).

Marion found support for the idea of a phenomenon of Being in Heidegger's references to a "phenomenology of the unapparent" (1998, 60). He approvingly quoted Heidegger's statement that "[p]henomenology must bear on the unapparent because Being does not appear, 'is not perceivable'; ... what belongs to the Being of a being remains in obscurity" (60). Marion considers his concept of givenness to echo Heidegger's classic definition of a phenomenon as "what shows itself"³⁰ (2013, 69). Marion argues that "[s]howing itself therefore amounts to giving itself. The fold of givenness, in unfolding itself, shows the given that givenness dispenses. For the phenomenon, showing itself is equal to unfolding the fold of givenness in which it arises

³⁰ In Heidegger's view, phenomenology's purpose is "to let that which shows itself be seen from itself in the very way in which it shows itself from itself" (1962, 58).

as a gift. Showing itself and giving itself play in the same field—the fold of givenness, which is unfolded in the giving” (2013, 70).

Just as some commentators have criticized Marion’s reading of Husserl, a number of critics have found fault with Marion’s reading of Heidegger.³¹ Marion finds in Heidegger’s exploration of Being a steppingstone in the path toward justifying a phenomenon of givenness: the existential reduction. However, Janicaud finds no *reduction* there whatsoever; in Janicaud’s view, Heidegger’s project is focused elsewhere (2000, 61). At worst, the so-called second reduction could be argued to be almost irrelevant to Marion’s conclusions with respect to givenness. It does *not* appear to clear away any potential obstacles to the manifestation of givenness—Marion’s description of the function of a reduction. Marion contends that Heidegger’s writings on Being, properly understood, expand what may be considered the scope of intentionality. That is likely true, but not a compelling factor in Marion’s ultimate argument for the preeminence of givenness. Perhaps Marion’s exploration of Heidegger’s work was undertaken primarily for the purpose of showing that recognizing givenness is not fundamentally at odds with the generally accepted views of Heidegger. In order to recognize Marion’s advances, I find no need to overturn Heidegger’s fundamental arguments with respect to Being; one would simply be required to expand them.

That was Marion’s goal: “It remains that Heidegger no doubt did not accomplish what he nevertheless attempted, more than anyone else, to attain through and for phenomenology. This is so, first, because, whatever the case may be, *Dasein* still remains haunted by the *I*; next it is so because the ‘phenomenon of Being,’ even in the already attenuated form of the ontological difference, never shows itself; and finally it is so because the ‘phenomenon of the unapparent’

³¹ Marion also found fault with the readings that many contemporary philosophers have given to Heidegger’s works in an interview contained in Janicaud’s book, *Heidegger in France*, explaining, “I do not advise people to write theses on Heidegger. Not because it is a taboo subject, but because it is too difficult” (2015, 405).

henceforth called for never gets beyond either its programmatic status or its contradictory formulation” (1998, 2).

3.1.3 The “Inevitable” Third Reduction

The culmination of Marion’s efforts to expand Husserl’s and Heidegger’s work comes in Marion’s positing of a third reduction, that of givenness, the “most strict reduction” that is “before and outside of objectivity and the question of Being” (1998, 205). This third reduction fully frees phenomenology from the limitations of objectivity and the question of Being by radically opening phenomenology to donation and givenness—leading back to originary giving intuition. The concept of *that which gives itself to intuition* is Marion’s narrow focus. Although that concept is found within the relatively focused phraseology of the principle of all principles, Marion does not believe that its implications had been fully understood.

Marion discusses the manifestation of intuition through givenness by utilizing the German word *Gegebenheit*, a word deployed by Husserl in his writing. Similarly, a showing of Being that Marion considers as resembling the concept of givenness is discussed by Heidegger in *Being and Time* through his use of the German words *es gibt*. Yet, to the extent that Marion attributes the origins of the concept of givenness to Husserl and Heidegger, legitimate objections can be made. In particular, commentators object to a translation of *Gegebenheit* that implies a gift in the sense of something offered as a present. In a debate with Marion, Derrida argued that the idea of phenomena being given as gifts stems from the mistranslation of Husserl’s “*Gegebenheit*” and Heidegger’s “*es gibt*.” Rather than givenness, those terms refer to the passivity of intuition. For Derrida, those words mean: “Something is there. We have, we meet something. It is there, but it is not a gift” (1999b, 58). Hart agrees: “Giving without conditions is the basis of Husserl’s insistence ... on philosophizing without presuppositions, that is, contenting oneself with accurately describing how things present themselves without their having to meet any conditions that we might have laid down for their reception” (2008, 4). If Marion’s project

were to be viewed through only hermeneutic criteria, Derrida's criticism might be considered fatal to Marion's project. It was almost certainly not Husserl's and Heidegger's belief that phenomena occur as a manifestation given *by* an other—divine or otherwise. It appears to me to be a clear misreading to argue otherwise. If the goal of Marion's readings of Heidegger and Husserl was to derive his own conclusions, culminating in his third reduction becoming "inevitable" (1998, 204), then a misreading of those philosophers would call his conclusions into question. Janicaud labels the third reduction that Marion finds a "pseudoreduction" on this basis (2000, 61). However, if the concept of givenness is an expansion, candidly understood as being beyond that which Husserl, in particular, intended in his methodology, then there is more to be considered.

How is Marion's project an expansion of phenomenology? Here it may be useful to pause in order to consider some questions about Marion's readings of Husserl and Heidegger. Is the expansion he offers crafted solely to allow philosophy to recognize divine revelation—and for no other purpose? Specifically, what other source of givenness is contemplated by his thinking? I do not find such a goal to be fatal to his project—if recognition of the divine was indeed his goal—however, one might ask how far one can go in disregarding the disciplined perspectives of classical phenomenology without losing the assurances regarding truth and meaning that phenomenology is intended to provide? By what criteria would we evaluate Marion's expansions of phenomenology, if his conclusions overturn the fundamental tenets of phenomenological thinking?

Recognizing givenness *without conditions* allows the manifestation of that which appears to the subject—the "manifestation of the thing starting from itself and as itself, privilege of rendering *itself* manifest, of making *itself* visible, of showing *itself*" (2013, 8). His argument is that "nothing would make an exception to givenness" (2002, 21). First, implicit in Marion's concept of givenness is a *source* of that givenness, but he objects to conceptualizing that source

as an object; in fact, the source is “established against objectness” (249). He nevertheless believes that source to be more than mere intangible inspiration. In *Being Given*, he controversially characterizes the source as a “self.” In his words, a phenomenon manifested through givenness “gives itself and shows itself only by confirming itself as a ‘self’” (248-49). Using this characterization of the source of givenness, Marion thereby clearly depicts givenness occurring in a reversal of intentionality in which intuition is given to the subject by a source outside of the subject. Intuition would not be a mere cognitive activity of the subject.

Second, for Marion, givenness must be allowed to show itself on its own terms and need not be constituted within the conditions of any horizon. This separates him from the thinking of most philosophers who work within phenomenology. As Horner explains, in the context of phenomenology “the horizon is a border that includes or allows for particular possibilities, which fences an economy of thought and action” (2001, 97). For classical phenomenology, a horizon is mandatory in order to assure sufficiently scientific perspective. Yet, Marion argues for the acceptance of givenness without regard to any horizon—whether a horizon determined by a subject-object relationship or a horizon of Being. No longer even restricted to the horizon of Being, the third reduction removes phenomena vastly beyond limitations of objectivity. As Marion explains:

The third reduction—our entire enterprise has tended toward nothing other than to render the recognition of it inevitable—properly speaking *is not*, because the call that exercises it nevertheless rigorously no longer issues from the horizon of Being (nor of objectivity), but from the pure form of the call. (1) It reduces to the *interloqué*, by leading every *I* or even *Dasein* back to its pure and simple figure as an auditor preceded and instituted by the call which is still absolute because indeterminate. (2) It gives the gift itself: the gift of rendering oneself to or of eluding the claim of the call. (3) According to no other horizon than that of the absolutely unconditional call and of the absolutely unconstrained response. (4) The originary absence of conditions and determinations of the claim allow it to appeal, without any limit, as much to what is not objectivated as to what is objectivated, as much to what does not have to be as to what must be. The last reduction reduces to the *interloqué*, and hence gives all that can call and be called. (1998, 204-05)

Horner, a translator of one of Marion's later significant works, shows a nuanced understanding of Marion's views of givenness in her work *Rethinking God as Gift*. She finds that the third reduction can be understood as being composed of four questions: "to whom is what given, according to which horizon, and what is thereby excluded? ...The reduction to the call concerns how the interlocuted (the me, prior to the I or to *Dasein*) is given the gift of surrendering to or withdrawing from the claim of the call, according to no other horizon than that of the call itself, and excludes nothing, since it is transcendental" (2001, 92-93). Marion's third reduction is intended to clear away remaining obstacles to manifestation of phenomena, in particular, obstacles inherent in Husserlian concepts of objectivity. In Marion's view, it "eliminates all transcendence³², that is to say, the intentional ecstasy of consciousness toward its objective, which alone allows knowledge of it, but also incertitude, error, illusion, and so on; thus the givenness of the given, on the express condition that it is already reduced, reduced to the pure given becomes absolutely indubitable. Doubt can only be instilled in a not-yet-reduced perception, where one takes equally and confusedly for granted that which is not truly given and that which the reduction has brought back to a given without remainder, without shadow, without aura. ...Because the reduction eliminates from the process of appearing all that which is not given without reserve: semblances and confusions, inventions or given memories, all linked to transcendences that merge the lived experience (possibly intentional) with the object intended (by definition only sketched), are marked, filtered, and finally separated from the remaining given" (2002, 18-19).

Marion views the third reduction as not just a means for recognizing intuition that cannot be acknowledged otherwise in phenomenology. To a large extent he sees the third reduction as preempting the first and second reductions. He finds Heidegger's principle, "so much appearing,

³² Marion defines transcendence (from a phenomenological perspective) as what surpasses the immanence of consciousness (2007a, 17).

so much being,” as imprecise, because it couples seeing with being. In what he views to be a more precise formulation—in fact, the defining principle of phenomenology—he proffers this claim: “So much reduction, so much givenness.” (2013, 17-19)³³. In other words, the more thoroughly the reduction is employed, the more givenness becomes available. Moreover, after the reduction, the pure given manifests only itself. For Marion, this reduction “separates what appears from what does not appear, from what renders its apparition deceptive and mimics appearing by fraudulently attaching a fundamental obscurity to it—in short, from what brings into phenomenality that which remains foreign to it—unregulated objectification, ‘absurd theories’” (16). In this respect, Marion argues against Husserl’s approach to intuition: that matters of intuition should be recognized to the extent *fulfilled*—in other words, to the extent comprehended by the I. Marion rejects any such limitation, asserting that givenness “could and even should be carried out without intuition” and “is measured by its own standard, not by that of intuition” (17).

Marion’s argument here can be paraphrased in something of a tautology: the pure given manifests what it manifests. In this context it lacks a requirement—or possibly even a place—for human cognition. Marion describes a phenomenology of givenness as “radical empiricism” in that it “no longer limits itself to sensible intuition, but admits all intuition that is primarily donative” (1997, 286). Some phenomena that manifest themselves through intuition *are* sensible, such as the sensations of pain and coldness. Marion argues for recognition of phenomena that are not in any manner sensible and accordingly do not fulfill intention. “Fulfillment” is a term used by Husserl which describes the perception of an object by the subject. For Husserl, a thing merely imagined by the subject is not fulfilled—or at best is fulfilled poorly. By contrast, an object perceptible to the senses is clearly capable of fulfillment. Husserl in his writings struggles

³³ Translated by Robyn Horner as “As much reduction, as much givenness,” to emphasize the proportionality of the formula: the more rigorously the formula is applied, the more givenness can be perceived (Translator’s Introduction to *In Excess*, xn4).

with the application of this concept to borderline phenomena such as mathematical relationships, but he does not abandon the idea of fulfillment as a condition to the phenomenality of phenomena. For Marion, this is another example of Husserl's undue emphasis on the objectivity of phenomena, and so he rejects the need for fulfillment of intuition as a condition to its recognition as a phenomenon. Accordingly, givenness is not to be measured by standards of cognition.

As we will see in Section 3.2.1, in connection with saturated phenomena, signification found in givenness presents itself, "by itself and itself alone" without any correlative intuition capable of fulfillment (2013, 28, 29). Lack of fulfillment is explained, in part, by the fact that givenness should be understood as occurring prior to intuition; in other words, givenness is anterior to intuition. A phenomenon "only shows *itself* to the extent that it first gives *itself*—all that which shows *itself* must, in order to reach that point, first give *itself*. ... If manifestation perhaps results from givenness, givenness must precede it; it therefore remains anterior to it, in other words, not yet engaged in the space of visibility and consequently, strictly speaking, unseen" (2002, 30-31). If phenomena are, as he argues, *given*, then the question may properly be asked, from what (or whom) are phenomena given? Marion's third reduction parallels the phenomenological consequences of the "call" posited by Lévinas. In fact, Horner refers to the third reduction as the "reduction to the call" (2001, 92). However, for Marion—at least for purposes of his phenomenological project—the source of the call is indeterminate. "Phenomenologically, the call must remain anonymous because its function is never to name itself, only to call the respondent and thus arouse him. ... And if it is ever necessary to give a name to the call, this will not be the job of the call itself (nor of the giver), but of the responsal (or [the *adonné*]). ... The call calls the responsal, never itself; it therefore receives its possible name only from the responsal, which gives a name to it after the fact" (2013, 298). Considering Marion's theological body of work, one can argue that his emphasis on givenness and his portrayal of the "gift" is for the purpose of recognizing a divine giver. Critics and adherents alike

understand that Marion's philosophy paves the way for a phenomenological recognition of the possibility of divine revelation.

3.2 Phenomenology of Revelation

Through a phenomenology posited by Marion that recognizes givenness and, in fact, allows givenness to be “measured only by its own standard” and not by Husserlian methodologies applicable to intuition, philosophers may now recognize the possibility of revelation. Granted, revelation is at the boundary of what phenomenology can possibly disclose and the source of revelation likely remains radically anonymous; however, the door has been opened by Marion for the *possibility* of revelation. Gschwandtner in the careful analysis contained in *Reading Jean-Luc Marion* explains the way in which Marion sets limits for philosophy's endorsement of the idea of revelation: Marion “insists [that] we can only speak in terms of possibility, not actuality. Phenomenology can say absolutely nothing about whether or not revelation has actually taken place, but it can suggest that if such a thing were possible, its phenomenality should be described in a certain fashion. ... He asserts that it is not even the primary goal of his project to show the possibility of revelation, but rather to push the limits, definitions, and resources of phenomenology as far as they will go” (2007, 82-83). For Marion, philosophy cannot confirm the actual occurrence of any claimed revelation; it can and does, however, explain how a revelation would be manifested if, indeed, a revelation were to occur. He emphasizes that “[p]henomenology cannot decide if a revelation can or should ever give itself, but it (and it alone) can determine that, in case it does, such a phenomenon of revelation should assume the figure of the paradox of paradoxes. If revelation there must be (and phenomenology has no authority to decide this), then it will assume, assumes, or assumed the figure of paradox of paradoxes, according to an essential law of phenomenality” (2013, 235).

Along with his body of work that addresses his ideas for expanding philosophy, Marion has created a separate body of work that applies phenomenological thinking to theology. He is

adamant that the boundary lines between his philosophy and theology are clear; however, he believes that each line of thinking can aid in a fuller comprehension of the other. In particular, his project of overcoming metaphysics was not solely in aid of a more rigorous philosophy, but also to bring clarity to modern theology. For Marion, the disciplines of philosophy and theology are distinct, but each such discipline can employ the advances in thinking accomplished by the other—in particular, theology can illuminate philosophical thinking. In his view, this means that “the distinction between the domains, objects, and methods remains absolute, but that [theology] can shed some light on [phenomenology] without destroying it or being destroyed” (2002, 28). Carlson characterizes Marion’s writing (in a tongue in cheek manner) as “liberation” theology: “one that seeks, primarily, however, not to place the disruptive power of revelation in the service of all too human ends (liberation as we might understand or expect it in its social, political, and economic senses), but much rather to free *God* from the alienation in which he would have been placed by the reign of the human sciences (which would understand revelation in terms of everything but its own unconditional self-showing) and by the metaphysics (especially modern metaphysics) that would undergird the human sciences and culminate in the nihilism of our time. Both in its conception of the human subject (as setting the conditions of possibility for experience and intelligibility, especially in terms of objectivity) and in its conception of God (as prime mover, *causa sui*, sufficient reason, etc.) metaphysics would occlude revelation in its true sense because it would demand that God appear not in his own way but according to the conditions of an objectivized human experience and/or so as to account for and render intelligible, primarily in terms of efficient causality or the logic of sufficient reason, the appearance of all other phenomena” (2008, 153). Marion, himself, notes that phenomenology “liberates” God from any requirement (found in metaphysics) to be the ground of the physical world (1997, 288).

Although Marion is dismissive of natural theology—the attempt to formulate a rational discourse with respect to God—he defends the validity of revealed theology. He argues that bracketing God as a transcendent being outside of one’s lived experience within the world “would therefore leave intact any definition of God not based on a transcendence of this (metaphysical) type. Now, it is precisely the case for revealed theology that it approaches God by immanence as well as transcendence. ... Would this immanence more radical than the region of consciousness also fall beneath the blow of reduction?” (2013, 343n4). In his view, the answer is no. Revelation—including that presumed to be from a divine source—is not excluded by phenomenological reduction: “For the same phenomenality covers all givens, from the poorest (formalism, mathematics), to the common (physical sciences, technical objects), to saturated phenomena (event, idol, flesh, icon), up to the point of the possibility of phenomena combining the four types of saturation (phenomena of Revelation)” (2002, 51).

I will discuss Marion’s advocacy for the philosophical recognition of revelation by first, laying the groundwork through summarizing his position with respect to the capability of humankind to comprehend the assumed source of revelation; second, describing the category of phenomena that accommodate revelation, a category that Marion names “saturated phenomena”; and finally, summarizing his views with respect to revelation and the conditions for its manifestation. At each stage of my analysis I will endeavor to identify unanswered questions relating to the ability of philosophy, having rigorously evaluated all implications, to adopt Marion’s thinking, in whole or part. As we will see, unlike Lévinas, Marion largely ignores the possible role of language-formation within consciousness as a fundamental element of human experience of divine manifestations. Yet as we will also see, Marion depicts such phenomena as bedazzling and incomprehensible. Accordingly, I will explore in Section 3.3 the extent to which an experience of meaning-formation is inherent in a perception of incomprehensibility.

3.2.1 Incomprehensibility of God

Although Marion advocates for a philosophy capable of recognizing revelation, he does not claim that his phenomenology of givenness can accomplish what philosophers throughout Western history have failed to accomplish: comprehension of the true nature of God. To the contrary, he believes that the concept of incomprehensibility is a fundamental part of the formal definition of God, since comprehension would put the divine on the same level as our finite minds. God can be known “only as not being known” (1999a, 36-37). The possibility of revelation does not overcome the fundamental incapacity of human consciousness to perceive God or other manifestations of the divine. Is there inconsistency in these views? Probably not. As discussed in Section 3.2.2 below, Marion argues for recognition by philosophy of saturated phenomena that reveal the divine. However, he is clear that such phenomena cannot consist of intuition for which fulfillment is possible; full comprehension of the divine is not possible. Marion acknowledges that the intuition of a revelation cannot be objectivized in a manner that would satisfy Husserlian methodology (2000b, 176).

In a clever analysis that addresses this shortcoming of comprehension and, at the same time, situates his project in the context of modern, Nietzschean thinking, Marion characterizes human attempts to describe God as conceptual idolatry. He then interweaves his discussion of conceptual idolatry with a commentary on *Twilight of the Idols* in which Nietzsche famously critiques the moral underpinnings of Western religion—and responds to Nietzsche’s often quoted report on the death of God. For Marion, the “death of God” is precisely the death of *idolatrous* concepts of God that had been accepted by pre-modern philosophers and theologians.

He considers most attempts to depict God—whether through describing God’s attributes or through naming the divine—as making an idol. As Horner explains it, an “idol is characterized not as the personification of its god but as the image by means of which the worshiper is referred only to the human experience of divinity [; yet] an idol is not an illusion: it

consists precisely in being seen, in becoming an object of knowledge” (2001, 160-162). Using the language of phenomenology, Marion asserts that any gaze at the divine that seeks to fulfill intentionality only results in the making of an idol. The idol is an object—in a Husserlian sense of the word—and is inadequate to manifest the divine. Such an idol merely “acts as a mirror” of the observer, but “not as a portrait” of the divine (2012, 12). One is incapable of perceiving the divine, which is beyond the horizon of Being; the horizon of Being “admits no beyond” (13). In such an endeavor, the divine is only measured by what fulfilled intentionality can support, presenting a “low water mark of the divine” (14). Therefore, when any philosophical concept of God appears in thought, that concept is an idol—resulting in conceptual idolatry. Marion views onto-theo-logy “as idolatrous in its very essence, namely because it circumscribes the divine by a concept” (Gschwandtner 2007, 39). Although such an idol is not necessarily deceitful or illusory, it only “supplies vision with what it sees” (Marion 2012, 26).

Marion considers philosophical constructs from throughout Western history that have depicted God as *causa sui* and as the moral author of the world to be conceptual idols that have encountered twilight in modernity (16). Along with Nietzsche, Marion rejects these particular concepts of God and acknowledges them as fallen idols. In *God Without Being* Marion contrasts the creation of *icons* from the creation of idols, finding an icon to be the aim of an infinite gaze, rather than a gaze capable of fulfillment. The icon does not result from intentionality, but rather provokes perception of the invisible God; it “summons the gaze” (18). In fact there is a reversal: “the gaze of the man is lost in the invisible gaze that visibly envisages him” (20). A concept of God can also be an icon, provided that the “concept renounce[s] comprehending the incomprehensible” (22).

Carlson explains that the words idol and icon signify contrasting ways to apprehend the divine: “[T]he idol is defined by the primacy of the human subject’s intentional consciousness, while the icon would radically disrupt or reverse that primacy. In the idol, I finally see only the

invisible mirror of my own thought, whereas in the icon I see the fact that, prior to such thought, I am envisaged by the gaze of an irreducible other” (1999, 194). This advocacy for an iconic perception of God can be seen as a prelude to Marion’s philosophical project in which revelation is perceived through radical givenness. Are traditional, theological ideas regarding God idols to be swept aside? Possibly, according to Gschwandtner: “Marion insists that we must experience the radical foreignness of God. Only in conceiving God as radically distant does a non-idolatrous thought of God become possible” (2007, 49). To the same end, perceiving God in this way is consistent with Marion’s goal of overcoming metaphysics. He argues that “[t]o reach a nonidolatrous thought of God, which alone releases ‘God’ from his quotation marks by disengaging his apprehension from the conditions posed by onto-theo-logy, one would have to manage to think God outside of metaphysics insofar as metaphysics infallibly leads, by way of blasphemy (proof), to the twilight of the idols (conceptual atheism)” (2012, 37).

In order to distinguish between the unthinkable God and the idolatrous concept, Marion proposes to “cross out” the word God, and therefore refer to the God that reveals itself as “G⊗d.” “The cross does not indicate that G⊗d would have to disappear as a concept, or intervene only in the capacity of a hypothesis in the process of validation but that the unthinkable enters into the field of our thought only by rendering itself unthinkable there by excess, that is by criticizing our thought. To cross out G⊗d, in fact, indicates and recalls that G⊗d crosses out our thought because he saturates it” (2012, 46).³⁴

³⁴ While Marion is clear that his thinking is not compatible with negative theology (1999a, 54-60), Caputo sees a theme of negative theology in the symbol of a cross superimposed on the word God. Caputo argues that the name “God” denotes an empty intention, because “God is *not* what we say God ‘is’” (1997, 45). “The only way to keep God’s alterity safe is to save Him... from ensnarement by some name. ... That gives us another way to read the beautiful cross that Jean-Luc Marion puts over the name of God This cross keeps God safe, like crossed swords or arrows that defy anyone who would dare trespass” (44).

The concept of an incomprehensible divine Other manifesting itself from outside of Being might be a matter of indifference to philosophers if Marion had not also posited that phenomenology is capable of recognizing the manifestation (incomprehensible though it may be) of such an Other. An additional concern for Marion's readers—whether philosophers or theologians—might be whether a “gift” defined as having been manifested from outside the horizon of Being is merely a paradoxical construct of abstract thought. Such a gift is, by definition, incomprehensible. As discussed below, it is also defined as impossible. In short, we might ask, what *is* the gift? The premise of total incomprehensibility of the divine had certain ramifications for Marion's theological project. In particular, this premise demands that the reliability of theologians' understandings of the divine gleaned from sacred texts and tradition be questioned. What does Marion offer to replace—or at least inform—theological understandings of the nature of God? In large measure, he simply proffers a passive receptivity to givenness that presents itself—“by itself and itself alone.” Givenness, which in his view, should be seen as characterizing all phenomena, allows for recognition of manifestations of God, whether or not fully comprehensible. Nevertheless, Marion does not consider phenomena as understood in classical phenomenology to be adequate for the manifestation of that which is outside of the horizon of Being. To account for the possibility of revelation, he expands upon his concept of phenomenological givenness to posit a radical form of givenness: the saturated phenomenon.

3.2.2 Saturated Phenomena

In recognizing givenness as a means of manifestation of phenomena, Marion opened the door to phenomena of varying degrees of comprehensibility. Husserl's methodology considered those phenomena that were perceived through intuition as a special class that were judged by the extent to which they were fulfilled—or in other words, in this context, by the degree to which they were capable of being comprehended. Husserl proposed in his methodology to limit intuition to that which is fulfilled by intention. Rejecting such an approach, Marion argues for

philosophical acceptance of that which is given, regardless of the extent to which it can be perceived by the senses or even comprehended. At the extremities of givenness is the possibility that one can encounter what Marion refers to as a *saturated* phenomenon. A saturated phenomenon is one that goes beyond the limitations of Husserl's principle of all principles, appearing without the limits of a horizon or a reduction to a "conscious I." Marion describes such a phenomenon as capable even of manifesting impossibility: "not only the possibility that surpasses actuality, but the possibility that surpasses the very conditions of possibility, the possibility of unconditioned possibility—in other words, the possibility of the impossible" (2013, 218). He characterizes such a phenomenon as "saturated" because the excess of its intuition "overcomes, submerges, exceeds—in short, saturates—the measure of each and every concept" (2002, 159). An abundant excess saturates the manifestation, expanding the possibilities of what can be perceived. In these circumstances, he finds intention to be inadequate: "[I]ntention sets forth a surplus that the concept cannot organize... . As a result, intuition is not bound to and by the intention, but is freed from it..." (2013, 225). Using a phrase quoted approvingly by some and ridiculed by others, Marion argues that to be the recipient of a saturated phenomenon is to have an "experience of bedazzlement" (1999b, 74).

To be clear, that which is manifested by a saturated phenomenon is not gibberish or nonsense, but rather, is a manifestation that is *beyond* full comprehension. Here, the recipient's cognition is hopelessly inadequate. As Carlson describes it, the concept of the saturated phenomenon overturns the understanding of Husserl "where a concept or intention, an aim or meaning, precedes and then eventually receives either a poor or a relatively adequate fulfilling intuition, and where the possibility is never fully considered that our concepts and intentions, aims and meanings, might prove inadequate to the intuition actually given to us in most experience" (2008, 154). Against this reading, Richard Kearney views Marion's concept—particularly in its effort to conceptualize God—as "hysterical postmodernism" (2001a, 167).

Kearney's perspective is hermeneutic and his argument with Marion is best illustrated by his book *The God Who May Be* in which God is understood as possibility—"God neither is nor is not, but *may be*" (80). He disagrees with the concept of a phenomenon that is divine in its origin, but nevertheless incomprehensible: "We hit here upon a serious hermeneutic muddle. If the saturating phenomenon is really as bedazzling as Marion suggest, how can we tell the difference between God and madness? How are we to distinguish between enabling and disabling revelations?" (2001a, 164).³⁵ I, too, question the workings of Marion's approach in this regard, as I will discuss below, but it should be noted that Marion is not alone in viewing manifestations of the divine as more than consciousness can comprehend and signify.

Lévinas, too, posited an approach by an Other that was *radically other* and incomprehensible; however, Marion considered Lévinas's thinking to be too narrowly focused. He offers an expansion of Lévinas's concept of a disturbance by the Other to include all saturated phenomena—and not just divine ethical demands. He makes clear that a saturated phenomenon is not—in his words, "to say it plainly"—merely a *theological* form of phenomenality (2013, 218). Not only was Lévinas's phenomenology too theological to satisfy Marion, as understood by Gschwandtner, Marion also found it to be too generic and universal in its depiction of the Other. She saw this distinction: "Lévinas's other is a face in the sense of *façade*, any face, a universal face, a generic injunction not to kill (that must of necessity apply to everyone, regardless of his or her identity or individuality). ... [T]he face does not appear to me, never reveals itself. ... Because the face cannot be identified, cannot be given a proper name, has no 'quiddity,' and is not inscribed in a system of relations, ... the 'face' does not refer to a specific other, but rather to the other 'as such'" (2005, 73).

³⁵ Kearney prefers to reinterpret the God of Western religion as "neither being nor non-being, but as something before, between, and beyond the two: an eschatological *may be*?" (2001a, 34). For Kearney, this God "obviates the extremes of atheistic and theistic dogmatism in the name of a still small voice that whispers and cries in the wilderness: *perhaps*" (38).

Perhaps Marion's criticism of Lévinas's restraint in depicting the nature of the Other stems from Marion's theology, clearly stated in works such as *God without Being* that phenomenology is capable of revealing revelation from the God of Christianity. Close readers of Marion, such as Carlson, find a blurring of the lines between his treatment of saturated phenomena and his descriptions of "the God of phenomenology [who] displays himself, on the basis of himself alone, in the mode of bedazzlement" (1999, 2012). Horner, too, concludes that Marion, in attempting to make his theology work within the framework of phenomenology, has "potentially compromised his reading" of Husserl and Heidegger (2001, 113). Yet, Horner sees a valid thread in his writing: his fundamental question as to whether "phenomenology as a methodology [can] sustain more than can be comprehended?" (114). To be fair, Marion does not disguise the parallel tracks of his philosophical and theological projects. Accordingly, one may properly consider his phenomenology in that context. Hart believes that Marion's phenomenological views are relevant regardless of one's religious beliefs. In Hart's view, a saturated phenomenon "remains an eidetic possibility with an inner structure to be respected and a phenomenality that must be acknowledged even by those without faith in Judaism or Christianity. [Marion] deals with revelation as possibility because that is all that phenomenology can do, and indeed must do, if the phenomenality of revelation is to be respected" (2008, 34, 35).

Still, I would argue, a critical concern with respect to a saturated phenomenon is the question of how a manifestation that is by definition *given* can be understood as a phenomenon at all, since givenness implies that the subject is merely a recipient and not an active player in the encounter. Inherent in the idea of givenness is some degree of passivity—that the subject merely receives that which is given. In arguing for a phenomenology of givenness, Marion depicts a reversal of intentionality in a manner similar to Lévinas's depiction of the call of the Other. In fact, in a departure from classical phenomenology, Marion intends for his concept of givenness to be understood as "invert[ing] intentionality" (2013, 267). The subject is no longer a

transcendental I³⁶, but rather a recipient. Such a phenomenon, as understood by Marion, “confiscates the function and role of the *self*, and therefore can only concede to the ego a me of second rank, by derivation. ... [T]he *ego*, deprived of transcendentalizing dignity, must be admitted as it is received, as an *adonné*: the one who is itself received from what it receives, the one to whom what gives itself from a first *self*—any phenomenon—gives a second *me*, the one of reception and of response” (2002, 45). While the concept of a reversal of intentionality has some commonality with the thinking of Lévinas, it should be noted that Marion argues for the possibility of perceiving saturated phenomena in a bedazzling excess manifested in intuition. By contrast, Lévinas argues that only a trace is perceived, a bare remnant of that which has already departed. The depiction of the phenomenological experience is vastly different. How can this be? Is one view simply wrong, or is there a way in which to reconcile these views? Perhaps the differing views can be accommodated by relegating the trace that Lévinas perceives to a “moment” anterior to consciousness. Marion makes no such supposition with respect to revelation; presumably, it occurs during moments of consciousness. Perhaps the explanation is simply this: Lévinas and Marion each have different faith-based assumptions about the nature of the divine Other. Marion’s assumptions are unabashedly Christian; he includes Christ as an example of an iconic manifestation of the divine. Lévinas assumes virtually nothing about the nature of the Other that he depicts; the Other is, by his definition, entirely other and impossible to depict through language.

Lévinas and Marion both depict recipients of religious experience who are passive in such encounters, but can a passive recipient be considered a subject, for purposes of falling within the minimum requirements for this line of thinking to be considered phenomenology? Marion does not contest the concept of the subject as the “center”, but rather contests the mode

³⁶ The “transcendental I” is a Kantian description of a subject in the first person nominative affirming the “I am,” thereby expressing the consciousness that can accompany all thought.

claimed for it: “I will contest the claim that it occupies this center as an origin, an ego or first person, in transcendental ‘mineness.’ I will oppose to it the claim that it does not hold this center but is instead held there as a recipient where what gives itself shows itself, and that it discloses itself given to and as a pole of givenness, where all the givens come forward incessantly. At the center stands no ‘subject,’ but a gifted, he whose function consists in receiving what is immeasurably given to him, and whose privilege is confined to the fact that he is himself received from what he receives” (2013, 322).

At no point during the experience that Marion depicts does the recipient react to the phenomenon and begin to engage in thought in the manner of an ego. As Gschwandtner explains his thinking:

Marion insists that this constitutes a reversal of intentionality: the subject becomes a passive recipient instead of a constitutive actor. The interlocuted is radically displaced and submitted to an appeal and must renounce any autarchy or attempt at self-positioning. That which is received cannot be thought clearly or distinctly; one can thus not speak of a constituting subject defined by its clear thought, but only of a confused and surprised recipient who indicates the phenomenon precisely by such surprise. The phenomenon takes controlling consciousness away from the self: I find myself utterly displaced, cross-examined, questioned, unsettled. I am always already preceded by a prior call and claim. And most importantly ... the new self is one called and constituted by the other. (2007, 207)

As we have seen, the subject is the recipient of a gift, an *adonné*, and it is fundamental to Marion’s project that this be so. He considers this experience of givenness to be broadly applicable to phenomena of all kinds; however, it is difficult to think of any context for givenness other than in connection with divine manifestations. Indeed, Caputo considers Marion’s efforts to expand phenomenology to be largely motivated by theological goals. Although Marion posits the possibility of non-theological applications for the concept of saturated phenomena, Caputo considers the purpose for such an expansion to be evident:

First order phenomenology then leads to the possibility of second order saturated phenomenon on strictly phenomenological grounds. One is thereby led by the hand of

phenomenology to the threshold of theology which can be crossed only by faith and would represent, if confirmed in actuality, an existential and theological “crowning” of phenomenology by actualizing an essential possibility of which phenomenology itself is not capable. Theology would be what phenomenology wants to be but cannot attain. Without confusing itself with theology, and modestly confessing its own limits, phenomenological revelation points to the possibility of a theological Revelation. Without confusing itself with a purely natural phenomenology, a Revealed theology would take over the controls of phenomenology and describe phenomena of maximum paradoxicality and hyper-phenomenality. (2008, 80-81)

Echoing Caputo in this regard, I would question the role that the concept of saturated phenomena can validly play in philosophy. Is it a logical possibility that should be acknowledged and filed away for use as needed? Or is it only hyperbole with little relevance to serious philosophy? Or is it something in between those two alternatives? I would argue that the concept of saturated phenomena is useful, almost exclusively, for the purpose of framing an approach for contemporary philosophy to consider the possibility of revelation. But why is it useful for philosophers to even consider revelation, given the fact that revelation is outside of science and by most accounts offers a type of experience that is not testable, not generally repeatable, and not necessarily representative of typical human experience? In part, the answer is that post-modern thinkers generally decline to flatly deny possibilities of any kind solely on the basis of lack of scientifically recognized evidence. If philosophy is to adopt an openness to possibilities outside of those affirmed by the scientific method, then it must also adopt a means through which its community can think about those possibilities and articulate relevant premises. That is the stated goal of Marion.

3.2.3 Possibility of Revelation

Beyond saturated phenomena of the first order, Marion conceives of a higher order of saturated phenomena in which a phenomenon can be manifested as a saturation of saturation, as an abundant excess of intuition, as a paradox of paradoxes—indeed, as a manifestation of the *impossible*. These are “revelations” with a lower case “r.” Marion denotes actual revelations with

an upper case “R”: Revelations. As discussed below, for Marion, Revelation is acknowledged as being primarily a matter for theology, involving, as it does, matters of faith.

The phenomenon of revelation, in which phenomena are depicted as being saturated to the second degree is characterized by Marion as the “possibility of impossibility—on condition of no longer understanding impossibility confiscating possibility ..., but possibility assimilating impossibility” (2013, 235-36). Are these concepts, as Janicaud complains, nothing but words? They are certainly paradoxical assertions. To some extent, though, the experience of impossibility that Marion describes is not unlike the “mere” saturated phenomenon described above: a perception that exceeds comprehension, an experience of bedazzlement or astonishment; such perceptions cannot be reduced to objectivity or be comprehended (1999b, 74-75). But he defines revelation as *doubly* saturated, thereby emphasizing the overwhelming incomprehensibility of that which is impossible. Marion acknowledges the challenges in attempting to have a rational discourse about such things. He asks how impossibility can be considered “without resorting to a meaningless and even mad paradox?” (2002, 161). In his view, it is not a matter of abandonment to blind faith: “Categorical intuition does not at all impose itself through some mystical initiation that would open a suspect third eye of the mind” (1998, 15). In essence, Marion considers even a manifestation of impossibility—a doubly saturated phenomenon—to be phenomenologically justified based upon the principle of all principles: “[T]he paradox of paradoxes offers no extraordinary phenomenological trait. Though exceeding the common-law phenomenon, it does not make an exception to the original determination of what shows itself: it gives itself—and without common measure” (2013, 236).

The culmination of his phenomenological project is to demonstrate the manner in which revelation can be understood to manifest itself as a phenomenon—but not to proclaim the truth of any particular theological conclusion. He offers divine revelation only as a possibility that philosophy must consider: “I am obliged *here*—in phenomenology, where possibility remains

the norm, and not actuality—only to describe it in its pure possibility and in the reduced immanence of givenness. I do not *here* have to judge its actual manifestation or ontic status, which remain the business proper to theology” (2013, 236). He argues for acceptance of revelation as a possibility “but nothing more, since phenomenology cannot and therefore must not venture to make any decisions about the actuality of such a phenomenon—this is a question entirely beyond its scope. Phenomenology is to make decisions only about the type of phenomenality that would render this phenomenon thinkable. The question is to be formulated in this way: if that with which the third way of mystical theology deals in fact is revealed, how should the phenomenon be described, such that we do justice to its possibility?” (2002, 158).

Whether that which is manifested in revelation is worthy of belief is acknowledged by Marion as being beyond the scope of what phenomenology can provide: “*Here*, I am not broaching revelation in its theological pretension to the truth, something faith alone can dare to do. I am outlining it as a possibility—in fact the ultimate possibility, the paradox of paradoxes—of phenomenality, such that it is carried out in a possible saturated phenomenon. The hypothesis that there was historically no such revelation would change nothing in the phenomenological task of offering an account of the fact, itself incontestable, that it has been thinkable, discussible, and even describable. ... As for the relation that phenomenology, or rather a phenomenology still to be constructed, could maintain with the fact of Revelation, it is not fundamentally different from the relation that philosophy as such maintains with it” (2013, 5). Horner emphasizes that, on this topic, Marion proclaims himself to be a dispassionate observer; he “is not cataloging what others say is revelatory; on the contrary, he is asking us to contemplate that when someone bears witness to a revelatory phenomenon, it might actually be Revelatory” (2001, 157). Marion strives to present an understanding of revelation that is fully countenanced by phenomenology; however, I question whether Marion’s claim of relative disinterest in the truth to be found within revelation is disingenuous. As discussed above, his project of allowing phenomenology to

recognize revelation runs parallel to his project of allowing theology to find answers through phenomenology. In my reading of his body of work, he is by no means indifferent to that which he finds to be revealed.

Although Marion emphasizes that phenomena of revelation are merely possible, in his depiction of them they appear to be only *barely* possible—largely as a consequence of human finitude. He sees such phenomena as marking the “limit starting from which the phenomenon in general is not possible” (2000b, 176). Radically saturated phenomena of revelation result in an extreme excess of givenness, a blinding indeterminacy which *paradoxically* results in a *poverty* that inhibits one’s ability to name the source of givenness—a radical anonymity. For Marion, the “excess of intuition is accomplished in the form of stupor, or even of the terror that the incomprehensibility resulting from excess imposes on us” (2002, 161). Again, lack of comprehension is deemed to be inherent; Gschwandtner explains that for Marion “the problem is not that God is utterly transcendent or that the divine is not revealed to us, but rather that we are unable to grasp what is given” (2007, 176). A recipient of such revelations can have no cognition of the source thereof. They result in a “luminous darkness.” In this way, the plenitude of givenness appears as an overwhelming lack and is perceived in a state of blindness. Describing this manner of occurrence in extreme terms, Carlson observes that to think outside of Being “is finally no longer to think at all” (1999, 196).

In Marion’s view, one can name the source of the phenomena only after the fact. Carlson emphasizes the complete indeterminacy that Marion describes; even identification of the phenomenon as divine in origin occurs “always incompletely and provisionally, never comprehending nor defining the essence of that which calls. ...Operating according to the logic of the anonymous call, the phenomenon of revelation (unforeseeable according to quantity; unbearable according to quality; absolute according to relation; and incapable of being looked at according to modality) pushes the excess of givenness to an extreme of blinding indeterminacy

in which intuitive saturation can appear as intuitive poverty—a poverty that is essential to the call itself, a kind of weakness that bestows its power to provoke. ...In other words, if I were to know or to claim ahead of time that the call is the call of God—or Being, the other, or life, as Heidegger, Lévinas, and Michel Henry might argue, respectively—then I would be subjecting the call to the precedence of a constituting intention, forcing it to conform to my expectations, and to do this would be to ignore both the irreducible structure of passivity and delay implied by my birth and thus, on the other side, the unconditional poverty and anonymity of the call that gives such birth” (2008, 157).

While Marion emphasizes that a phenomenon that manifests God is impossible in the sense that it is impossible to conceptualize God; paradoxically such a phenomenon offers the possibility of a counter-experience of that impossibility. As he explains, “[t]he impossibility of assigning a concept to God thus stems from God’s very definition, namely that he admits of no concept. ... [T]his impossibility results directly from his infinity, taken as the hallmark of his incomprehensibility. [However,] the epistemic impossibility of the phenomenon of God (namely his incomprehensibility) is itself experienced as a counter-experience of God” (2007a, 23). He sees impossibility as a unique attribute of God, exclaiming that “*God, and God alone, lets himself be defined by impossibility as such*” (2007a, 25). He defines this attribute as radical impossibility, in fact, a “triple impossibility—impossibility with regard to intuition; impossibility with regard to concept; and impossibility, therefore, with regard to experiencing the slightest phenomenon” (24).

Marion describes one’s perception of the impossible as a *call* that is heard paradoxically in the subject’s own response; that which is given—the call—is a phenomenon that is “transcribed in visibility by way of the response” (2013, 287). By admitting that one is the intended recipient of a call and responding with the simple question “Me?” one becomes open to the manifestations appearing in revelation—and to the retention of revelation’s impact (288).

Such a response opens visibility and “lets the call speak.” Such a response is not a gaze of intentionality, in a manner recognized by Husserl, but implies some degree of affirmative action on the part of the recipient of the call. Marion explains:

As long as this call remains ... implicit, it will remain absolutely in vain, for it will never take place, so long as it has not been explicitly heard, recognized, admitted—so long as nothing will have happened. But what more is needed for “something to happen” or to have happened? First and almost uniquely, that the target of the proposition acknowledge having heard a call, that he admit that this call was indeed addressed to him, in short, that he assume unambiguously the role of he who knows himself subjected to a seduction—and therefore that he even silently utter this “Me?” which brings it about that “now, it is for me” and that it is necessary to decide if you want it or not. But as long as the target is unaware, can stay unaware, or wants to believe himself unaware of the attempt whose object he has become, every seductive enterprise will be null and void and won’t happen. (2013, 286)

Although it is not a condition to the receipt of givenness in every context that a response be made, for revelation, that appears to be the case. Marion writes in *Being Given*, “the decision to respond and hence to receive precedes the possibility of seeing, and hence of conceiving.” Carlson emphasizes this correlation by observing that “givenness in fact enters into visibility only through the response made by the *adonné* to the call of givenness; that response, then, is an indispensable pole of phenomenal givenness itself” (2008, 156). He interprets that response as an expression of faith: “[i]n order to see, the *adonné* can and must only decide to see. ... This decision to see, then, might be understood to fall squarely within the logic of a faith seeking understanding, which means that the possibility of phenomenology itself relies on a necessarily pre-phenomenological movement of faith” (161-62). As Kathryn Tanner describes it, “givenness gives itself to show itself but cannot show itself, fully at least, without an appropriate receiver of its manifesting of itself. ... [T]he call makes itself heard only in and through the return response—‘You mean me?’—of the one who thereby receives it; the call becomes audible only when it is acknowledged by the one who assumes the role for which it calls, in making a return response” (2008, 222-23).

This depiction of a call and a response strongly echoes the thinking of Lévinas, but it complicates—and possibly muddles—Marion’s overarching view of phenomena as being given irrespective of intentionality—in an inversion of intentionality. Any necessity for a response by the recipient in order for a call to be manifested implies reciprocity between the subject and the source of givenness. Yet, Marion’s carefully-described third reduction allows for passive perception of that which givenness manifests. In Tanner’s words, “[t]he reciprocity Marion tries to avoid in this fashion always reappears at another level down, so to speak” (2008, 223). Tanner, a theologian, believes that Marion goes too far in defining Revelation and depicting God with purely phenomenological parameters: “Marion refigures the character of phenomenological reduction according to givenness so that phenomenology itself—as a philosophical enterprise—can never be itself disrupted by Revelation, never come to its limit, never meet its match. Phenomenology, just because it has become such an apt instrument for describing a God beyond measure, becomes God’s measure” (205).

In my view, Marion is operating at the very boundaries of philosophy—and his willingness to do so raises several crucial questions. Should one consider as merely “radical” Marion’s trajectory of argument in which he expands phenomenology to recognize, first, phenomena for which intuition is unfulfilled, then second, phenomena which are saturated, then third, phenomena which are doubly saturated, and then ultimately, phenomena that are impossible (and possibly require faith as a condition to manifestation)? Is this radical phenomenology or is it the slippery slope to pseudo-phenomenology? Janicaud does indeed view it as the latter, as a “metaphysico-theological montage.” While Gschwandtner is not critical of Marion’s entire enterprise, she does believe that his phenomenological views are extreme and that the excess in religious experience that he describes should be “toned down” (2014, 185). She observes that thinkers such as Marion “focus exclusively on religious experience in its most excessive and extraordinary register. ... All are, so to speak, mountaintop encounters. Ordinary

humans rarely seem capable of experiencing them. ... Such phenomena are essentially not testable or repeatable and possibly not even particularly representative of genuine spiritual life” (183-84).³⁷

If one takes the components of Marion’s explanation of revelation and strips away faith-based pre-suppositions, one can re-characterize his project as a camouflaged exploration of *thinking impossibility*. After setting the stage for human consciousness to passively receive manifestations from outside of Being, Marion thoroughly diminishes expectations for what can be perceived by consciousness. The phenomenon of revelation is manifested through a complicated double-reversal of intentionality, where intentionality is first reversed by the initial passivity of the subject in the encounter, but reversed a second time by the requirement that the subject respond to the gift by deciding with conviction of belief to receive it—resulting in a call from the other that, according to Marion, is *heard in the subject’s own response*. Yet that which is heard is incomprehensible to such a degree that it is deemed by Marion to be impossible. The formation of language in consciousness—the act of signification—which attempts to express this impossibility is performed by the subject. What is actually given to the subject from outside of Being? It is not clear. Ultimately, all that the typical beneficiary of the gift may receive is an opportunity to ponder the thought of impossibility. Such an outcome would not be irrelevant to philosophy, but it would more resemble the projects of Caputo and Derrida than it would one that is comfortably within the parameters of phenomenology. As will be discussed in the following chapter, Caputo—based in large part on his reading of Derrida—finds immense relevance to philosophy in a proper understanding of how consciousness addresses impossibility.

³⁷ Gschwandtner argues instead for a phenomenology of liturgical practices in order to “allow the phenomenologist to appreciate and begin to understand the meaning of religious experiences and practices in a manner that deals with the actual experiences of religious communities instead of the rare and radical raptures of isolated individuals” (2014, 188).

However, Caputo does so in a project that opposes the fundamental premise of Marion's phenomenology: that impossibility is revealed by a divine Other through a gift.

In summary, I would argue that Marion's project insofar as it relates to revelation is largely reducible to thinking impossibility—unless it is merged with various theological pre-suppositions. As restated, Marion can be read as arguing for recognizing a state of consciousness in which failure of language occurs. Rather than being dismissed from further consideration by virtue of its somewhat paradoxical nature, such a failure of language could be seen as the foundation for how to think impossibility. The best rebuttal from advocates for Marion's expansion of phenomenology might be that my argument ignores Marion's premise that the very source of the phenomenon of revelation is a "self" that is separate from the subject and unlimited by the horizon of Being, a source that provides a call to the subject. In my view, such a rebuttal clearly demonstrates the theological underpinnings of Marion's phenomenology. If such theological pre-suppositions are necessary to articulate the parameters of Marion's project, perhaps Marion's project is—as his critics contend—a theological endeavor. Theological assumptions do not make Marion's conclusions unworthy of consideration; however, in my view, the existence of such assumptions could bring readers to properly categorize Marion's philosophical project as a faith-based phenomenology.

3.3 Language

Even if one accepts Marion's premise that philosophy may properly recognize the possibility of saturated phenomena such as revelation, one may nevertheless continue to explore the role of thought and language in experiencing such phenomena—when and if such phenomena are manifested. Saturated phenomena such as revelation are depicted by Marion as incomprehensible; and much of what is manifested is characterized as impossible. So what is it, precisely, that is being manifested to consciousness? Marion (like Lévinas and various advocates of mystical theological thinking) frequently acknowledges that language is inadequate to express

the excesses of givenness. He says that the excess of the saturated phenomenon “conquers comprehension and what language can say” (2002, 160). Indeed, the gift suffers from indeterminacy par excellence: it is indeterminate as to identity, source, and content—and, as we have seen, that which language must strive to signify potentially comes from outside of the horizons of Being. What can language say about *that*? Not only are words inadequate, but to further confound the possibility of signification, that which consciousness might attempt to put into words—and thoughts—is a phenomenon of impossibility. For Marion, the very thinking of God, as such, is impossible (2012, 45). The idea of God is, for Marion, not only unthinkable, but at the extremity of that which is unthinkable: “Concerning God, let us admit clearly that we can think him only under the figure of the unthinkable, but of an unthinkable that exceeds as much what we cannot think as what we can; for that which I may not think is still the concern of *my* thought, and hence to *me* remains thinkable” (2012, 46). He concludes that one must therefore renounce all presumed concepts of God and rigorously cling to the sense of incomprehensibility (2007a, 28).

Theology has wrestled with understanding God since pre-modern times—particularly through the writings of mystical theologians such as Meister Eckhart and Pseudo-Dionysius. One writer who sees an instructive parallel between Marion’s phenomenology and mystical theology is Horner; she sees in both the recognition that there is a “gap between thought and referent” that must unsettle the discourse of revelation (2001, 242-43). She explains that with respect to theology, revelation as to matters of divine origin is not always a gift that can be fully and unambiguously comprehended; rather, interpretation of whatever is given by intuition must occur. The hermeneutic work of theology must be done in order to assert meaning as an outcome of the phenomena that Marion describes as being incomprehensible. Horner agrees with Marion that to speak of God as gift is “to speak at the point of words’ failure” (242).

If language is, indeed, inadequate to signify revelation, I consider it highly relevant to pursue a correlative questioning of the functioning of consciousness in the experience of that revelation. Saturated phenomena, as with other manner of phenomena, are perceived when manifested to human consciousness. Consciousness exists within the horizons of Being—Marion does not posit the existence of a mind that is outside of modern concepts of consciousness. Rather, Marion asks: “how could givenness give a given without making it visible to..., therefore without addressing itself to some instance like a ‘consciousness’? The arising of the given makes it visible because the movement of appearing ends by bursting on the depthless surface of consciousness like the impact of the gift, which precipitates and bursts there” (2013, 69). Yet there remains a question for Marion as to the capability of consciousness to comprehend that which is given by intuition. For him, intuition “exceeds what the concept can receive, expose, and comprehend” (2002, 159). The call is received as a gift even as comprehension is wholly lacking. The incomprehensibility of doubly saturated phenomena such as divine revelation can be explained in large part by the inadequacy of language to express the impossible. Lévinas finds a similar complexity of religious experience and consciousness in his dichotomy of the saying and the said. Philosophers of language sometimes debate whether thought precedes signification through the formation of language or whether thought is, precisely, that signification. In some contexts, the outcome of that debate is of little consequence. But in the context of a theorized call by a divine Other for which language is inadequate, such a debate brings focus on some of the fundamental questions relating to phenomenology. In particular, it brings focus on uncertainty as to what *aspect* of intuition should be considered as the phenomenon. Can thought prior to signification be considered a phenomenon? Or should it be the experience of language-formation—an experience much like Lévinas’s concept of the saying?

Such analysis is further complicated by Marion’s contention that this inadequacy of consciousness is mitigated by the gift itself. Marion argues that the gift provides language to

respond to itself. He states this most explicitly in connection with divine revelation: “The Word is not said in any tongue. ...[God] in his Word, will speak our language and teach us in the end to speak it as he speaks it—divinely, which means to say in all abandon” (2012, 141-144). So the response of consciousness to the gift would not be one of comprehension, but rather would be one of acknowledgment. Marion explains, “The gifted does not have language or *logos* as its property, but it finds itself endowed with them—as gifts that are shown only if it regives them to their unknown origin. Thus, only the response performs the call, and the gifted renders visible and audible what gives itself to it only by corresponding to it in the act of responding, ‘Here I am’” (2013, 288). Carlson explains this relationship as follows: “language and logos are not properties of a subject but rather ‘gifts’ that can only be received (by a radically passive self) through the ‘response’ that makes them manifest” (1999, 202).

Marion describes a gift’s manifestation to consciousness in a manner that echoes Lévinas’s depiction of a call that occurs prior to original consciousness—prior to any constituting ego or Dasein. Marion writes that “intuition in its role as donation, always precedes the consciousness which we have of it retrospectively” (1997, 286). As he explains it: “[i]n effect, not only am I born as if from a call, but this call even precedes my birth, which constitutes only its first responsal. Before my birth, words were said around me and I heard them without understanding; even before my conception, words were exchanged by others, words ranging from joy to violence and from which I no doubt come. I therefore was said and spoken before being; I am born from a call that I neither made, wanted, nor even understood. Birth consists only in this excess of the call and in the delay of my *responsal*” (2013, 290). It must be said that this mystical depiction of the call is not a primary element of Marion’s thinking, though certainly grounded in his theology. In fairness to Marion, this entire concept of a gift that precedes birth could be put to the side when evaluating his philosophy—except for the fact that it functions to reinforce the paradoxical nature of saturated phenomena.

In short, the call and one's response to that call occur in a highly paradoxical experience/non-experience of the impossible that eludes language. In fact, as Marion explains in *Being Given*, one is born from a call that he or she has not even heard. This relation is well-described by Carlson, who notes the implications such a view has in connection with thought and language³⁸:

Radically preceding or exceeding the subject in its self-identity, an absolute giving or unconditional givenness would remain irreducible to the economy of that subject's Being—irreducible, that is, to the thought and language that would constitute the conditions of its experience. Marion thinks such a givenness in terms of the “call”—the theological call of the Father and the more indeterminate call of the phenomenon as such—that calls the “I” to be in such a way that the “I” cannot have been present to intend, constitute, master, or even receive the call. Before I am, the call calls me to be, and in this sense the call is given before Being. Radically preceded by a givenness that calls me to be, I am constituted through an originary and irreducible difference or delay between the call and my response to it. That difference prohibits my foreseeing the call so as to calculate it; it disallows my rendering it present in a presence so as to master or manipulate it; it forbids my inscribing it within conditions that would permit its repetition. In sum, the conditions of thought or language do not determine the givenness of the call, but rather the givenness of the call first brings about those conditions. The conditions of thought and language, then, are given to me through the provocation of that which ever exceeds them because it radically precedes them. (249-49)

Like Lévinas, Marion understands a call by the divine to be part of the awakening to consciousness of all humans. He emphasizes that one's “sole individuation or selfhood is found only in the facticity imposed on [him/her] by the word originally heard from the call” (2013, 271). He asserts that “no mortal has ever lived, even for an instant, without discovering himself preceded by a call already there. The paradigm of this irremediable facticity is found in the fact, always already arrived, of speech itself: for every mortal, the first word was always already

³⁸ In addressing the theological implications of the unknowability of God, Carlson writes, “There where God gives himself most fully or excessively, the created soul simply cannot find itself in the self-presence of its own thought or language—and thus the excess of God does finally exceed the distinction of presence and absence. Thought and language pertaining to the mystical unknowing of God, therefore, can only circle around that God in an endless proliferation that signals an insatiable—unknowing—desire” (1999, 254).

heard before he was able to pronounce it. Speaking always and first comes back to hearing passively a word coming from another, a word that is first and always incomprehensible, that announces no meaning or signification, unless to begin with the very alterity of the initiative, whose pure fact gives (itself to be thought) for the first time” (as translated by Carlson 1999, 228; Marion 2013, 270).

In my view, Marion’s concept of an originary call must itself be considered a Revelation (in his nomenclature, a designation with an upper case “r”) grounded in faith—rather than being an appropriate expansion of phenomenological thought. Phenomenology cannot provide support for an assertion that intuition initiated by a divine source calls consciousness to awaken. One can reasonably defend Marion’s phenomenological project by noting that in his philosophical writings he explicitly avoids making claims as to the credibility of faith-based beliefs. He argues consistently that revelation (with a lower case “r”) is merely *possible*. Yet one must question the utility of a concept for a category of phenomena that must *always* be a matter of faith, when it is asserted to have actually occurred. As a theoretical concept, a revelation requires no faith, but any actual purported occurrence of Revelation does require faith. In other words, revelation is a purely abstract concept—a phenomenon that never occurs—except when faith confirms its truth and meaning. How is this not, then, solely within the province of theology?

Perhaps a means of addressing valid concerns as to the phenomenological justification for phenomena of revelation would be to view such phenomena as experiences of language, rather than as manifestations of a divine Other that are conditioned on the subject’s faith. In so doing, one would acknowledge that *what offers itself originarily to us in intuition* and appears to be revelation is, in essence, a thought—in Husserl’s terminology, a noema—for which consciousness is attempting to find language. Possibly, this approach can most clearly be understood in its application to the impossible. Carlson sees in the manifestation of the impossible a gift that “generates thought, language, and desire precisely because it ever eludes

them” (1999, 229). I would argue that the experience of the impossible can *only* be an experience of language-formation. Certainly, Marion does not envision a gift being received by a dumbfounded recipient who makes no attempt to engage with that which is manifested. If one assumes engagement by a subject—and I would argue that Marion does assume engagement through the subject’s response—then the experience of an incomprehensible call that manifests impossibility must be understood as a striving within consciousness to signify that for which no adequate signifiers exist.³⁹ This will be further considered in Chapter 4, as I explore Caputo’s deconstructionist views with respect to the impossible.

3.4 Philosophy or Theology? (Part 2)

In Chapter 1, I explained that in my reading of the works of Marion and Lévinas I would explore phenomenology’s treatment of language in the context of religious experience. I find that Marion, like Lévinas, offers expansions of phenomenology that are relevant to my exploration; yet, his expansions of philosophy almost certainly stray into the realm of theology. When evaluating the French phenomenological movement for which Marion and Lévinas are known, commentators have sometimes treated the works of Marion and Lévinas as if they were essentially the same in their phenomenological perspectives. To a limited extent that is a fair assessment. Janicaud claims that throughout Lévinas’s writings, “faith rises majestically in the background” (2000, 27). Such an assessment could well apply to Marion, as well; Marion makes no secret of the manner in which he would apply his phenomenological perspectives to Christian theology. For both Marion and Lévinas, matters of theological concern are addressed through arguments couched in philosophical terms. Both depict a means through phenomenology for

³⁹ Concerns with respect to the adequacy of language are viewed differently by Derrida, who finds there to be a “desertification of language” in certain fundamental questions of God, rather than phenomena that exceed language (1995, 56). Both Marion and Derrida find the need to explore what is “at the “edge of language,” but from the standpoint of deconstruction the implications are different (60).

things and ideas that originate outside of Being to be manifested to humans—each, disregarding views to the contrary inherent in the writings of Husserl and Heidegger. Janicaud depicts this entire French phenomenological movement as a “maximalist conception of phenomenology” (2005, 6) and argues for a return to a more minimalist phenomenology (80). His stated goal is to “prevent immanence from becoming reduced to a mere pretext or a detour of transcendence” (80), a goal that embodies his objection to a common theme in the works of Marion and Lévinas: that phenomenology is capable recognizing more than Husserlian intentionality would manifest to consciousness.

One might say that the ramifications of Marion’s and Lévinas’s thinking are sufficiently similar to let thinkers such as Janicaud focus on perceived common shortcomings in their logic. Indeed, for proponents of classical phenomenology—or for philosophers (such as Derrida and Caputo) who are relatively indifferent to phenomenology—the thinking of Marion and Lévinas has many obvious commonalities. However, it is important to recognize that even if certain important conclusions reached by Marion and Lévinas appear to be similar, the arguments by which they arrive at those conclusions are not the same. As discussed in the preceding chapter, Lévinas attempts to expand phenomenology by eliminating any horizon that excludes that which is outside of Being—without any significant attempt to justify that expansion through logical argument or through reliance on alternative readings of existing texts by other modern philosophers. By contrast, Marion’s project is a detailed reading of the works of Husserl and Heidegger with the goal of providing what Marion terms an “inevitable” expansion of phenomenology.

How have Marion’s readings of the works of phenomenology’s essential works been received? I would argue that his readings of Husserl and Heidegger are widely considered by the community of philosophers as misreadings, as overstatements, as hyperbole. For example, Derrida argues that Marion is not even practicing phenomenology in his efforts: “[H]e cannot

practice any phenomenology without at least keeping some axioms of what is called phenomenology” (1999b, 60). Janicaud presents the overarching objection that a saturated phenomenon, which is *defined* as being outside of all the classical conditions of phenomenology, cannot possibly be considered a phenomenon (2005, 43). Gschwandtner in *Reading Jean-Luc Marion*, identifies a number of readers of Marion who believe that his ultimate conclusions regarding givenness are not supportable by any rigorously developed expansion of phenomenology. She quotes even Lévinas as questioning the possibility of a real phenomenology that posits no horizon whatsoever (68). She also identifies a thread of criticism from writers such as Ruud Welten, Bruce Benson, and Natalie Depraz—all of whom have given considerable attention to the arguments made by Marion that recognize doubly saturated phenomena by means of a third reduction of givenness. Each concludes (though with different degrees of respect for Marion’s project as a whole) that reliance on Marion’s conclusions, to the extent the reliance is based on Marion’s analysis of Husserl and Heidegger, is unfounded (68-79).

Other writers are more accepting of Marion’s project, viewing it as precisely what Marion claims to intend: an expansion of phenomenology that allows for the possibility of phenomena that are, in fact, manifested to consciousness, but do not otherwise meet the requirements of classical phenomenology. Horner argues that “it is very difficult to prove that what Marion is doing is not phenomenology but working at the point of phenomenology’s failure. ... The breakdown of classical phenomenology occurs at the point where what is given exceeds conscious thematization, and we see this in a negative way thanks to Janicaud, because he indicates that any decisive reading of what surpasses intelligibility requires a leap of faith. ... We observe the breakdown more positively in the work of Lévinas, where ... the leap of faith is recognized without our having to commit to it. ... Marion’s thinking of saturated phenomena provides him with an opportunity to describe the conditions surrounding what interrupts or

exceeds consciousness, without his having to take the next step of committing to an interpretation of that interruption” (2001, 158-159).

To return to the basic question I posed in Chapter 1, how does Marion’s project advance philosophy’s understanding of religious experience? If Marion’s project can be understood as an attempt to describe the conditions surrounding what interrupts or exceeds consciousness, then I would contend that we cannot dismiss his project out of hand simply because phenomenology has traditionally refused to consider the possibility of intuition that exceeds consciousness. Are his arguments therefore situated at the limits of phenomenology or have they passed beyond the limits of phenomenology? Derrida, Janicaud, and others cited above assert that Marion’s conclusions have passed beyond the limits of phenomenology. If that is the case, are his conclusions beyond the limits of philosophy, generally? I would argue that they are not beyond the limits of what philosophy should undertake to consider. Marion’s project fundamentally concerns the possibility of intuition exceeding what can be fulfilled in consciousness. Such a concern is not nonsense; nor is it a return to discredited, pre-modern metaphysical inquiries. As I will discuss further in the following chapters, philosophy’s exploration of Marion’s ideas can potentially be advanced through a recognition of the potential of language-formation to exceed or disrupt the capabilities of consciousness. There, we shall see whether a reasonable argument can be made that experiences of language-formation are embodied in religious experience. In short, Marion’s project, whether or not it can be categorized as rigorous phenomenology, provides a contribution to philosophy’s efforts to understand and properly depict religious experience. My next chapter will consider another perspective that largely avoids the theological entanglements we encountered in Marion’s project. While Marion finds answers in phenomenology, Caputo looks to deconstructionist thought that explores the uncertainties inherent in any philosophical project grounded in faith.

CHAPTER 4

JOHN D. CAPUTO: RADICAL HERMENEUTICS

I talk to God, but the sky is empty.

Sylvia Plath, *The Unabridged Journals of Sylvia Plath*

As we have seen in the prior two chapters, Lévinas and Marion found support in phenomenology for contemporary philosophy to consider and depict human experience of the divine. In my exploration of their works, I found support for the possibility that a phenomenon in which the divine is manifested can be understood, at least in part, as an experience of language within human consciousness. While I believe that my analysis of their views does not overstate their positions on the role of language-formation in dealing with that which is beyond Being or other than Being, it would be fair to say that Lévinas and Marion do not look to hermeneutics as primary support for their arguments—or even as a significant source of clarity. I will explore in this chapter whether a phenomenology informed by deconstruction better accounts for religious experience that is—or approaches—incomprehensibility. I will consider whether claims that an experience of God is “beyond words” opens the door to a hermeneutic approach to understanding what is manifested when language struggles. The work of John D. Caputo addresses these concerns often in response to the God talk of adherents of new phenomenology. I hope to integrate the thinking of Caputo with that of Lévinas and Marion in order to demonstrate that hermeneutics and, in particular, the perspective of deconstruction, offer support for an understanding of phenomenology that would recognize experiences of language as being within phenomenology’s purview.

My interest in the possibility of an intersection between phenomenological perspectives and deconstruction is not unprecedented. Derrida expressed great respect for Lévinas and found wisdom in Lévinas’s views on ethics. In *Adieu*, the transcript of a speech delivered at Lévinas’s

funeral, Derrida credited him with changing the “landscape without landscape of thought” (1999, 11). Conversely, Lévinas took interest in the thinking of Derrida. In fact, Bernasconi and Critchley concluded that Lévinas’s book *Otherwise than Being* was influenced by a careful reading and assimilation of Derrida’s essay “Violence and Metaphysics” (1991, xiii). Marion and Derrida were also acquainted and had the opportunity on various occasions to engage in debates with each other on their differing ideas with respect to human perception of the divine and, in certain circumstances, to find commonalities in their perspectives.⁴⁰

There has been great interest in—but not universal acceptance of—the conclusions of Lévinas, Marion, and their followers shown by U.S. philosophers and theologians. Certainly, debates as to the premises of new phenomenology have resulted in passionate conversations among philosophers of religion. Caputo has played a pivotal role in the collaborative exploration by U.S. philosophers and theologians of the views of Derrida, Lévinas, and Marion; many such debates allowed less-established voices to be heard. Caputo is a prolific writer as well as a leader in organizing academic conferences at Syracuse University and Villanova University at which recognized philosophers and theologians from the United States and Europe presented papers and engaged in thoughtful debate about topics highly relevant to both religion and philosophy.⁴¹

In many of these debates, participants acknowledged that phenomenology’s perspectives are sometimes relevant to thinkers who work within the field of hermeneutics. In particular, phenomenology and hermeneutics share a mutual interest in the way in which consciousness

⁴⁰ Two such encounters are transcribed in the books *Questioning God* and *God, the Gift and Postmodernism*.

⁴¹ Gschwandtner observed: “At least as influential as his writing has been Caputo’s organizing of many events, interviews, and roundtables highlighting and celebrating postmodern thought, especially that of Derrida. He has been instrumental in getting such thinkers as Marion, Chrétien, Lacoste, and others translated and known in the American world. The biannual conferences on “Religion and Postmodernism” at Villanova and the Syracuse conferences on “Postmodernism, Culture, and Religion” have been central events at which important debates ... served as impetus for further thinking and have contributed immensely to popularize the work of the [contemporary philosophers addressing these topics]” (2013, 243)

strives to apprehend aporiae and to think that which is beyond or outside of language. Caputo's writings have delved into such aporiae at length and, to that end, have employed deconstruction as a tool to address modern philosophy's questions regarding the ethical consequences of nihilism. He finds common cause with Lévinas and Marion in some respects, but Caputo is no phenomenologist. He labels himself a practitioner of hermeneutics—in fact a *radical* hermeneutics. Like Lévinas, he finds contemporary philosophy of religion to be largely an ethical project. And like Marion, he finds the concept of the gift to be a necessary component to the understanding of the human condition. However, unlike Lévinas and Marion, he does not presume the existence of a divine Other—in fact, the “call” depicted in Caputo's writings reflects an experience of language resulting from the *non-existence* of a divine Other. Indeed, his philosophy and theology is founded upon an essentially Nietzschean view that there is no supreme being that corresponds to the definition of God found in Western religion. In describing the relevance of deconstruction to religion, he frequently quotes the acknowledgment that Derrida made in *Circumfession* that, all things considered, Derrida could “rightly pass for an atheist” (1993, 155). Caputo does not make the same claim for himself, and perhaps for Caputo such a claim would be an overstatement. Caputo has a passion for religion that is at odds with the thinking of most contemporary philosophers who deny the existence of God.

Two of Caputo's books, in particular, *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida* and *On Religion*, advocate for the practice of a “religion without Religion.” Caputo attributes this seemingly paradoxical formulation to Derrida, but enthusiastically adopts it as a foundation of his theological premise that religious practice cannot be based upon “truths” that are presumed to come from a divine source. For Caputo, religion without Religion is a practice “which is informed by the general and translatable structure of the religious without taking up the determinate content of any of the specific religious translations or ‘denominations’” (1999, 198). This view clearly places him at odds with Marion's conviction that divine revelation is a

possibility for humankind, but aligns his thinking more than he explicitly acknowledges with Marion's underlying phenomenological explanations of the call. In this chapter I will endeavor to demonstrate the similarities between Caputo's hermeneutic understanding of religious experience and Marion's (and to a lesser degree, Lévinas's) phenomenological perspectives. I will also note similarities in the ethical underpinnings of Caputo's and Lévinas's conclusions; each, in his own way, seeks to find a source for ethics in a world in which God is absent.

Caputo's project is one in which perspectives of Nietzsche regarding the death of God are countered by deconstruction. Deconstruction can incorporate "religiosity" into the human experience of joy and suffering, without the dogma of religious faith and without the concrete belief system of Western religion that Nietzsche sought to debunk. Like Nietzsche, Caputo is little interested in phenomenology. In Caputo's view, deconstruction is fundamentally inhospitable to phenomenology because it questions the possibility of pure, pre-linguistic experience and perception (1997, 15).⁴² For Caputo (and to a large extent, for Heidegger, as well), Husserl's claims regarding the *things themselves* are claims "made within and by means of the resources of certain semi-systems, linguistic and otherwise, situated within the framework of a complex set of contextual presuppositions which can never be saturated. There are no things themselves outside these textual and contextual limits, no naked contact with being which somehow shakes loose of the coded system which makes notions like the 'things themselves' possible to begin with and which enables speakers to refer to them" (1997, 17). Nevertheless in his later writings, Caputo refers to his style of hermeneutics as hermeneutic phenomenology (2006b, 117), because in the experience of deconstruction, a call is perceived by consciousness. Caputo does not criticize the use of the word "experience" to depict what is unfolding—what is happening—in one's linguistic struggle. Rather, he wants clarity that the experience is not one

⁴² Yet Caputo does not deny that phenomenology offers a means to understand possible human experience of God: "Any phenomenology that does not include God, which names our desire beyond desire ... would be an incomplete, imperfect phenomenology" (2002, 176).

from classical phenomenology where one is able to perceive a fully-formed thing-in-itself. One must first bring words to what is happening.

Through deconstruction, Caputo seeks to save religion—much as Derrida attempted in *Sauf le nom* to save the “name” of God. Caputo’s is a curious project, in that he renounces much of the traditions of religion in the very passages in which he affirms his passion for the mysteries inherent in religious struggles. He values religion, recasting its practice into a form unrecognizable to some, but no doubt inspirational to others; his vision of religion is one that, like deconstruction, proceeds not by knowledge, but by passion and faith (1997, xxvi). Caputo is a Roman Catholic philosopher/theologian struggling with the fundamental premises of Friedrich Nietzsche. He is unabashedly Catholic at heart and acknowledges that he “make[s] no bones about having broadly biblical and specifically Christian concerns” (2013, 128). The passion which he exhibits in his writings for the sacred texts and religious practices that he questions is noteworthy for its intensity and paradoxical nature, given his unwavering criticism of dogma that is central to Roman Catholicism as well as other Western religions. He finds in deconstruction a means for the practice of religion to exist free of dogma. This he refers to as “religion without Religion” crediting Derrida for the phrase and inspiration.

A central theme in this religion without Religion is Caputo’s criticism of all religious authority and his rejection of “truths” promoted by Roman Catholics and the fundamentalist Christian denominations—including faith-based claims of revelation with regard to the nature of God. He finds in Christianity (and in what Derrida refers to as other “determinable” faiths) a “dangerous absolutism” because its adherents forget that such religions are founded on faith and not knowledge (1997, 47). For this reason, he criticizes believers in Biblical inerrancy, charging that they have been endowed with “‘immunity’ to the modern world” (153). Even so, he finds in the Bible and in the writings of Christian mystics much to consider from a hermeneutic perspective. Although the authors of sacred texts were not “handpicked to be Being’s or God’s

mouthpiece” (2006b, 12), such texts provide a rich source for deconstruction—and constitute the inspiration for much of his philosophy. Caputo’s writings are filled with words of passion for an unknowable God similar in some respects to expressions of awe and astonishment found in mystical theology.

Caputo finds in Derrida a fellow traveler in his theological journey. Like Derrida, Caputo shares an abiding interest in the writings and perspectives of mystical theologians such as Meister Eckhart and Aurelius Augustinus. They both also share a conviction that deconstruction of religious texts, icons, and traditions does not question the possibility of finding relevance in a religious quest for truth about the divine. On the contrary, for them, deconstruction provides opportunities to explore potential truths within the *name* of God. In this chapter, I will explore the insights that Caputo gleaned from deconstruction and evaluate the way in which he applies those insights to religious practice. Although not central to his project, his conclusions regarding the role of language in shaping religious experience has, in my view, relevance in phenomenology. I will begin by describing the way in which he adopts—and adapts—the thinking of certain Christian mystics regarding their inability to comprehend the nature of God; then I will describe the way in which he relies upon Derrida to provide a hermeneutic treatment of those difficult and paradoxical ideas. After that, I will explore in some detail Caputo’s use of deconstruction in framing his brand of radical hermeneutics, an approach that integrates the endeavors of hermeneutics with the workings of consciousness. Ultimately, in this chapter I will explore whether philosophy can properly countenance the concept of faith—in the context presented by Caputo as an outgrowth of one’s experience of language. If he can be seen as properly employing deconstruction in his explications on religious experience, then perhaps the insights he provides complement those provided by phenomenology. With these possibilities in mind, I will consider the writings of Derrida alongside those of Caputo and lay the groundwork for an argument that phenomena that are arguably of a divine origin can best be understood

through a hermeneutic analysis that recognizes the role of language-formation in human perception of the divine.

4.1 Philosophical Influences

What are Caputo's fundamental views with respect the possibility of human perception of God? Caputo largely shares the modern philosophical conclusion that an all-powerful God as understood by Western religions simply does not exist (2001a, 20). He is sometimes coy in his writings about humankind's ability to interact with the God of Western religion through prayer and otherwise. Yet he is also occasionally blunt: "God is neither a supreme being nor being itself, neither ontic nor ontological, neither the cause of beings nor the ground of being" (2006b, 9). Like Nietzsche, Caputo understands that the absence of belief in a divine God who watches over us has consequences. In fact, he considers Nietzsche to be the thinker who most lucidly depicted the consequences of "the loss of a heavenly guide, of being set adrift in a cold, merciless cosmos that cares not a whit for our well-being" (1993, 49). He found in Nietzsche's perspective a "merciless" way of viewing the cosmos, a pre-Socratic "vision of war ..., where the endless strife of things, the incessant going over and going under, strikes an overall balance" (2000, 242). Though frightening for Caputo, there is a "ring of truth" in Nietzsche's "cold, merciless truth" (244).

Even though clearly influenced by Nietzsche, Caputo does not situate his thinking firmly inside or outside Nietzsche's philosophy. He acknowledges a love for Nietzsche, but "cannot muster the lionhearted, macho courage required by Nietzsche's cold cosmic truthfulness" (1993, 233). He objects to the excesses of Nietzsche's (and Heidegger's) "Greco-German bombast" (1993, 54) which Caputo finds to show disdain for the joys and sorrows of ordinary people. Caputo's project is not one which endeavors to "rehabilitate" Nietzsche by somehow softening Nietzsche's criticism of Christianity or finding in Nietzsche's view of truth a "source of emancipation." Indeed, he finds Nietzsche's depiction of the cosmic insignificance of humankind

in the essay “On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense” (1999, 79) a “haunting specter” and not necessarily truth (2002, 156).⁴³ Again, while not dismissing Nietzsche’s idea of the physical world as an abyss over which we “cast interpretations,” Caputo favors a “more benign or warmer interpretation of human existence” (156).

However, like Nietzsche, Caputo finds a need for philosophy to address the implications of nihilism. In a modern world without religion, nihilism is, for many thinkers, a feared consequence. Nietzsche foresaw this philosophical and theological dilemma and sought to find values in the absence of religion. Although “scandalized” by Nietzsche (1993, 84), Caputo seems to find legitimacy in Nietzsche’s observations regarding the potential in modernity of “revaluing all values.” He also found in Nietzsche’s thinking a legitimate challenge to the modernist critique of reason and its application to religion (2001a, 63). He acknowledges that a questioning of values can understandably arise when one “has been uprooted, cut off from things which speak for themselves, and forced to prove the existence and binding power of values, even as he is forced to prove the existence of the external world” (1987, 245). Yet he is not satisfied with Nietzsche’s “hard values” and rejection of all facets of the Christian religion. Caputo, too, seeks to counter nihilism (1997, 57); however, his answer to Nietzsche is to salvage religion, to offer a postmodern religious practice that does not depend on traditional religious belief systems. In his thinking he strives to avoid the “old modernist reductionistic metanarratives inherited from Freud, Marx, or Nietzsche” (2006b, 119). For him they do not adequately address the human condition as we find it; faith as such, he argues, need not be discarded in today’s world.

To balance the “cold, merciless truth” offered by Nietzsche, Caputo offers “cold hermeneutics” that renounce “Truth”—with capitalization to designate an elevated stature—and,

⁴³ Nietzsche wrote: “Once upon a time, in some out of the way corner of that universe which is dispersed into numberless twinkling solar systems, there was a star upon which clever beasts invented knowing. After nature had drawn a few breaths, the star cooled and congealed, and the clever beast had to die” (1999, 79).

therefore, seeks truth that does not have to be “attenuated, veiled, sweetened, blunted and falsified” (1987, 189).⁴⁴ By keeping company with Nietzsche, Caputo has subjected himself to criticism from the theological community. Conor Cunningham, in a book that offers a counterargument to the assumed dangers of nihilism, lists Caputo among contemporary philosophers who are nihilists and that offer a “god” that is not divine (2002, 245). As will be discussed below, Caputo’s hermeneutic project does not portray a divine Other as the source and object of religious faith—in that observation, Cunningham is generally accurate—however, Caputo denies that his style of radical hermeneutics provides “an exercise in nihilism” (1987, 6). In particular, Caputo does not proclaim that God is “dead” and therefore unworthy of further consideration in philosophy. His hermeneutic exploration of religion, rather, is centered on achieving an understanding of what is to be found within the *name* of God. In this undertaking he finds inspiration in the writings of Christian mystics such as Eckhart and Augustine, acknowledging that the complexity of his concerns forces him to “slip back and forth” between the belief systems of Augustine and Nietzsche (1987, 288).

Taken as a whole, Caputo’s writings acknowledge, but do not directly challenge, Nietzsche’s conclusions with respect to the human condition. When battling Nietzsche, Caputo is restrained in his criticism. Clearly, Caputo considers thought-provoking questions derived from decades of thought and research: is our place in the postmodern world reduced to a struggle with the cold truth of nihilism? Is Nietzsche right or is he wrong in his ridicule of the efficacy of prayer? Is there nothing outside of the physical world that affects humankind? It is not difficult to surmise where Caputo stands on these questions, but he generally frames his positions without reference to contrary positions made famous by Nietzsche with regard to truth and ethics. In framing his arguments with regard to these issues, Caputo considers virtually the entire canon of

⁴⁴ Caputo is excerpting language from Nietzsche’s assertion in *Beyond Good and Evil* that unvarnished truth can be dangerous (68).

Western philosophy; however, as noted above, his project finds particular relevance in the writings of Christian mystics and of Derrida—a compelling juxtaposition of views, given the fervor of the former and the indifference of the latter with respect to matters of Christian faith.

4.1.1 Apophatic Questions of Mystic Christianity

In much of his writing, Caputo embraces and adopts the idiom of negative theology, an idiom found in the apophatic texts of Eckhart and Augustine. He follows Derrida’s lead in finding relevance there to deconstructionist thought and, ultimately, finds religious perspectives there that underlie the paradoxes of religion without Religion and even of God without God. In both Augustine and Eckhart, he sees devout men who nevertheless question the traditions of the Roman Catholic faith, men who dare to ask complex, open-ended questions. Yet Caputo does not look to Augustine for answers as to the nature of God, nor does he look to Eckhart for answers as to adequacy of language to express desire for God. He finds the questions themselves to be symptomatic of aporiae that shape the human condition, finding in their passionate writings an example of how one may face a Nietzschean world that provides few clear answers to ethical questions. His brand of radical hermeneutics has to do with “keeping the difficulty of life alive and with keeping its distance from the easy assurances of metaphysics and the consolations of philosophy” (1987, 3). Apophatic theology provides Caputo with defining questions that he finds to be emblematic of the uncertainties that humankind faces.

Apophatic theology, sometimes known as negative theology, seeks to describe God through negation. Implicit in that manner of thinking is the belief that God cannot be described because God is transcendent and beyond Being. Commonly, this style of hyperbolic language strays between objectively negative assertions (e.g., God is not a created thing) and words that depict abundant excess (e.g., God is greater than one can think). In either variation, apophatic language is a source of interest to deconstructionist thinkers. Derrida observes that

deconstruction shares a passion for the discourse that hyperbole in such texts provokes (1995, 64).

Eckhart's writings are among the apophatic Christian texts that Caputo most frequently quotes. He often parses Eckhart's writings both for the plain meaning there, but also to consider ways in which Eckhart finds underlying truths that are contained in earlier sacred texts. He finds in Eckhart's writings a "great late medieval deconstructive practice," in that Eckhart's sermons display "an acute sense of the 'textuality,' the interdependence and differential structure of the terms of scholastic discourse"—an understanding of the "contingency of the signifiers we deploy" (2000, 254-55). Caputo describes Eckhart's thinking as the "protohistory of hermeneutics" (1987, 3), naming him as "one of the great masters of disruption, of thinking through and thinking against the grain of everyday conceptions" (268).

Eckhart was a thirteenth-century German Dominican monk who was ultimately charged with heresy. His work was rediscovered in the nineteenth century, and he is sometimes credited with being the father of German idealism (*Meister Eckhart: a Modern Translation*, xiii). His sermons and writings explored the unity of God and humankind in a manner largely at odds with the Roman Catholic thinking of his contemporaries, proclaiming in one of his sermons, "In bursting forth, however, when I shall be free within God's will and free, therefore of the will of god, and all his works, and even of god himself, then I shall rise above all creature kind, and I shall be neither god nor creature, but I shall be what I was once, now, and forevermore. . . ., for in bursting forth I discover that God and I are One" (1941, 231-32). His mystical view of the relationship between God and mortals depicted a tension between the divine power of God and the divinity that Eckhart found to exist in humankind. That view prompted a sermon in which Eckhart offered this prayer: "I pray God that he may make me free of 'God'" (1981, 202)⁴⁵.

⁴⁵ Eckhart continues: "for my real being is above God if we take 'God' to be the beginning of created things. For in the same being of God where God is above being and above distinction,

Caputo seizes upon this prayer and quotes it frequently in his works as an exemplar of human perplexity. He characterizes these words as “language without language about a God without God,” interpreting the phrase as a passionate plea that recognizes not only the inadequacy of language to depict God, but also the possibility of a mystical experience of language. He finds there “the attempt of language to efface its own trace and this in the name of an ineffaceable desire” (2000, 250). In a similar way, Caputo describes Eckhart’s view of language’s inadequacy: “What you say God is, is not true, ... but what you do not say God is, that is true” (2000, 30).

Whether or not Caputo’s explication on the underlying meaning in Eckhart’s plea to make him free of God precisely matches Eckhart’s intentions when delivering the sermon, this much is clear: Eckhart’s words inspire Caputo and function for him as a prototype postmodern prayer. Caputo asks: “When Meister Eckhart prays God to rid him of God, is that not ... the most remarkable way to speak of god, the most felicitous way to speak of not speaking of God? And is not ‘God’ here the name of what we desire beyond desire?” (2000, 251). As we shall see, Caputo finds consideration of the *name* of God to be a relevant topic for discussion, even if one is prepared to abandon virtually all understandings of the nature of God-*as-entity* promulgated in Western religion. In this sense, Caputo finds in Eckhart’s prayer an example of a passionate, religious outpouring that, nevertheless, questions traditional beliefs about God.⁴⁶

there I myself was, there I willed myself and committed myself to create this man. Therefore I am the cause of myself in the order of my being, which is eternal...” (1941, 202).

⁴⁶ In his evaluation of Caputo’s reading of Eckhart, Cunningham offers a slightly different view, reading Eckhart’s question as a suggestion that “we have God without God” (2002, 260). He finds in Eckhart’s writings a conversation between theology and nihilism—but without the philosophical conclusions one might draw from Nietzsche. For Cunningham, nihilism endeavors for nothing to be *as* something. The idea of nihilism for Cunningham is not a cold, merciless truth. It is a different perspective on Being: “being is after all nothing *as* something although in a manner beyond nihilism’s imaginings” (265). Cunningham contends that Eckhart supported a view that God may be considered a “God of nihilism” (260), when Eckhart said, “You should love him as he is a non-God, a nonspirit, a nonperson, a nonimage, but as he is a pure, unmixed, bright “One,” separated from all duality; and in that One we should eternally sink down, out of

In Eckhart, Caputo finds an early witness to the inadequacy of language used to describe God. However, in his reading of Augustine, he finds a mystic who offers a sincere questioning of not just language, but the very functioning of the word “God” as a name. Augustine was a fourth-century bishop of Catholic North Africa who wrote the *Confessions*, a series of poetic, reflective prayers. Augustine asked in Book Ten of the *Confessions*, “What is it that I love when I love my God?” (195). Caputo does not look to Augustine for the answer to that question; rather, he finds it to be a question without an answer, a “paradigmatic” question for deconstruction (2001b, 307). The underlying quandary posed by the question is the indeterminacy of what the *name* of God signifies. He sees the name itself as a name that “throws everything into bottomless questionability” (2000, 263). Caputo does not write about the nature of a divine Other which Western religion names God; his views do not assume the existence of any such Other. However, he finds relevance to philosophy and theology in a clearer understanding of the name of God. He argues that the name functions as the name of what we love and desire: “the name of God is the name of whatever it is, beyond name and God, beyond language and silence, that I desire. The name of God is the name, not of some transcendental signified beyond language, but the name of what language most deeply loves and affirms, dreams and desires” (2000, 258). Accordingly, he paraphrases Augustine’s question as, “What do I desire and love when I love and desire God?” (2000, 264). For Caputo, the name of God does not signify God, but rather the name of human desire for God. It functions as the name of what humans love and desire (2001b, 300). Augustine’s question for Caputo, then, is entangled with our questioning of who *we* are (2001a, 27).

‘something’ into ‘nothing’” (1941, 208). Cunningham and Caputo do not appear to share a common perspective on the consequences to theology of nihilism, but they both find inspiration in the dilemma posed by Eckhart. For Cunningham, “approaching God as non-God” is a means for manifesting the ultimacy of love and eschewing ontotheology (265).

Graham Ward believes that Augustine's discourse does not presume that an answer can be given; the question constitutes a prayer. He explains that the question "does not seek knowledge, as such, to assuage the pain of a privation (ignorance). It is a response internal to a relationship already established.... It is a response invoking meditation, the movement beyond things seen into things mysterious, concealed, into *theoria*" (2001b, 275-76). Caputo doesn't appear to disagree. He is inspired by these words of Augustine, but does not claim that his views reflect an Augustinian perspective. Ward emphasizes that they do not, contrasting the views of Caputo and Derrida with those of Augustine: "Augustine and Derrida both argue for a necessary suspension of judgment in favor of an ungraspable excess and an openness to what has yet to come but is in the process of arriving. But Augustine's questions both structure the hope of final, eschatological judgment and participate, by that structuring, in the realization and arrival of that hope. The questioning is a movement in relation to the Good, the Just, the Beautiful and the True. Derrida's questioning is a 'movement' in the continual expansion of aporia itself: promise, hope, the yes hover as never-to-be-realized, but nevertheless necessary, regulative ideals. The hope can never be enjoyed, as such, and the aporetic—with its tyrannous demand for infinite responsibility—can only be endured" (285).

Derrida's and Caputo's portrayal of a "yes" as an ideal never to be realized offers us a link between Christian mysticism and deconstruction. For Caputo, this likewise constitutes a link with a contemporary understanding of prayer. He finds deconstruction and mysticism to be united in "their common structure as *prayer*, a prayer for something unimaginable, inconceivable, *impossible*" (2000, 250). From this perspective, mystical apophatic discourse attempts through language to efface language and, in so doing, addresses through words—or silence—a divine Other that words cannot describe. Such language is the language of desire for and affirmation of the *tout autre* (251). Accordingly, the aporia of mysticism forms for us an experience of deconstruction; Caputo claims that it "speaks on behalf of" textuality and

différance (251). He acknowledges, however, that an important difference between deconstruction and mysticism is that, for deconstruction, the prayer remains indeterminate (252). In deconstruction, the “target” of prayer—if one accepts the depiction of the experience as described by Caputo—is not an ungraspable, divine other, but instead, something wholly indeterminate and impossible.

In addressing such aporetic experiences, Caputo finds a striking mirroring opposition between the idiom of mystical theology and that of deconstruction. Apophatic depictions of God tend toward the hyperbolic, depicting abundant excess, while the subject matter of deconstruction is often grounded in the ineffability of Plato’s *khôra* (1997, 10).⁴⁷ Caputo explains that negative theology “is always on the track of a ‘hyperessentiality,’ of something hyper-present, hyper-real or sur-real, so really real that we are never satisfied simply to say that it is merely real. *Différance*, on the other hand, is less than real, not quite real, never gets as far as being or entity or presence” (2). This concept of *différance* is complicated and often misunderstood (and maligned) in hermeneutic circles. Caputo describes it as a quasi-transcendental anteriority—as the condition under which words and concepts are formed in the first place (8), as something that can be understood as the “‘space’ between signifiers” (2000, 96).

There is no question that Caputo finds Eckhart and Augustine to be sources of wisdom that allow contemporary thinkers to grasp difficult concepts of deconstruction. He has quoted them in many of his works in support of the premise that theology and deconstruction have

⁴⁷ Caputo contrasts this Greek perspective with that which Lévinas found in the philosophy of Plato: “If Lévinas thinks to find a Greek echo of a very theological *tout autre* in the *epekeina tes ousias*, Derrida, seeks out an alternate, outlying, atheological, desert site in *khôra*. The otherness of the *khôra*— the ‘barren, radically nonhuman, and atheological character of this “place”’—is something ‘irreducibly other,’ and in ‘a certain manner’ it is ‘wholly other.’ But this *tout autre* does not go under the name of God, is not an event or promise or gift, and has nothing to do with negative theology” (1997, 37).

common aporiae, even if they fundamentally differ on their perceptions of God. He explains the commonality as one of shared passion for the impossible: “Deconstruction desires what negative theology desires and it shares the passion of negative theology—for the impossible. ...The difference is that in negative theology the *tout autre* always goes under the name of God, and that which calls forth speech is called “God,” whereas for Derrida every other is wholly other (*tout autre est tout autre*)” (1997, 3-4). To be clear, Caputo does not find answers, as such, in mystical theology. Truth about God—secret knowledge—is sometimes implied within the writings of mystics such as Eckhart, but Caputo denies that any such truth is there to be gleaned; for him, there is no ultimate truth “hidden under some hermeneutic rock” (1997, 102).

4.1.2 Deconstructing the Impossible

Caputo shares with the mystics a conviction that words are inadequate to convey truth about the God of Western religion, in part, because of the limitations of language itself. These limitations are explicitly acknowledged in the pleas for secret truths to be revealed that are found in negative theology as well as in the acclamations of praise for the bedazzling abundance of the divine that are found in many sacred texts, an abundance that leaves even hyperbole short of the mark. However, Caputo also believes that words are inadequate for the religious purposes intended, because words are freighted with the baggage of millennia of human experience and evolution. He describes the complexity of language in this way: “We begin where we are—in the midst of a language, of a tradition, a heritage, of a complex and ultimately unfathomable web of intersecting, interweaving, and conflicting beliefs and practices, an inescapable cacophony of voices and counter-voices, a crazy quilt that we will never succeed in simply unstitching or simply bringing into harmony” (2001b, 301).

While the phenomenological perspectives of Lévinas and Marion would undertake to depict the manifestation to consciousness of what words cannot inadequately express, a hermeneutic undertaking would explore—and question—the nature of the *inadequacy* itself.

Caputo notes, simply: “Consciousness is inherently hermeneutic” (1987, 56). Is language truly inadequate to signify what consciousness finds to exist? Is this line of inquiry a word game or is it appropriate for philosophers? Can consciousness encounter aporiae for which language is impossible? Such concerns are also the concerns of deconstruction and Caputo, perhaps to a greater extent than other philosophers and theologians, has sought answers to religious questions through deconstruction and the writings of Derrida.

Along with Augustine, Caputo questions what one loves when one experiences love for God and understands Derrida’s writings to have a similar interest in exploring the nature of this love and its object. However in the view of Caputo, the difference between Augustine’s and Derrida’s queries is that “Augustine has seized and settled upon a determinate historical name for the object of this faith and hope and love, that he has ‘entrusted’ or ‘delivered’ himself over to the proper names that have been transmitted to him by his tradition, while for Derrida faith and hope and love make their way in the night as best they can. ...The difference is that when Augustine asks ‘What do I love when I love my God?’ his question is played out within the fixed and determinate limits of the historical tradition with which he associates himself, but Derrida asks this question with a certain detachment from the historical particularity of a determinate answer; he is really a little lost and leaves open other possible responses.... He has faith in faith, and hope in hope, but he has no guarantees” (2001b, 311).

Were one to develop an understanding of Derrida’s deconstructive project solely from Caputo’s perspective, one might misunderstand the overall tenor of Derrida’s work—which is not highly religious in nature. Caputo’s reading of Derrida is generally reliable, as far as it goes, highlighting the mystical and religious dimensions in some of Derrida’s writing; however, in the view of Gschwandtner, it largely ignores more prevalent atheistic and anti-religious aspects of Derrida’s work (2013, 247). Certainly, works by Derrida such as *On the Name* and *Circumfession* contain religious themes and exhibit Derrida’s interest in exploring the language

of religion in a deconstructive sense, but a predominant theme for Derrida in such writings is to condemn “totalizing forms of theology” in the same manner as he criticizes other forms of totalizing discourse, rather than to endorse any manner of religious practice (248).

Deconstruction is perhaps best known as a hermeneutic tool capable of challenging *any* reading of a literary, political, or religious text. Moreover, it generally provides a hermeneutic conclusion that meaning is undecidable—or, worse, contradictory in inherently possessing meaning that is *both* “x” and “not x”—or, cryptically, possessing meaning that is “x” without “x.” Caputo thus finds in Derrida’s toolkit the ideal vocabulary for evaluating Western religious texts and traditions. He notes (with approval): “[i]f deconstruction were a theory, it would be a theory that nothing is safe, pure, clean, uncontaminated, monochromatic, unambiguous..... Deconstruction is a quasi-theory of undecidability.... Its ‘solution’ to the question of undecidability shows a trend: it always tends to say that the undecidability is permanent, that undecidability precedes, follows, and permeates the decision, that the undecidability is first, last, and always, but that decisions must be made and indecision broken” (1997, 225).

Accordingly, Caputo finds that Derrida’s thinking drives theological hermeneutics to its “most extreme and radical formulation” (1987, 4). For some critics, that is not a good thing. Cunningham, for example, calls Derrida the “most slippery of thinkers” (2002, 155). Caputo acknowledges that a popular caricature of deconstruction is “dabbling in ideas that can never be resolved, playing with the play of signifiers, splashing around in a pool of undecidability” (2002, 161) and that certain critics believe that deconstruction is structurally incapable of stating a preference for one thing rather than another. However, he disagrees: “Derrida does not for a moment think that we simply splash about randomly and with abandon in this complex, multiplex sea of indifferent differences as if it were just a bad infinite” (2001b, 301).

Even apart from the writings of Caputo we can see that Derrida appears to be intrigued by sacred—particularly Judeo-Christian—texts. Notably, in *On the Name* he provides a

deconstructionist reading of the name of God, qualifying his observations by noting that he could “rightly pass for an atheist” for the perspectives found in his earlier body of work. Obviously, that does not disqualify his style of hermeneutics; yet it is important for Caputo that it be understood that deconstruction, itself, is not atheistic (1999, 197). Neither does he find in Derrida’s thinking the disdain for religious concerns that one encounters with Nietzsche. In Caputo’s estimation, “Derrida does not discredit negative theology but gives us an alternative, non-metaphysical, non-ousiological, or non-hyper-ousiological way to read or hear it” (1997, 60). In *Radical Hermeneutics*, one of Caputo’s earliest works that delves into the writings of Derrida, Caputo describes Derrida’s goal as being an “antihermeneutic interpretation of interpretation” rather than being one which seeks to decipher truth from sacred texts: “It denies all deep meanings, all hidden truth, indeed truth itself. It denies that there is anything originary, that the originary is anything more than a linguistic illusion induced by grammar” (117-18). Caputo concurs that nothing in Judeo-Christian sacred texts is originary, primeval, or undistorted; “every text resonates with other texts” (118). He frames this deconstructive form of questioning as a reaction against traditional theological endeavors, but also against what he views as a Heideggerian “nostalgia” for deeper truth (118). Deconstruction undertakes a “patient, scrupulous, pitiless unfolding of the limitations and constraints under which human understanding labors, exposing in a bold and novel way the multiple illusions and traps to which we are subject *precisely* in virtue of the finitude of our understanding” (2000, 43). It is, for Caputo, “an exhibition of complexity and hidden tensions which demonstrates that beneath the calm surface of unity a thing puts forth there lies a multiplicity of competing elements, that beneath the reassuring look of certitude and knowledge there is restlessness and undecidability” (200).

A hermeneutic philosophy that focuses on the inherent undecidability of fundamental premises is at odds with traditional theology and is frustrating to many philosophers, as well.

One must acknowledge that deconstruction provides few answers to the questions it raises and no criteria for addressing the indeterminacy that it finds in religious texts and traditions. For theologians such as Richard Kearney, such a form of radical hermeneutics is a step too far. He asks, “[H]ow can we ever recognize a God stripped of every specific horizon of memory and anticipation; how can we ever give content to a faith devoid of stories and covenants, promises, alliances, and good works? How can we fully trust in a God devoid of all names...? Or whose only real other name is ‘desire’? ...[M]ust not our encounter with the ‘coming of the other’ find itself not only blind but empty as well?” (1999, 126-27). Kearney is a respected theologian whose writings attempt to address similar concerns as those of Caputo and Lévinas. In one of his major works, *The God Who May Be*, he offers the concept of a God that “neither is nor is not, but may be,” a “God who possibilizes our world from out of the future” (1). However, if one takes indeterminacy at face value, Kearney questions why we should assume that radical otherness is goodness: “Why is alterity ethical? Why is it not rather evil or an-ethical or neutral?” (128). Against Caputo’s argument that undecidability and its “haze of indefiniteness” nourish the passion of the faithful (1997, 63), Kearney asks, “But can we be so sure?” (1999, 128). In my view, Kearney’s question is not answered by Caputo in a manner that affirms that goodness lurks in alterity. If Kearney’s comment is intended as a criticism of Caputo’s contentions, it should best be understood as arising out of dissatisfaction with Caputo’s view that, despite human desire for truth about the divine, such truth simply does not exist. For Caputo, alterity as such is neither ethical nor an-ethical. Phenomenology may provide such answers; however, deconstruction does not.

Indeterminacy and undecidability are frequently-referenced hallmarks of deconstruction; yet, for Caputo those aspects of contemporary thinking need not result in paralysis. Such thinking differentiates itself from the thinking of determinate faiths, but does not leave us “stuck in undecidability, on the threshold, unable to make a choice, questioning but never deciding....

Rather, it means that we are always responding and at the same always asking what we are responding to, always choosing and at the same asking what we have chosen or has chosen us, what we are doing in the midst of the concrete decisions we always and invariably make” (2001b, 296). Deconstruction provides religion with a postmodern way of thinking about things “which keeps itself intensely alert to the contingency of what it thinks,” not out of an agnostic perspective or even from a sense of skepticism, but rather, “in order to keep itself open to the coming of the most unforeseeable, unimaginable, to the *l’invention de tout autre* [the coming of the totally other]” (1999, 197).

In providing religion with an alternative postmodern way of understanding itself, deconstruction can be seen as far more than a form of literary criticism. In the language of philosophers it could even be considered a “movement of transcendence” (1997, xix)—transcendent because it provides access to that which is beyond the horizons of possibility: the impossible. That is the essential connection that Caputo finds between deconstruction and religion: a common interest in human desire for the impossible. Here Caputo explains that “deconstruction is set in motion by an overarching aspiration, which on a certain analysis can be called a religious or prophetic aspiration..., a passion for that which is impossible, a passion for doing the impossible, a passion for going precisely where one cannot go because it is impossible” (1995, 59).

The idea of the impossible interested philosophers such as Hegel and Hume, primarily from the standpoint of establishing boundaries—limitations on what can be conceived, imagined or thought. Anselm and Descartes found it relevant to an understanding of existence to consider what could be thought at the margins—the proposition that God was “that than which nothing greater can be thought.” Undaunted by classical logic, Derrida boldly proclaimed the possibility of thinking the impossible and, through deconstruction, *experiencing* the impossible. Marion incorporated the concept of impossibility into his thinking as “possibility that surpasses

actuality” or as “the possibility of unconditioned possibility” (2013, 218). In so doing, Marion sees impossibility as an excess and uses the word in a hyperbolic manner. “Impossibility” for Marion then becomes a characteristic of a saturated phenomenon of which manifestation is actually possible. Thus, although Marion offers an explanation of how one may experience the impossible, it is described as an experience of the impossible *as divinely possible* and not as that which is literally impossible. Despite sharing an interest in the concept of the impossible, Marion and Caputo (with Derrida) approach the concept from significantly different perspectives. For Marion the experience of impossibility is given to us from a source outside of Being; comprehension is inadequate, but the bedazzling phenomenon of the impossible is manifested in present experience. For Caputo, the present experience of the impossible is *never* given. It is deferred; it is never manifested; it is always to come. The experience that occurs is only one of desire. Caputo sees the paradigm of deconstruction as a Messiah who never appears and who is therefore desired all the more (1999, 186).

In part, Marion’s and Caputo’s views on the impossible differ, because their conceptions of the word likely differ. Caputo clarifies Derrida’s view by first emphasizing that Derrida is exploring “the” impossible—and not simple logical contradiction; the impossible is “something unforeseeable that shatters our horizons of expectation” (2006b, 103). The impossible is that which is more-than-possible, a transgression of horizons, a passage to and beyond any limits. Caputo writes that the it is “the terminus of a hope beyond hope, of a hope against hope, of a faith in what we cannot imagine or in any way foresee, a *tout autre*, beyond any present horizon of expectation” (2000, 263). The impossible is something whose possibility we don’t and can’t foresee (2001a, 10). While one might quibble with the accuracy from a linguistic standpoint of the meaning that Caputo gives to the word “impossible,” there is no philosophical disingenuousness there. For Caputo, experiencing the impossible (as he defines it) does not

require a miraculous violation or suspension of the laws of physics. Rather it is accomplished within consciousness as an experience of language.

As I will discuss below, Caputo believes that deconstruction provides a beneficial perspective on the impossibility—as defined by Derrida—of future events which religious texts promise are to come. Caputo goes so far as to say “deconstruction is a generalized form of, and a repetition of, what is going on in religion” (1999, 197). In its recognition of human desire for the impossible, Caputo finds deconstruction to be “structured like religion” (2006b, 111). Yet, an important difference between the two can be seen in the indeterminacy of deconstruction as opposed to the reliance by traditional theology on faith-based presumptions. Caputo does not tiptoe around this difference, this conflict with faith-based conclusions found in theology. He acknowledges, rather, that “deconstruction exposes faith to indefinite recontextualization, substitution, and translation. ...leaves it vulnerable and exposed to multiple interpretation, to a multiplicity with which it is the business of faith to cope” (1997, 48).

If deconstruction is to be considered as a potential source of clarity in matters of religious experience, one must ask whether it provides clarity at all. To borrow Caputo’s practice of offering self-negating phrases, one may ask whether deconstruction provides only insight without Insight? Such a criticism is worthy of consideration. Even heralded postmodern philosophers of religion have been accused of offering nothing but “words, words, words” (Janicaud 2000, 42). Some writers arguably compensate for absence of logic with abundance of passion. However, as I will argue in the following sections, Caputo’s writings are carefully crafted and deserve careful consideration. The following section will summarize the primary components of Caputo’s thoughtful deconstruction of Western religion and explain the basis on which indeterminacy, rather than underlying faith, can be understood as justifying faith.

4.2 Radical Hermeneutics

Whether or not Caputo would grudgingly acknowledge that, for some, deconstruction provides an experience of insight without Insight, he would understand the implication of this observation. He frequently criticizes the use of capitalized letters to denote an absolute form of uncertain signifiers, such as Truth, Religion, and the Good. Emphasizing the ultimate scope of such words implied by capitalization is not a technique that originated in recent times. Perhaps Greek mythology took us down that path by equating human concepts with gods and goddesses and referring to the divinities and divine forces with proper nouns. As the myths were translated into European languages, such nouns were given capitals and possibly the germ of an idea was planted that the capitalized version of a word such as the Good could denote far more than the lower case equivalent. The appeal of capital letters to theologians and writers of pop psychology is frequently irresistible. Throughout his work, Caputo questions the use of such capitalized terms not only from a stylistic standpoint, but from a hermeneutic perspective.

Fundamentally, Caputo's project is a hermeneutic project. It questions the inherent justification for elevating important concepts by capitalizing their signifiers and delves into underlying significations. Truth...Religion...God—how are those words deployed in the language of philosophy and theology? More importantly, how is that deployment often misunderstood? In hermeneutics, and in particular, the manner of hermeneutics practiced by Derrida, Caputo finds a methodology for considering words that embody humankind's understandings of who we are without accepting age-old interpretations or modernist narratives. He is troubled by the questions that Nietzsche explicitly and implicitly poses and largely looks to hermeneutics for answers. He sees different hermeneutic perspectives and embraces some, toys with some, and rejects others. He coins for his own perspective the label of "radical" hermeneutics: hermeneutics pushed to its limits through deconstruction. He argues that that deconstruction is "a more radical way of doing what hermeneutics sets out to do" (2000, 42); it is

a hermeneutic rendering that “holds the feet of hermeneutics to the fires of facticity and alterity” (43).

One of Caputo’s basic observations, which he uses to emphasize the misunderstandings of traditional Western religious thought is this: “We do not know who we are” (2000, 36; 2001a, 21). Quoting Augustine’s prayer, Caputo acknowledges “I have become a question to myself” (*Confessions* 217). As a consequence, neither scientists nor philosophers can offer infallible answers or guidance as to the most important concerns of life. For Caputo, facing up to cold truth requires acknowledging that all that is labeled truth is in fact “invaded and fragmented by untruth” (2000, 36). To those who believe that religion provides a source of secret truth to the faithful through divine revelation, Caputo responds that the “secret is that there is no Secret. The truth is that we cannot gain the high ground of capitalized Truth, insulated from violence and unreason, destruction and self-destruction, ‘madness,’ and ‘sin’” (40). He concurs with skeptics of organized religion that religious dogma does not offer answers: there is “no way to know the Way,” no meta-narrative that justifies suffering, no divinely-orchestrated meaning of events (2001a, 20). On the contrary, he contends that “while events give joy or sorrow they do not, as a whole, have Meaning. While there are numerous meanings *in* events, there is not meaning *to* events overall, no overarching Meaning which is their point” (1993, 234).

Out of this complex and problematic history of misunderstanding, Caputo finds inspiration for his project in the writing of Derrida, in which Derrida muses on the burdens and demands that traditional theological language place on God. In *On the Name*, the signifier “God” is explored and Derrida undertakes to “*sauf le nom*” of God—a phrase almost certainly selected by Derrida for its multiple, thought-provoking meanings. Caputo lists the multiplicity of meanings: “[s]aving...the name of God by keeping it safe...; sacrificing the name of God precisely in order to save it. Sacrifice everything, save or except...the name of God. Save everything about God (keep God safe) save (except) the name of God, lest it become an idol that

blocks our way. The thing itself slips away leaving nothing behind, save the name. Save the name of God for everybody, not just the faithful in the determinable faiths” (1997, 43). As we will see in Section 4.3 below, the *name* of God is the focus of Caputo’s philosophy and theology—not the divine, creator-God of Western religion or any variation thereof. A divine Other, an actual entity or force inside or outside of Being, is almost a matter of indifference to the practice of religion without Religion offered by Caputo. He does not affirm or deny the existence of a God that resembles the God of Judeo-Christian sacred texts—although he does criticize portrayals of God advanced by religious leaders throughout the ages. Whether or not a God exists, religious experience can be found in “what is happening in that name” (2006b, 2).

Caputo deploys the expression “religion *without* Religion” as a way of emphasizing the radical break from tradition that he offers. Throughout his body of work, he adopts Derrida’s “logic of the sans” in proffering these self-contesting expressions. They reflect one’s attempt to understand while being cut off from the very thing one is attempting to understand. For Caputo this paradoxical pursuit is necessary, since “[o]ne must pursue understanding *sans voir, sans avoir, sans savoir*, without sight, without savvy, and without seizing hold of what we love” (2000, 17). For Caputo, thinking in this manner ruptures thought; it interrupts the process of finding meaning, highlighting the aporiae that remain to be thought (2000, 65). For our understanding of Caputo, it is important to recognize that these phrases are not simply clever word plays; rather, they juxtapose the very questions they pose against an implicit unanswerability that forces readers to question the assumed meanings of the words at issue.

In this sense, radical hermeneutics—like its progenitor, deconstruction—provides few, if any, concrete answers to questions concerning truth. Caputo acknowledges that there is no “definitive hermeneutic key” there, “[f]or keys turn locks in both directions” (1997, 53). The “truth” explored through deconstruction is indeterminate and undecidable. Acknowledging criticism of such an endeavor, Derrida acknowledges that a reading of deconstruction as a

“symptom of modern or postmodern nihilism... will always be possible” (1992, 77). Although Caputo through his deconstructive project relentlessly questions the fundamental assumptions of religion, his goal is not the destruction of religion’s traditions and practice of faith. In that approach he clearly departs from the goals of Nietzsche. Just as Derrida said of himself that he could reasonably pass for an atheist, one could well observe of Caputo that he could reasonably pass as a nihilist. The irony would not be lost on Caputo that, notwithstanding his acceptance of certain nihilist foundations, he is a passionate advocate for prayer and faith. For him, faith has a role to play in modernity notwithstanding contemporary philosophy’s tacit support for Nietzsche’s declaration of war on all eternal idols (*Twilight of the Idols* 32). In his view, an interpretation of the signs that are at our disposal: texts, traditions, and “the historically conditioned modes and linguistic artifacts” that are part of the religious tradition are supportive of a faith-based understanding of the human condition (2000, 236).

4.2.1 God’s Silence

Possibly the most significant challenge that Caputo makes to religious tradition is his questioning of understandings of God as an entity or force with Being that in some manner discloses its existence to humankind. Kearney believes that the Greek interpretation of Exodus 3:14⁴⁸ began an error of conflating God with a category of substance, thereby assigning to God a modality of Being. In Kearney’s view, Hellenistic philosophy created a trajectory of thought that continued through Augustine’s praise of a God that has being. In his reading of the *Confessions*, Kearney found that Augustine “turns the verbal ‘is’ of God into a substantive formula. And this move becomes more explicit when Augustine [in another text] comments directly on Exodus 3:14...—‘Because he *Is*, that is to say God is Being itself” (2001, 22-23). As we saw in Chapter

⁴⁸ In response to a question from Moses as to what he should say if asked God’s name, “God said to Moses, ‘I AM WHO I AM.’ He said further, ‘Thus you shall say to the Israelites, ‘I AM has sent me to you’” (Exodus 3:14). The phrase is sometimes alternatively translated as “I AM WHAT I AM” or “I WILL BE WHAT I WILL BE” (*The New Oxford Annotated Bible* 86n a).

2, Lévinas posits an absolute Other that is outside of Being but nevertheless leaves a trace within Being. And so the Other, as understood by Lévinas, winds up being divorced from any modality of Being, even as it is manifested within Being. Even if understood to be residing outside of Being, such an Other seems to have a similar essence as a God understood to be residing inside of Being. Whether or not Lévinas would concur with that assessment, it seems clear that the Other that he conceives, like the God portrayed by Augustine, is comprehended here phenomenologically—through manifestation to consciousness. Something—even if only a trace—is understood to be manifested. Even for Marion, for whom God is explicitly otherwise than Being, an affirmative experience of God can be manifested within Being. The possibility of a saturated excess provides the necessary context for Marion’s theology. However, if there were absolutely nothing relevant to humankind outside of Being—as opposed to the Other as portrayed by Lévinas—and absolutely nothing that humankind can comprehend that is otherwise than Being—as opposed to the God portrayed by Marion—what would there be for postmodern theologians to talk about? What can one say about God if there is no God? The writing of Caputo offers a possibility for theologians and philosophers alike, a perspective that does not rely on any need to recognize a God *that is*.

In the same way that saturated excess outside of Being provided context for Marion, the desolation of the ancient Greek concept of *khôra* provides context for Caputo’s theology. In section 16 of the *Timaeus*, Plato imagined the *khôra* as a third form of reality: the receptacle and nurse of all becoming (67). As re-imagined by deconstructionists, *khôra* provides a blank slate as a point of reference by which religious experience can be evaluated; the *khôra* situates humankind in an environment where nothing regarding the divine is assumed—and where one may find that *nothing* exists outside of the physical world that seeks a relationship with humankind. Yet Caputo nevertheless considers it an environment where the nature of faith can be explored: “Khôra names the site, the interval, the spare spacing, within which both theology

and atheology, both faith and faithlessness, theism and antitheism, faith in this or faith in that, would take place, would have a place” (1997, 58). Such a view reflects the indeterminacy of deconstruction that frustrates some philosophers and theologians: that which is gleaned from an exploration of the *khôra*, if anything, is frequently paradoxical or potentially contradictory.⁴⁹

Such indeterminacy is seen by Caputo as an aid in seeking truth free of the taint of religious dogma. Deconstruction offers thinkers the possibility of beginning their inquiries from a perspective that is undecided with respect to all preexisting beliefs, as described by Caputo, “a place of absolute ‘resistance’ or ‘heterogeneity’ to the formed structures, the constituted forms of history and culture, of the Western and non-Western, of philosophy and theology, of reason and revelation” (1999, 216). For Derrida the *khôra* can be understood as providing neutrality: “The *khôra* does not desire anything, does not give anything. It is what makes taking place or an event possible. But the *khôra* does not happen, does not give, does not desire. It is a spacing and absolutely indifferent” (1992, 107).

The *khôra*, though a place of neutrality and silence, is not seen by Caputo as a nihilistic void (2000, 243), nor can it be understood as the infinite nothingness of which Nietzsche’s madman warned.⁵⁰ Rather, Caputo believes that:

[M]ystical silence occurs in and as a mystical caesura *within* language, like a pregnant pause, or like a pause in a musical movement. It is a work of language, part of its

⁴⁹ For example, in Caputo’s view, if one perceives a “call”—a perception of a divine Other—one must accept the paradoxical nature of that call, because it comes out of a desert in which nothing is there. Envisioning the *khôra* as the source of the call, he terms a declaration of faith in response to such a call a “desert discourse” (1997, 59). By contrast, a divine call as described by Marion is conceived as one that issues out of saturated, bedazzling excess. For Marion and Lévinas, as we have seen, this enigmatic call comes from God or something that resembles a God. However, for Caputo any such perception is an aporia “forged (formed/faked) in *khôra*” and therefore undecidable (1997, 59). If there is a trace left by God, as depicted by Lévinas, then for Caputo that trace “is invariably marked by undecidability” (2000, 221).

⁵⁰ Nietzsche’s madman proclaims, “Are we not plunging continually? Backward, sideward, forward, in all directions? Is there still any up or down? Are we not straying as through an infinite nothing?” (1974, 181).

repertoire, an artful way that language has of pushing itself to its limits, to a point where language reaches out to what it cannot have and hence desires all the more, in a language without language. The language of desire is a desire for something that language longs for but cannot quite reach, before which it grows silent, which is what constitutes the *tout autre*. For the *tout autre* would not be *tout autre* were the arrows of language to reach that far; the *tout autre* must always be to come, unheard of and unthought. The silence of this language is a language of silence, a space opened up by language and within language, a wordlessness, a being lost for words, a groping for words that only a verbal being can undergo. ...Silence is the language of desire, of the deepest desire of language. (251)

Here the image of the *khôra* could be considered a metaphor for entering into a mental state of silent contemplation, finding oneself in a desolate spiritual desert, analogous to the wilderness through which Christ is said to have wandered for forty days (Matthew 4:1). For Christian mystics quoted by Caputo, the comparison could be apt; an experience of the *khôra* in some respects resembles the mystical experience depicted by apophatic theologians, where language simply does not exist to depict what is going on. However, references to the *khôra* do not appear to have that function for Caputo. Engaging in his hermeneutic endeavor, his project proceeds to deconstruct religious faith with the *khôra* as a kind of grounding. We find in the *khôra* all that can be known about God and traditional tenets of Western faith. So what do we find there? What can be known? According to Caputo, nothing—God is absolutely silent: “There is nothing outside textuality, no uninterpreted facts of the matter lying outside the interpretive web, no way around language and history, no secret passage which gives us access to a privileged, unreformable insight into what is happening. The secret is there is no Secret” (2000, 236).⁵¹

⁵¹ Such silence would not be inconsistent with the view of negative theology that God may be experienced as an *absence* of knowledge. According to Eckhart, at the point of breakthrough, where one begins to understand what is found within the idea of God, “we have a sense not of being flooded with light but of having fallen into an abyss, where all the familiar conceptions we have devised about God collapse, all the comforting reassurances we have been giving one another about what God is simply turn to dust” (1987, 268-69).

Here we see how Caputo departs from the thinking of Lévinas and Marion in his fundamental contention that there is *no truth* to be imparted with respect to any divine Other. As he views it, there is no ethical imperative, no revelation imparted to humankind. Rather, as he argues, “the things we come up with when we describe our condition are written in the sand, a desert sand that is vulnerable to the next storm” (2000, 35). In this sense, he disagrees with Lévinas as to how to view the Other.⁵² He is blunt that Lévinas’s depiction is “a fabulous, poetic story” but an “impossible dream” (1993, 80-82). The absolutely Other is for Caputo a poetic and hyperbolic name “for the fact, as it were, of obligation, of heteronomy, that we do not belong to ourselves, that we are always already held fast in the grips of something I know not what” (2000, 83). In the same manner, he rejects the possibility of divinely-revealed truth: “Whatever is called “Truth” and adorned with capital letters masks its own contingency and untruth” (36). Rather than “Truth,” Caputo finds in religion something “deeply true,” but such truth constitutes a “truth without knowledge” (2001a, 111).

Nevertheless, as we shall see, Caputo finds even in the “desolation” of the *khôra* a foundation for religious faith, a frame of reference from which prayers arise (2000, 264). Experiencing the *khôra*—accepting the apparent silence of God—allows a strain of faith to exist that is not conditioned on believing religious dogma. “Khora forces us to make our way by faith, construing shadowy figures which may turn out to be otherwise, beginning where we are in the midst of a web of institutions, structures, languages, and traditions. By virtue of khora we are forced to do the best we can, making our way by a kind of radical hermeneutics” (1999, 217). In essence, religious faith is an experience of hermeneutics, described by Caputo as being a “way we have of reading the traces in the sand of human existence” (2000, 236).

⁵² Caputo writes: “Lévinas is a great prophetic voice and I love him, as I love father Abraham and all the prophets. But I have always allowed myself to think that it is not necessary to believe the stories the prophets tell, not literally” (1993, 80).

4.2.2 Passion for the Apocalyptic

Acknowledgment of the silence of God and the “desolation” of the *khôra* is, for Caputo, a means for pursuing a clear-headed understanding of divine truth—if any there is—and a foundation for faith. Others might see in a resolute acceptance of the silence of God a nihilist grounding for philosophy of religion, a despairing acceptance of human existence unanchored by faith in anything. While Caputo would likely sympathize with difficulties in mustering faith, he would reject any label of nihilism for perspectives such as his (2006b, 310n14). Rather than seeing despair or nihilism, Caputo follows the lead of Derrida in observing that the undecidability and indeterminism of deconstruction equate to a messianic perspective at odds with nihilism. This messianic perspective contains a deconstructive passion for what is coming that is unexpected and impossible. The term “messianic” here does not imply a literal hope for the Messiah of the Judeo-Christian tradition but, rather, expresses a “structure of absolute hope and expectation” of “what is coming or incoming” (1999, 197). Yet the motifs of “religious” deconstruction are often apocalyptic—expecting and waiting for future events, notwithstanding that such events are paradoxically deemed impossible. For Caputo, the passion that can be felt for what is to come and the related sense of hope offer an antidote to nihilism.

Against such nihilism, Caputo boldly argues that deconstruction can be seen as a messianic religion, in that it is “inhabited and structured in a messianic-religious way” (1997, 150). In this sense, the passions and aspirations of deconstruction and of religion overlap: “[d]econstruction takes the form of a certain re-ligious re-sponsibility to what is coming, to what does not exist. Deconstruction turns on a certain pledging of itself to the future, on a certain *religio* that religiously observes its covenant with the *revenant* and *arrivant*, to what is coming back from the past, and to what is arriving from the past as the future” (149). I would ask: is it an overstatement to claim, in essence, that deconstruction is—or can be—akin to the practice of religion? Certainly not a vast overstatement, based upon the way in which Caputo places limits

on his claim of kinship. To state the obvious, he does not find in deconstruction any support for traditional beliefs about God; deconstruction is not deemed to be a source of religious truth or of any Truth. As he addresses these issues, Caputo is clear that deconstruction “keeps a safe distance” from all determinable faiths; its faith is not in any determinate thing or person. Yet he finds similarities between the faith of deconstruction and the faith of Christian mystics, both occurring in an “atmosphere of apophatic renunciation” (150). Derrida, too, finds a “familial” connection between deconstruction and negative theology in multiple references in his essay, “How to Avoid Speaking.”

As we have seen, Caputo’s contributions to understanding of religious experience are heavily influenced by Derrida’s insights on deconstruction and, in particular, Derrida’s readings of certain religious texts. Yet some philosophers have questioned the extent to which deconstruction, rigorously applied, is relevant in this context. From all indications, it proved to be highly meaningful to Caputo: his confessional explications regarding the possibilities of deconstruction to better understand faith can be seen as a religious journey, an undertaking to find answers to fundamental religious quandaries addressed by Augustine and Nietzsche—as well as by Lévinas and Marion. Caputo finds that answers to those quandaries have the potential to be the “heart of a justice and a democracy to come in a heartless world” (1997, 156). He finds similarities between deconstruction and negative theology that provide such insight that he attempts to fold deconstructive thinking into theology. Do his conclusions go beyond what deconstruction has the capacity to offer? Would Derrida concur that his questioning of the implications of naming God is akin to a practice of religion? Would he agree that faith in the impossible is of the same substance as religious faith? In a variety of conferences (including those that provided the source material for *Questioning God* and for *God, the Gift and Postmodernism*) Derrida heard Caputo’s claims along these lines, and he neither supported nor rejected the comparisons. Gschwandtner agrees that there is a “convergence” between

deconstruction and religion, but considers Derrida's interest in the messianic to be one that relates only to the structure of language and not to any messianic content found within religious texts (2013, 249).

While it may be true that messianic content within religious texts was of secondary interest for Derrida, it is of central interest to Caputo as a source of human response to the concerns within the texts. The "messianic" is depicted in Caputo's project as hope, faith, and desire for the "impossible future always 'to come'" (1999, 199). To be clear, it is atheological. It does not emerge out of the facticity of any particular determinative faith, nor does the hope that it engenders "subsume, enclose, or pre-contain particulars" (Scanlon 1999, 226). Faith and hope with respect to the nature of God—or even the existence of any divine Other—is not required here. Nor is any opinion necessary as to whether God has been or will be manifested or made present in the flesh or outside of Being. As Caputo explains, there is no need for "dividing things up into theism and atheism" (1999, 200). The *signifier* "God," the manifestation of the presence of God, as understood by Western theology, is impossible—in Caputo's view—because that signifier signifies "what is *neither* present *nor* given, what is structurally *never* present or given, whose givenness or presence is always *to come*" (199). To put it simply, Caputo, along with Derrida, find in the pursuit of deconstruction a desire—even a passion—for the unexpected that is to come, which Caputo labels "the impossible." The full acceptance in deconstruction of indeterminability and undecidability allows this desire to exist even if the object of desire is not only beyond comprehension (as posited by Lévinas and Marion), but also non-existent.

Caputo characterizes this desire for the impossible as an "apocalyptic" dimension of Derrida's thought, "namely as a welcome of what is always to come, a structural dimension of hospitality, which always says 'come' to the unforeseeable and unpredictable" (Gschwandtner 2013, 248). This concept of welcoming the impossible—a messianic impulse—is central to the experience that Caputo portrays. In support of this same impulse, Derrida employs the phrase

“*Viens. Oiu. Oiu* [Come. Yes. Yes]” to exemplify language embracing that which is to come. Caputo explains that “*Viens* is a certain structural wakefulness or openness to an impossible breach of the present, shattering the conditions of possibility, by which we are presently circumscribed” (1997, 96). Such a welcome provides an affirmation of justice, which is always to come, through an affirmation of the wholly other. Yet Caputo emphasizes that the welcome he perceives is characterized by an openness to “surprises, ...anomalous, unexpected, horizon-breaking events that leave us asking, ‘what is this?’ What is going on? What is happening to us? What is going to happen next? Is this ethical?” (2000, 177).

In Caputo’s description of the manner in which *something is to come*—in apocalyptic fashion—we find the concept of the gift. The gift depicted by Caputo as a paradox: “The gift is an event, *é-venir*, something that really happens, something we deeply desire,” and yet the “gift pure and simple does not make an appearance, never presents itself in the order of presence. ...The gift, if there is any, does not give itself to be seen” and does not manifest itself as a phenomenon (1997, 161). For Caputo, therein lies the source of a passion for the implications of the gift: a passionate desire for the impossible. This is the “aporia of the gift” both for Caputo and for Derrida. As another name for the impossible, in the words of Caputo, the gift “drives us on, drives us mad, like the secret, which engenders endless interpretations. The gift belongs to a thought beyond knowledge, a desire beyond mere wishes, a naming beyond ordinary nomination” (169). We have seen in Chapter 3 that the concept of the gift played a central role, as well, in Marion’s thinking; however, Marion defines the gift as a saturated phenomenon that (by definition) becomes manifest. By contrast, Caputo sees the gift as an aporia with no divine giver that is never manifested—except as an experience of language.

However, one wishes to imagine the nature of the impossible and of the gift, these concepts may be understood as a merely human source of passion for something—which is fundamental to Caputo’s view of a religion without Religion. He finds religious experience in the

passion humans have for something that language cannot name. It is not an experience instigated by a divine Other—or even requiring the existence of a divine Other, nor is it a response to a call from an Other residing outside of Being or somehow other than Being—as would be consistent with the thinking of Lévinas or Marion. Rather than emerging out of a manifestation of the divine, religious experience of the impossible is a “post-phenomenological experience where experience does not mean phenomenological seeing but running up against the unforeseeable” (1997, 209).

Some critics question how religion without Religion can be considered “religion” at all. Would it be fair to say that in most respects, it is religion without religious content? Probably not. Moreover, as I will discuss in the following section, Caputo acknowledges that he, too, perceives a “call” which is a source of his passion for the theological tenor of his later works. Additionally, as discussed in Section 4.3, he finds relevance in an experience of the “event” within the name of God. While his exploration of either of these two concerns might warrant consideration of his project as being relevant to philosophy of religion—in the same manner as “key words” enable a librarian to determine what shelf a book should be placed on—his focus on faith *without the theological assurances of faith* as an integral component of religion without Religion is likely his most important contribution to philosophy.

4.2.3 Postmodern Faith

Caputo frequently questions the objects and rationale of faith found in Western religion; however, he does not reject faith itself. Rather, he endeavors to re-situate faith within the context of undecidability. Faith as the “art of construing shadows” is at home within his radical hermeneutics. As he understands it, faith does not lift one above the flux of life’s uncertainty or allow one to escape the limits of mortality. It cannot move mountains or otherwise accomplish

the miraculous or change the horrific—or mundane—aspects of “what happens.”⁵³ He considers faith to be only “a read we have on the human condition,” rather than a cause for any kind of “supervening miracle that lifts us up out of our boots” (2000, 236). Faith offers, instead, a way of interpreting what happens in daily life to us and those around us (1993, 245). One could question whether a consideration of faith should be of any significant interest to philosophy, given faith’s roots in theology. For any philosophical perspective that perceives the methodology of science as instructive, faith might be considered a first cousin to superstition. Classical phenomenology was intended to eliminate from consideration matters of cognition that lack fulfilment or, in other words, perceptions that lack objective support. Objects of faith here are not fulfilled in intuition in the manner contemplated by Husserl or other classical phenomenologists. Rather, a postmodern perspective that rejects science as the ultimate arbiter of all questions arguably opens the door to consideration of faith as defined by the parameters offered by Caputo.

He sees faith *as* faith, an insight, but not made as an assertion of Truth: faith “cannot be demonstrated or confirmed in discursive, argumentative, rational discourse” (2002, 157). Matters of faith are not viewed by Caputo as revelations or saturated phenomena as might Marion. Instead, faith constitutes a position that one takes “within the cloud of unknowing” (158), just as deconstruction happens as an endeavor undertaken in an environment of undecidability. Accordingly, Caputo asserts that “deconstruction is *itself* faith, miming and repeating the structure of faith in a faith without dogma” (1997, 57). Deconstruction comes alongside faith to “ask, with interest and admiration, ‘what is happening?’” (67). Here faith will be understood as “an instantiation of a deconstructive situation in which we are asked to affirm, to make an act of faith, and to make an act of faith which is motivated by love, by the love of justice and what is to come, ...that hopes for the future” (2002, 164). Faith is not dependent on any particular

⁵³ The almost flippant phrase “what happens” is also used by Derrida in describing experiences of deconstruction (see, for example, 1992, 108-109).

understanding of God; rather, Caputo's project involves "keeping metaphysics to a minimum"⁵⁴ (1993, 220). Unlike the faith asked of adherents to Western religion, the faith depicted by Caputo must acknowledge—as might a nihilist—that "perhaps history has no point at all, that undeserved suffering has no meaning, that the cosmos does not know we are here" (2000, 243).

Faith, for Caputo, must exist in a world in which true meta-narratives do not exist and life unfolds "without why." He is accepting of the possibility that there is *no* God to answer the question "Why?"—and that there is *no* Truth to be had. Along with Eckhart, he argues that love "is without why" (1987, 262-65). Accordingly, faith demands that one live and love "without why." The passion for the name of God found in Caputo's practice of religion without religion is not founded on finding answers to *why*. It exists alongside faith, but not faith in revealed Truth. Purported Truth about God or about what one may expect to receive from God are examples of "why's"; they function as grounds or expectations that, for some, support a religious fervor for God. Instead of finding love of God out of such expectations for Truth, Caputo follows Eckhart in advocating love of God as one loves life—and embracing the ethics of *Gelassenheit* or letting-be—"letting gods and mortals, earth and sky be and be in play" (Eckhart 2000, 264). In a coda that could rightly pass as nihilistic, Caputo argues, "There is no 'why' outside what happens, no Meta-event that dominates other events, that serves as the point and purpose of what happens. ... What happens is what there is (*es gibt*). That is all." (1993, 223).

Would Nietzsche agree? Almost certainly, but Nietzsche would likely recoil at Caputo's determined advocacy of a faith founded in deconstruction. In *The Anti-Christ* Nietzsche condemns idealists who express contempt for "understanding" and "the senses," writing, "I make

⁵⁴ Caputo does not consider his perspective to be overcoming metaphysics, in the manner of Marion, but rather, to acknowledge and avoid the excesses of metaphysical perspectives. He acknowledges that "One cannot avoid some sort of metaphysics or another, but that does not mean that one needs to rush headlong into the most extravagant, totalizing, maximalist, metanarrative, in short, the most meta-physical forms of metaphysics, which are always organized around some Meta-event or other" (1993, 221).

war on this theologian instinct.... The pathos that develops out of this is called *faith*: closing one's eyes with respect to oneself for good and all so as not to suffer from the sight of incurable falsity. ...Wherever the influence of the theologian extends *value judgement* is stood on its head" (131-32). Regardless of his seemingly nihilist perspective, Caputo could rightly pass as a theologian, given the manner in which he incorporates his readings of sacred texts into his thinking. Nevertheless, he shares few of the "theological instincts" against which Nietzsche rails—and the faith espoused by Caputo is not the kind of devout Christian faith that so disturbed Nietzsche. For Caputo, faith, properly understood, is a self-contesting endeavor; faith must be faith *without* faith, faith without the assurances of faith, faith that stands up under the "logic of the sans" (1997, 62). He explains: "A faith without faith is a decision inscribed in undecidability where undecidability is structurally ingredient in faith, not the opposite of faith but the element of faith. The undecidability is first, last, and constant, the element, the space in which faith makes its leap, the horizon in terms of which faith understands its limits, understands that it is faith, through a trace darkly" (62-63).

Faith without faith, properly understood, is not faithlessness, nor is it (necessarily) cause for despair. Faith provides an experience in which one is cognizant of the "impossible future always to come." Rather than evoking despair, Caputo feels that one's perception of this impossibility can elicit faith and hope with respect to the future, a "purer faith, a faith in faith itself" (2006a, 67). For some, a perception of this impossible future is not only *not* a source of hope, it constitutes a vision for the future not likely to ever occur: the idea of it is likely nonsensical. Caputo does not deny this and offers the concept of "the call" as an element of experiencing faith without faith. In *The Weakness of God* he acknowledges that a trigger for one's openness to the "promise" found in religion without religion is an experience of the call. The call "originates from the name of God, from God knows where, from something I know not what—from God, from some World-Soul, or from a dark corner of the unconscious—soliciting

us from afar and calling us beyond ourselves” (2006b, 113). The hiddenness of the source of the call is “*constitutive* of the call, part of its positive phenomenal makeup” (114). In a blunt statement that acknowledges that some thinkers flatly reject the possibility of a call, Caputo writes, “If you do not have the least idea of what that means, you would probably be better served to stop reading and check the stock market page to see how your portfolio is doing. This little treatise will not be of any further help to you” (113-14).

Despite his views with respect to a human experience of the call, such a possibility is not a fundamental component of Caputo’s philosophy— in contrast to the philosophy of Marion. As we have seen, Caputo disagrees with Marion’s overarching view that a call—a claim by an anonymous Other—is phenomenologically manifested to consciousness; yet, Caputo nevertheless perceives a “call” of a more ambiguous nature to occur. While the call that Caputo depicts is by no means presumed to be given to consciousness by God or any other divine source, his Caputo’s depiction, like that of Marion, appears to be an essentially phenomenological treatment of the idea. It is experienced by consciousness. Would Husserl’s principle of principles, as expanded by Marion, apply? Is Caputo’s view of the call something that offers itself originarily to us in intuition, which must therefore be taken wholly as it gives itself? I would argue that attempts to form rigid distinctions between phenomenological experience and hermeneutical experience are unnecessary and potentially disruptive to complete understandings of the workings of consciousness. I will take up this issue further in Chapter 5.

4.3 Language

As we have seen in the preceding two chapters, the phenomenological projects of Lévinas and Marion provided some explicit and implicit support for the premise that language and meaning-formation play a role in religious experience. By contrast, the writings of Caputo are hermeneutical in their focus and address head-on the questions of meaning in language, in particular, through deconstruction of religious texts. In deconstruction, one does not merely

scratch the surface of a text by considering authorial intention and parsing the linguistic history of words and phrases. Rather, one takes a deep dive and delves into the foundational underpinnings of a text, considering not only language that is present, but also language that is absent. Here one also considers not only analogies, but also alterities, and, perplexingly, considers not only what can be signified by language, but also that which is (arguably) outside of language (see Derrida's article "Différance"). Through such a patient deconstructive undertaking, one must face the likelihood that unambiguous conclusions will be largely absent. Yet, for Derrida and Caputo, deconstruction is not a fruitless, onanistic endeavor; instead, deconstruction can provide an experience of the *promise* of language. Derrida asserted that "[f]rom the moment I have opened my mouth, I have already promised; or rather, and sooner, the promise has seized the I which promises to speak to the other, to say something" (1992, 84). Caputo emphasizes that this promise is a form of affirmation, "a sweeping yes, a *oiu, oiu*" embedded in language, "embedded in the event of language, where language, which calls upon us, calls to us, and makes us promises, is taken to have a certain prophetic or messianic character" (2001b, 298-99).

Caputo appropriately asks, "But who is promising what to whom?" (298). In raising this question, Caputo is aware that there is potential for confusion that the concept of the promise somehow implies a maker of the promise—just as Marion's concept of givenness can be seen to infer a giver. However, Caputo is clear: the promise to which he refers is not made *by* an other, but rather promises us the other. This promise of the other is manifold: "the other to which our language by its structure as language *refers*, the other one *whom* we address, the other one *by whom* we are addressed, and indeed the *other others* who witness our conversation, if only at times by being left out of it" (2001b, 300). This depiction of the other certainly echoes Lévinas's inclusion of the other as a primordial object of consciousness, but that is not Caputo's intention.

Rather, the experience of the promise of language is a solitary experience. No relationship is claimed to ensue with God or neighbor.

This promise of language, for Caputo, is imbued with desire. In a correlation that is not necessarily intuitive, Caputo associates the promise of language with the *desire* of language: “*différance*, *écriture*, undecidability, the whole repertoire of deconstructive quasi-transcendentals, go hand in hand with desire, with the desire of language, the language of desire” (2000, 262). The phrase “desire of language” can be understood as referring to intent inherent in language-formation or, in Cunningham’s words, the desire “to say something”:

Language, because it is linguistic, cannot have an outside yet, in a sense, language is but the movement towards an outside. Language is the “embodiment” of the desire for an outside. This is true because language desires to say something, for language hopes that its significations actually bear significance. The outside is maybe the secret name for this desire. Language, in that it endeavors to communicate or to say something, wishes there to be something in what is said. In desiring thus, language desires that which is not reducible to itself. Language is in this way the desire for something other than language. (2002, 155-56)

In other words, consciousness as it forms language desires what it cannot have: that which is beyond language. This is a subtle idea, in that the desire that Caputo and Derrida have described is a desire for something that the subject cannot precisely identify, something outside of the signifiers that constitute language. Nevertheless, Caputo finds in deconstruction a means to assuage this desire: “Deconstruction is called forth in response to the unrepresentable” (1997, xix). This perspective significantly distinguishes his project from that of phenomenologists. While phenomenologists endeavor to articulate how one may perceive a manifestation of God, Caputo attempts to describe the experience one may have from language that embodies the unrepresentable idea of God, a word that belongs to “conditioned and coded strings of signifiers” (2006b, 2). As we have already seen in prior chapters, phenomenologists are justifiably called to account when they posit a variety of phenomena somehow experienced outside of consciousness—or, though experienced within consciousness, are incomprehensible. Radical

hermeneuts have more flexibility; they do not (generally) claim adequacy of language for any purpose. The quandary of meaning is their project, rather than their dilemma.⁵⁵

Rather than attempting to find clarity in the idea of God, Caputo addresses his focus on the *name* of God—the word “God”—rather than on the presumed divine entity or force that has been worshipped by adherents to Western religion for millennia. To that end, he attempts to achieve clarity through use of the concept of the *event*.⁵⁶ He finds that within the name of God, an “event” is harbored. The word “God” and all attempts by language and tradition to *name* God are deconstructible—not because of any failing of language, but as a result of the inherent aspect of the signifiers that exist for the idea of God. In this way, Caputo considers the name of God to be a part of natural language, historically constituted or constructed. By contrast, he claims an event is undeconstructible (2006b, 6). There is no crisp boundary between the name and the event contained therein. Caputo explains:

The event is the open-ended promise contained within a name, but a promise that the name can neither contain nor deliver. ... A name is conditioned, coded, and finite, whereas the event it shelters is unconditional and infinite in the sense of being capable of endless linkings and endlessly productive dissemination. ... Names are endlessly translatable, whereas events are what names are trying to translate, not in the sense of an inner semantic essence to be transferred, but in the sense of carrying (*ferre*) themselves toward (trans) the event.... Events are what names ‘mean’ in the sense of what they are getting at, what they are trying to actualize, the source of their restlessness, the endless

⁵⁵ Caputo does not claim to experience—or expect to experience—any actual manifestation of God-the-being or the Being-of-God. However, in a rare comment on phenomenological implications of deconstruction, he acknowledged that the human experience of a desire for that which is encompassed in the name of God can be seen as providing a phenomenological approach to God. A “quasi-phenomenological reduction” occurs in moving from the name to the event (2006b, 13).

⁵⁶ It is not clear that Caputo uses the term “event” in precisely the same manner as other scholars of hermeneutics. For example, Paul Ricoeur refers to the “event of language” to emphasize its temporal nature, its “fleeting character” (1976, 9). An event is, in Ricoeur’s usage, a reference of language: “That someone refers to something at a certain time is an event, a speech event” (20). However, even if Caputo’s use of the term differs in its details, the distinction made by Caputo between word and event is similar to that made by Ricoeur between reference and event. Both are concerned with meaning that can be found in the experience of the event.

ends toward which names reach out... . Names are trying to help make things happen, while events are what is happening. (2006b, 2-3)

For Caputo, the experience one may have of the event of the name of God releases “everything vocative, evocative, provocative, or promised when we use this name.” It “comes over us, overtakes us imposes itself upon us, lays claim to us” (123). At the risk of understatement, one may say that the experience that Caputo portrays is very powerful, indeed, notwithstanding that it is only an experience that comes out of deconstruction. Though not characterized as such by Caputo, however, we need to ask: can it be understood as a mystical religious experience? Possibly. As he explains, “[t]he name of God is the name of an event neither inside nor outside, above or below, but up ahead, neither real nor unreal, but not yet real. ...The name of God occupies a considerable place in our conscious thoughts even as it settles deeply into our unconscious” (123). Given the inspiration that Caputo finds in the writings of mystics such as Eckhart, he would likely not deny that the passion found in his prose reflects the awe he shares with such mystics when addressing the topic of God. Yet he would likely want his reader to be clear as to his ultimate premise that the experience of the event of the name of God is a trigger for faith in the impossible—and potentially nothing more. It inspires faith for the unexpected that is to come, but not faith in the major tenets of Western religion. For Caputo, it thereby *frees* the name of God: “This is a reduction *from* any present determination or determinate form of the name of God, *from* what is happening or being named in the name of God at present, which contracts God to the order of being, *to* whatever event the name of God is promising, thereby freeing the name of God and letting it rise up to the order of expectation, so that the name of God is a way to hail the incoming of an event” (2006b, 121).

The name of God functioning as a promise of language exists alongside its capacity as a desire of language. This desire of language is understood by Caputo as an expression of affirmation that inspires faith:

For language is an archi-“yes” to the coming of the other. The first word we utter when we speak or pray is yes. Yes is not so much a single word in the language but the yes of language itself, language as a saying yes to what calls upon us to speak. But without knowing what calls upon us to speak, responding without being able to identify what addresses us. So that primordial yes is second, coming as it does as the yes which answers yes to the first yes, the first affirmation, the prior calling of what is to come, which solicits us. What is calling? What is coming? What is happening? Who knows, if we do not know who we are? Is it God or justice? God’s kingdom to come or a democracy to come? ...The characteristic trait of such undecidability is to say that our lives are marked by a radical, structural inability to settle such archi-questions. (2000, 262)

As we have seen, Caputo envisions a powerful experience of the event of the name of God occurring through deconstruction. But he is not as clear as to how we should understand such an experience from the standpoint of how meaning emerges in consciousness. Presumably an event, as understood by Caputo, emerges out of language creation; the event that is experienced is found in the *meaning* of the word God. One must assume the experience occurs within consciousness either as part of a creation of meaning or as a reflective thought that considers the meaning that has emerged. Because Caputo’s view is driven by *radical* hermeneutics, it expands the possibilities for what can be experienced through a hermeneutic approach. He contrasts his perspective with that of Hans-Georg Gadamer, one of the most respected, but moderate voices in modern philosophy’s quest to understand how meaning in language should be understood. Caputo characterizes Gadamer’s “philosophical hermeneutics” as “a reactionary gesture” and “a more comforting doctrine” (1987, 5). He reads Gadamer as being hostile to a deconstructive approach, given that deconstruction typically rejects the possibility of finding truth within texts through any hermeneutic strategy. Richard Rorty also questions the utility of the views of Derrida, arguing that Derrida is primarily interested in the “lubriciousness of the tangled” (1995, 126).

A hermeneutic experience of an event, as depicted by Caputo, is certainly different than the manner of hermeneutic experience depicted by Gadamer in his work *Truth and Method*. For Gadamer, a hermeneutic experience occurs when “a person reading a text is himself part of the

meaning he apprehends” (2014, 349). The experience of the event that Caputo perceives has a far broader meaning, one more akin to a mystical experience. How should the concept be understood in this context? Is the phrase “experience of the event” redundant in that the event (as something that has meaning) is, itself, a hermeneutic experience—hence, resulting in the depiction of an experience of an experience? If so, does the depiction imply thinking a thought, in other words a reflective experience? Gadamer describes this circumstance as “the reflective moment of consciousness coming to itself” (353) and as “an experience that experiences reality” (355). Yet the distinction may not have much relevance to the consequences of experiencing language. Gadamer explains that a “person who thinks something—i.e., says it to himself—means by it the thing that he thinks” (443).

Caputo may not care either way. His project does not attempt to square the details of his brand of radical hermeneutics with the thinking of other contemporary hermeneuts. In both *Radical Hermeneutics* and *More Radical Hermeneutics*, he rejects the possibility that a hermeneutic endeavor can provide a methodology for gleaning truth and meaning that resides in a text or in art or tradition. While that endeavor is central to the projects of hermeneuts such as Gadamer and Ricoeur, it is of little interest to Caputo. It is likely true, as well, that deconstruction’s interest in thinking the impossible is not within the scope of Gadamer’s hermeneutic philosophy. Gadamer’s hermeneutic experience is not one that proclaims a welcoming of the impossible; his methodology does not address how one should understand the experience of aporiae. While Gadamer finds human understanding to occur through a “fusion of the horizons of understanding” (2014, 385), Caputo disagrees. He claims that Derrida’s “notion of infinity blocks the fusion of horizons, and sees to it that the Other always belongs to the step beyond, the step we cannot take, the other shore, the bridge we cannot build” (2000, 58). Yet Caputo and Gadamer share much in their underlying thinking about language, for example, with respect to the way in which language operates. Caputo agrees that “[l]anguage is the emergence,

constitution, or coming into being of meaning. ...Language is related to meaning as the explicit to the implicit, the emergent to the latent, the actual to the possible” (2000, 53).

Given the distinct, but seemingly relevant, perspectives that phenomenology and hermeneutics offer, how should one best characterize an experience of language? Can it be understood as a phenomenon under an expanded reading of Husserl proffered by Marion—as something that has offered itself in intuition? Is it a “saying” of the kind that Lévinas depicted and, if so, does that mean that it is or is not a phenomenon? If one were to say that it is best understood as a hermeneutic experience, would that then exclude the possibility that it comes out of a saying or results in a phenomenon? Finally, taking a step back, are we attempting to parse this occurrence within consciousness too precisely, given that any description that one can give—after the fact—is highly personal and unprovable? We will explore this intersection of perspectives further in the following chapter.

4.4 Philosophy or Theology? (Part 3)

As we have seen in the preceding chapters, “new” phenomenology delves deeper into the recesses of consciousness than does classical phenomenology, largely as a result of a near-abandonment of Husserlian criteria that exclude phenomena that cannot be fulfilled in intuition. Phenomenologists such as Lévinas and Marion embrace incomprehensibility, rather than setting it aside for other disciplines to puzzle over. If one is asked to accept the concept of phenomena that are incomprehensible, then one may well wish to consider in greater detail what actually occurs within consciousness when incomprehensibility is manifested. And in some respects, the stakes are higher when the phenomena are depicted as being of a divine origin. Lévinas and Marion appear to recognize that more must be said on this topic than phenomenology has traditionally offered as part of its methodology. Lévinas described an experience of the Other as a *saying* that occurs anterior to consciousness, in which words are inadequate to convey the saying. Marion finds God’s revelations to be incomprehensible—even unthinkable. Although

Caputo's project is by no means offered as an expansion on the thinking of Lévinas and Marion, I find it to provide relevant insights into the implications of their thinking.

In part, his contributions to questions regarding the nature of religious experience are valuable in that—unlike Lévinas and Marion—Caputo does not presume the existence of God or anything resembling God. One could argue that if Lévinas and Marion are mistaken in their underlying assumptions with respect to the existence of a divine Other, their conclusions are largely irrelevant. For Caputo, such assumptions are not made. Are there divine forces at work outside of our physical world? He would say no, or at least that we should go on with our lives as though the physical world that we perceive is the only world that has relevance to the ethical dilemmas that humans face. Is there an exalted place within consciousness—whether soul, mind or a higher level of functionality within our brain activity—that interacts with God or phenomena of a divine source? Caputo would say no, or at least that the existence of such an exalted place changes nothing about the uncertainties surrounding the meaning of human desire for interaction with the divine. Yet his concerns are not totally distinct from those of theology; like Lévinas, Caputo seeks a source for ethics in an era in which the authority of Western religion is no longer widely recognized. In my view, Caputo is somewhat persuaded, but nevertheless troubled, by the ethical perspectives of Nietzsche.

Caputo's works largely echo the disdain that Nietzsche held for matters of traditional religious faith and, in particular, divinely inspired truth. Yet, I consider Caputo's project to be a counter-argument to Nietzsche's wholesale dismissal of tenets of Western religion. Nietzsche dismisses Christian morality as not only misguided, but as a "base" and "wretched" way of thinking (1968, 129), "thoroughly immoral" (190, 70) and "an idiosyncrasy of the degenerate" (56). His project was one that stared down "passive" and "weary" nihilism (1968, 17-19) and offered as the antidote an affirmation of the human experience and the embrace of human

strength and the will to power. Against the “merciless truth” offered by Nietzsche, Caputo offered a rejoinder driven by deconstruction—or, as he describes it, radical hermeneutics.⁵⁷

Given its focus on religion without Religion and its endorsement of postmodern messianic faith, should Caputo’s hermeneutic endeavor be understood as philosophy, or would it more properly be characterized as theology? Caputo is largely indifferent as to how readers may label his project—unlike Marion who consistently strove to have his phenomenological contentions accepted as philosophy. In Caputo’s introduction to *The Weakness of God*, he wrote, “I cannot deny that what I am doing here is theological. ...Theology is my weakness, ...what I secretly desire, or maybe not so secretly, even as it desires everything of me” (1). Yet, do theological implications necessarily preclude philosophical conclusions? In my view, concerns by Janicaud and others that contemporary philosophy is being bastardized in some way by thinkers who are also schooled in theology are overwrought. Although critics of the so-called theological turn in phenomenology seem to presume the possibility of a bright line that can separate philosophy from theology, in practice such a separation is difficult to achieve, given philosophy’s concern with the nature of truth and its relationship with human consciousness.

Janicaud did not target Caputo for criticism as a crypto-theologian and yet, Caputo in his body of work that is situated squarely within the thinking of Nietzsche and Heidegger, nevertheless seeks to expand the manner in which philosophy can address religious experience. I find that Caputo’s views help address the questions that I posed in Chapter 1 as to a proper understanding of religious experience by philosophy. While his views do not seamlessly integrate with those of Lévinas and Marion, they do—in my estimation—offer a clearer

⁵⁷ At this juncture, one might question whether any purely hermeneutic endeavor should be considered as working within the realm of philosophy. Gadamer asserts that hermeneutics constitutes “a universal aspect of philosophy, and not just the methodological basis of the so-called human sciences” (2014, 491). In his view, hermeneutics is not just an interpretive tool; rather it is a means of understanding Being: “being is language...revealed to us by the hermeneutic experience” (502).

understanding of the manner in which consciousness could perceive divine manifestations. Caputo addresses consciousness's response to "the call" with a disciplined analysis of the struggle within consciousness to create meaning out of incomprehensibility. This is an area arguably neglected by Marion and handled in a less-than-concrete manner by Lévinas. Does it matter that Caputo denies the divinity of the source of the call that Lévinas and Marion depict? In my view, no. Caputo's agnostic approach to the idea of impossibility expands opportunities for evaluating religious experience; such experience can be considered whether or not one is prepared to accept the possibility of God. While Caputo does not attempt to offer his hermeneutic perspective as an offshoot of phenomenology, he does not ignore possible connections: he characterizes religious experience of the impossible as a "post-phenomenological experience" of "running up against the unforeseeable" (1997, 209).

Caputo's hermeneutic explication on thinking the impossible is a fundamental element of his project. He finds in the experience of thinking the impossible a source or justification for *faith*—a word that may define his project as theology for those who endeavor to strictly separate matters of religion from philosophy. However, deconstruction, in the hands of Caputo, never pits faith against reason and never confuses faith with knowledge. The hallmarks of his deconstructive perspective are indeterminacy and undecidability. In his view, reason must adapt to those conditions and accept the possibility that faith informs reason just as knowledge supports reason. He argues that precisely *because* of this indeterminacy and undecidability, deconstruction emphasizes that "everything begins and ends in faith.... [W]hat we call reason turns on faith" (2001b, 296). Deconstruction provides a way for philosophers to understand faith that is distinguishable from the faith proclaimed by Western religion. Deconstruction eliminates for philosophy—and theology—any requirement that faith claim to be supported by knowledge. For Caputo, the undecidability of deconstruction (ironically) provides clarity in this respect:

“Undecidability is the reason that faith is faith and not Knowledge and the way that faith can be true without Knowledge” (2001a, 128).

Having concluded my analysis of the projects of Lévinas, Marion, and Caputo, I will in the following chapter further explore the possibility that deconstruction offers a means for phenomenology to better understand the nature of phenomena that are perceived as manifested from outside of Being. While the projects of Lévinas, Marion, and Caputo cannot be conceptualized as puzzle pieces perfectly fitting together to reveal a previously ambiguous whole, I would argue that their ideas complement each other and aid in a fuller understanding of the nature of religious experience. As we will see, language-formation within consciousness is arguably a critical element in understanding the nature of religious experience, whether such experience is considered from the perspective of Lévinas, Marion, or Caputo.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUDING OBSERVATIONS AND QUESTIONS

[I]f in a tongue you utter speech that is not intelligible, how will anyone know what is being said? For you will be speaking into the air. ...Therefore, one who speaks a tongue should pray for the power to interpret.

St. Paul, *I Corinthians 14: 9-13*

Truth claims made by religious authorities have been openly challenged since the Enlightenment by Western philosophers unwilling to fully accept traditional tenets of religious faith and practice. Of course, skepticism regarding such matters did not originate in recent times. Aristophanes wrote more than two thousand years ago, “Surely you don't believe in the gods. What's your argument? Where's your proof?” Some philosophers have acknowledged the theoretical possibility of gods, but questioned what can be known about them, given the relative paucity—some would say complete absence—of sensory experience available to allow individuals to form an understanding of their nature. However, a sensory experience, the manner of experience that provides empirical evidence of accuracy, is not promised to us by most strains of Western religion. Miraculous manifestations of divine figures are sometimes proclaimed and celebrated, but miracles do not occur in the presence of the vast majority of humans. Rather, most depictions of religious experience are accounts of occurrences within the confines of individual consciousness, invisible to the world and lacking in proof of any kind—other than the earnest testimony of those who affirm that they have, in fact, experienced God.

Perhaps it is the general lack of empirical proof of the existence and nature of God that has motivated philosophers and theologians to attempt to offer compelling logical proof: arguments based on reason alone. In a turn of phrase awkward by today's standards, Saint Anselm claimed to prove God's existence by mentally testing the possibility of a being “than which no greater can be conceived.” René Descartes and Gottfried Leibniz offered ontological

arguments of a similar nature, attempting to correct shortcomings in St. Anselm's logic. Such arguments generally sufficed among philosophers until the eighteenth century, when thinkers such as David Hume and Immanuel Kant boldly contended that all such traditional ontological arguments were inherently faulty—and therefore proved nothing. Kant and most of his contemporaries did not go so far as to contend that their arguments proved the non-existence of God; rather, their contention was that a reasoned analysis of available empirical evidence *could not prove* the existence of the God worshipped by Western religion. This era was a turning point in philosophy of religion; it set the stage for philosophers and theologians to consider more fundamental questions. Does God even exist? If so—or *if not*—how should philosophers talk about a type of experience within consciousness described by many individuals in which the divine is invisibly and inaudibly manifested?

Possibly of greater import, if one has become less confident about our ability to know God, what is the correlation between such God and truth? Assuming that truth—including truth upon which we base our ethics—is found in God's nature, how is such truth imparted to humankind? What manner of religious experience allows revelation to occur? And if and when the divine is manifested to any of us, is there language adequate to the task of explicating its meaning? Those have been the underlying questions that have guided this dissertation. Many contemporary philosophers would consider my endeavor to be a fool's errand of sorts, in that it openly considers the possibility of human experience of the divine. Possibly so. My project is open to all possibilities and does not start from the supposition of a non-existent or thoroughly silent God.

Friedrich Nietzsche likely spoke for the majority of Continental philosophers in the final decades of the nineteenth century when he ridiculed the concept of a heavenly realm and proclaimed in no uncertain terms that the God of Western religion is non-existent. Nietzsche's claim that "the 'apparent' world is the only one" was largely driven by confidence in the

advances in science and the “testimony of the senses” (1990, 46). Ironically, in their embrace of science and its reliance on empirical evidence to distinguish between reality and superstition, such philosophers vastly underestimated the extent to which scientific reality is not beholden to the testimony of the senses. I see in the perspectives of most seminal thinkers of this period an overconfidence in the role that science can play in answering questions that arise outside of science. There is a bit of arrogance in writers such as Nietzsche, Freud, and Marx in their assumptions that the weight of science—and even the forces of history—were behind them in their denial of the existence of what empirical evidence cannot prove. Accordingly, much turn-of-the-century philosophy is infected by overstatement when it rigidly assumes the non-existence of any divine Other and rejects the possibility of any manifestation of the divine to consciousness.

To be objective about things, a credible argument can indeed be made that there is no God or that any divinity that does exist bears little resemblance to the God of Western religion. Perhaps the latter contention, though not beyond challenge, is more persuasive. In fact, many twentieth-century philosophers of religion and theologians have distanced themselves from pre-Enlightenment depictions as to the nature of God. For many contemporary thinkers, humankind cannot justifiably trust in the possibility of miraculous interventions within worldly affairs by an omnipotent, immortal creator who loves humankind. Such skepticism is not just found within the atheism of Nietzsche, Jean-Paul Sartre, and other such voices; it is squarely within mainstream twentieth-century theology. Various modern theologians including Paul Tillich and Dietrich Bonhoeffer largely rejected traditional supernatural elements of Western religion. Tillich argued that theologians who continue to depict God as the highest being made known through authoritative revelations “are more dangerous to religion than the so-called atheistic scientists” (1964, 5). Such theologians do not deny the existence of a divine Other, but are persuaded that most depictions of God found in the sacred texts of Western religion are mythological in nature

and should no longer be foundational in religious practice. Such theologians do not reject the possibility of religious experience but, along with Bonhoeffer, strongly reject the view of God as a *deus ex machina*: a power in the physical world that intercedes at the behest of believers (1967, 188).

I am persuaded that one cannot realistically expect to gain understanding of God through testimony of the senses; conversely though, one cannot expect to find conclusive empirical proof that God does not exist. At best, such proof suggests that God cannot possibly exist, except in a manner vastly at odds with historical hopes and imaginings. Most contemporary philosophers of religion have engaged in God-talk with reference to that which is “other” and divine in the sense of existing outside of the boundaries of the physical world. By convention, the capitalized word “Other” denotes a possible divinity of a relatively benevolent nature that is not defined by religious authority (although philosophers occasionally consider the possibility that the Other is somehow malevolent or a prankster). Yet there is certainty among many—likely most—mainstream contemporary philosophers that no divine entity or force of any kind exists. I believe any such certainty that there is no God reflects an overstatement of the case that can be made; however, making a case to the contrary is fraught with challenge. Arguments to the effect that a divine Other can shape human experience in the physical world frequently have theological underpinnings. However, arguments that posit a disengaged Other that affects nothing within the physical world often lapse into little more than speculative mental constructs. How is one to strike a balance and allow consideration by contemporary philosophers of common claims of religious experience—that the divine has somehow been manifested to such claimants? I find that the late twentieth-century movement among French phenomenologists to engage the topic remains a valuable and credible source of insight.

In my analysis of the writings of Lévinas and Marion—so-called “new” phenomenology—I find a rational, though not traditional, depiction of religious experience—

and, importantly, of a manner of religious experience that bears the hallmarks of imparting a source of truth to humankind. Their logic is compelling, though not without flaws. To some extent, their arguments flounder when one takes a close and critical look at their contentions with respect to how consciousness reacts to manifestations of the divine. I also find the hermeneutic project of Caputo to be valuable in supplementing the thinking of Lévinas and Marion by providing a perspective that focuses more closely on the workings of consciousness. In so doing, Caputo helps articulate the possibility of linkage between religious experience and truth.

5.1 “New” Phenomenology

Why should philosophy reconsider the general consensus established early in the twentieth century that the God of Western religion is dead? Perhaps the best response to a Nietzschean rejection of the possibility of a deity that cannot be authenticated by empirical evidence was the argument proffered by Lévinas and Marion, that the methodology of classical phenomenology is unnecessarily restrictive. Those thinkers contend that philosophy, through phenomenology, should allow for the possibility of phenomena that are manifested in ways other than through the testimony of the senses, the means of proof endorsed by classical phenomenology. They made the case that phenomenology, rigorously applied, must recognize all that is manifested to consciousness, regardless of the nature of such manifestations. Recognizing the possibility of such phenomena is not an inconsequential advance in thinking. It provides a philosophical justification for consideration of things outside of the physical world—and for sources of truth outside of human observation and deliberation. As Marion argued, phenomenology gives ontology its sole method (1998, 43). Quite simply, for him, there is *no other* credible means for philosophy to consider the possibility of religious experience.

Traditionally, perception of the divine in one’s quiet reflection has always been within the province of theology. Western religion and its theologians offer assurances that each of us can sometimes experience the quiet voice of God in our hearts and minds. For at least the last

two hundred years, philosophers have generally either demurred on that topic or, in concert with Nietzsche and Freud, rejected any such possibility. Lévinas, Marion, and their followers were unwilling to allow philosophy to concede the battle—or even to stand on the sidelines. For each, it was essential to his project that philosophy rethink its position on human perception of the divine. Marion, in particular, sought to establish that a proper reading of Husserl requires thinkers to accept the legitimacy of phenomena that are perceived only within consciousness with no correlative manifestation to the senses. Lévinas sought to overcome the rigidity of Husserl’s methodology, in order to recognize the legitimacy of phenomena originating from outside of Being. As I have discussed in previous chapters, Husserl’s methodology was an attempt to provide philosophy with an approach to truth that mirrored the scientific method. However, as valuable as that methodology has been as a tool to question unsupportable belief systems, such methodology proves cumbersome and results in unintended consequences: the possible exclusion from consideration of certain categories of truth.

Read together, the writings of Lévinas and Marion offer an expanded template for what manner of divine interaction contemporary philosophy may properly consider without lapsing into highly questionable logic or straying into faith-based, theological thinking. Fundamentally, they require philosophy to give the stamp of phenomenological respectability to all that is given to consciousness from any origin. The impact of this view on philosophy should not be underestimated. Prior to Lévinas, philosophy had largely concluded its consideration of God. It had generally moved on to addressing the ramifications of a world without any divine source of truth and ethics. However, this late-twentieth-century French expansion of phenomenology has allowed a reexamination of the possibility of a source of truth and meaning with an origin outside of the physical world, a source that interacts with us. Were this manner of phenomena only a means for gathering facts about a disinterested realm outside of the physical world, one might question the relevance of such an advance in thinking to the human condition. Just as the

scientific discovery of seven additional spatial dimensions that we will never be able to perceive or comprehend has little import to our daily lives, perception of a completely silent, god-like force outside of Being might be of limited consequence. However, both Lévinas and Marion are clear in their views that, although the Other is and remains wholly outside of Being, meaning is manifested from the Other to human consciousness. In opposition to nihilism, such thinking offers the possibility of truth—in addition to a belief system about the source of that truth.

For Lévinas and Marion, an experience of the divine is an experience of substance—not just a sense of peace or well-being. Lévinas described the experience as one in which individuals perceive a “call” from the Other. Marion echoes Lévinas’s thinking and takes it further, describing the call as an unsettling, anonymous approach from something undefinable in the framework of Being, something incomprehensible. Even Caputo, who denies the likelihood that a divine, god-like presence actually exists, acknowledges a state of mind which he, too, refers to as the call. However, for Caputo the experience of a call is likely more akin to what Jean-Yves Lacoste terms restlessness: a condition that does not involve a clear desire for God because it is “immemorially steeped in ambiguity, which makes every desire ignorant of what it desires” (2004, 198n20).

The word “call” here is not arbitrarily chosen. The concept of a call is steeped in Judeo-Christian tradition, one that describes an interruption to human consciousness rich in imagery. In Biblical accounts, both Moses and Samuel, while minding their own affairs, heard the voice of God calling them by name (Exodus 3:4, I Samuel 3:4). Describing modern experience of the divine as hearing a call evokes an image of a transcendent Other that seeks to initiate a relationship with humankind. This imagery—the Other interacting with humankind in the manner of “something that resembles God”⁵⁸—is fundamental to understanding and finding words to describe religious experience. For Lévinas, such an experience is outside of memory.

⁵⁸ As explained by Lévinas (2012, 293).

For Marion, it is bedazzling but incomprehensible. For Caputo it is an aporia triggered by perceiving the undecidability associated with God.

Perhaps the call—in whatever form it may occur—is the essence of religious experience. However, the common postmodern view of the call does not expect the source of that call to exist within Being. Rather, the experience of the Other is explicitly the perception of something originating outside of, or independently from, Being. Offering an expansion of phenomenology to include anything manifested to consciousness from outside of Being was a critical component of both Lévinas's and Marion's project. For Lévinas, the extreme Other that interrupts consciousness is outside of Being. For Marion, the Other is potentially even further removed from Being, given that the Other is, by Marion's definition, *without* Being. The premise of allowing phenomenology to recognize phenomena that are manifested from outside of Being constitutes the fundamental offering of this new phenomenology. It explodes the discipline that Husserl intended for his methodology by explicitly recognizing perceptions that Husserl would no doubt have expected to be excluded by his transcendental reduction. The transcendental reduction was intended to exclude from consideration all pre-suppositions and mental constructs. Much of what Lévinas and Marion offer as “advances” in philosophy—even if legitimately relevant to philosophy—fall in the category of mental constructs and would surely be excluded by a disciplined application of classical phenomenology. Moreover, neither Lévinas nor Marion denies that criticism. Indeed, Lévinas's stated goal is to overcome the limitations of Husserl's methodology, just as Marion's arguments are framed as expansions beyond the thinking of Husserl and Heidegger. Do their arguments lapse into false logic and hyperbole? The consequences of expanding phenomenology in this way certainly can be criticized as abandoning the purpose of the original phenomenological objective: approaching philosophical questions from a disciplined, scientific perspective. Yet I believe there is rationality—and even elegance—

in Marion's central premise that philosophers must accept whatever offers itself to consciousness wholly as it gives itself.

Perhaps a greater challenge for philosophers is determining how to evaluate and talk about what a recipient of the call may claim has been given to consciousness. How can one find language to describe what consciousness cannot fully comprehend? Christian mystics have used apophatic language as praise for God. Such an approach may give inspiration to philosophers, but few answers are found there. How should we talk about phenomena that are only sensations within one's mind, potentially unformed thoughts derived from a source outside of Being?

5.2 Incomprehensibility or Truth?

Lévinas provided an explanation of the manner in which he believes truth and ethical demands are given to each of us by a divine Other: an approach that occurs anterior to consciousness. In my view, he argues for an encounter with the Other that is beyond what philosophy can affirm or deny. It is within the realm of philosophical thinking to consider the possibility that we may perceive phenomena that originate outside of Being. However, to conclude that each of us has, in fact, had an encounter outside of Being prior to the formation of consciousness is beyond the capabilities of philosophy. In offering a framework for understanding our ethical obligations to each other, Lévinas claims that philosophy should not reject the possibility of an approach to each of us by the Other outside of Being—and prior to consciousness. I think it is reasonable for philosophy to consider phenomena that one can perceive notwithstanding that they originate from outside of Being, for example, phenomena that exist in circumstances in which temporal boundaries are absent. Yet Lévinas strays from philosophy when he provides an unknowable description of what occurs prior to consciousness and outside of the dimension of time. He asserts that human experience of the Other cannot be fully comprehended; cognition is not possible. One is required to “think beyond what one thinks.” Lévinas focused his effort to think beyond the limitations of classical phenomenology by

rejecting any requirement that awareness of the Other be accomplished through Husserlian intentionality, in large measure, because he viewed the approach of the Other to occur outside of time and, therefore, memory. His ultimate conclusions regarding “pre-original” encounters with the Other are founded in mysticism or radical theology to a far greater degree than phenomenology. Does that mean that his conclusions are wrong or that his ethical insights are misguided? Not at all. But to evaluate criticism lodged against Lévinas’s project, one is best-served to acknowledge the boundary between philosophy and faith-based insights. I believe that his project includes elements of both.

Marion’s contribution to this area of thought was even more radical. Marion depicted God as not only being unconstrained by time, but as something entirely without Being. As an entity or force unconnected with any aspect of Being, God would therefore appear as incomprehensible to the human mind. For Marion, such incomprehensibility is not merely that one perceives God “as through a glass darkly.”⁵⁹ On the contrary, to the consternation of some contemporary theologians, Marion posits that all manifestations of God to consciousness are by definition incomprehensible. Although God’s approach to humankind is almost certainly of a benevolent nature, one that Marion describes as bedazzling, nevertheless, that which is given to consciousness by God cannot be comprehended. Marion’s project is noteworthy for its structure as a step-by-step demonstration that phenomenology, properly understood, must accept all that is given to consciousness. He takes great pains to separate his faith-based conclusions from his philosophical contentions. His premise of phenomenological “givenness” allows, in his words, only the possibility of revelation and does not affirm the scope or content of divine revelation. Caputo and others find Marion’s description of bedazzling, saturated phenomena to be

⁵⁹ The much-quoted phrase attributed to the apostle Paul acknowledging the inadequacy of earthly knowledge of God: “For now we see in a mirror dimly [more traditionally translated, ‘through a glass darkly’], but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known” (I Corinthians 13:12).

hyperbole. Marion's assertion that manifestations of God are, by their nature, incomprehensible appears to some as questionable. If all such phenomena are incomprehensible, how can the revelation contained in the sacred texts of Western religion be credible? How can truth be found in incomprehensibility?

Perhaps Marion is guilty of overstatement. Nevertheless, he has identified an aspect of religious experience that is broadly recognized: the inadequacy of language to encompass what is perceived. Caputo labels Marion's category of super-saturated phenomena as hyperbole, yet Caputo finds value in considering innate human response to the type of aporia similar to that which Marion was considering. Caputo is inspired by mystics such as Meister Eckhart who found much in the nature of God to be incomprehensible. Yet Caputo is fascinated by uncertainty of meaning that stems from a lack of content rather than from an abundance. In contrast with Marion, who found God to be manifested in phenomena of bedazzling excess, Caputo finds an understanding of the human condition in an exploration of the *khôra*: the mythical place of silence and ineffability.

Incomprehensibility of the divine is seen by Lévinas and Marion, in large part, as an attribute of a divinity outside of Being. In that regard, they have accepted a view of Being that largely limits the horizons of Being to that which is manifested to the senses. By contrast, that which is manifested only to consciousness may be viewed as possibly originating from outside of the horizons of Being. Does the concept of emanations originating from outside of Being come dangerously close to resembling superstition clothed in Heideggerian terminology? Possibly, if we were to define superstition broadly as belief in things that science cannot affirm; however, as has been demonstrated by Lyotard, there are inherent limitations in the ability of the scientific method to ascertain truth. In any event, modern science makes it increasingly credible that a powerful, mysterious presence that resembles God could exist and nevertheless never be manifested to the senses. As we have previously observed, twenty-first-century science now

recognizes much that defies the traditional scientific method, including multiple unseen additional dimensions that likely muddle what traditional science could articulate about Being and possibilities outside of Being.

Lévinas found Husserlian phenomenology to be useful—but not fully adequate—to describe the manner in which humans have been influenced by an ethical call originating from the Other. He described it as an interruption of human consciousness that demands responsibility for the human other. However, in depicting the encounter as something occurring outside of the temporal realities of Being, he rejected any philosophical standard that imposed comprehensibility. For Lévinas, the encounter occurs in a manner outside of cognition; in that sense, it is incomprehensible. However, he does not assert that the call given by the Other is incomprehensible or not cognizable. The call itself—that which is manifested—is not deemed incomprehensible or particularly paradoxical.

By contrast, Marion theorizes that all manifestations of God are by their nature incomprehensible, in large part, because they are given to consciousness from a source that is without Being. Taken at face value, the implications of such a view are difficult to conceptualize. Marion recognizes the radical turn to phenomenology that he is offering. He describes the consequences as impossible. Religious experience for him takes the form of human consciousness somehow assimilating impossibility. To some extent, the experience of impossibility that Marion describes echoes Lévinas; it is a perception that exceeds comprehension, an experience for which words prove inadequate. But Marion intends to go farther than Lévinas. For Marion, the impossible is, in fact, literally impossible—except for God, who makes the impossible possible.

Caputo shares the desire of Lévinas and Marion to explore the complexity of human perception of the divine, but is wholly unconvinced that a divinity of any kind serves as the source of that perception. For Caputo, one's encounter with the implications of impossibility is,

indeed, paradoxical, but it is not instigated by God or any otherworldly force. Rather, one faces the paradox of impossibility as a consequence of innate longing for that which is to come. With a perspective inspired by deconstruction, Caputo finds insight in a radically hermeneutic exploration of fundamental beliefs within Western religion—in particular, messianic hope. Through that endeavor, one experiences the passion for the impossible. Impossibility, for Caputo, does not refer to things that are literally impossible; rather, it consists of things that are unimaginable and inconceivable. What manifests itself in this experience is nothing but desire. Experience of the impossible is perpetually deferred; it is never manifested; it is always to come. Caputo finds fundamental importance in deconstruction's focus on the concept of impossibility, but he thinks of impossibility as unforeseeability. The impossible is hoped for, but not experienced as such. No faith-based claim is made that the impossible has occurred; rather Caputo offers the idea of a kind of faith that is essentially hope rather than belief—in fact, only a “hope against hope.”

What can one say about the possibility of divinely inspired truth, if Lévinas and Marion are right in their contentions that divine manifestations are inherently incomprehensible? I believe that both of them offer inadequate explanations of the implications of that viewpoint. Lévinas, after emphasizing that every approach by the Other exceeds cognition, nevertheless claims the ability to report that which is communicated by the Other. Marion, after positing the concept of divine but incomprehensible manifestations from a God without Being, nevertheless depicts such manifestations as the source of Western religion's revelations. Here I would argue that neither Lévinas nor Marion appears to fully accept the consequences of their premises. Though they strove to craft their premises with philosophical discipline, arguably, whatever truth may be gleaned from their endeavors originates largely out of faith and is therefore more properly the task of theologians. Yet as I see it, Caputo comes to their aid by offering an alternative to a faith-based search for truth. His project is hermeneutical, broadly defined. It can

be understood as adding a step to a phenomenological inquiry: if something of a divine origin is manifested to consciousness, then the hermeneutic task of ascertaining meaning may be undertaken. If the form of approach that is perceived is the communication of thoughts that can be reduced to words, then the task of hermeneutics becomes clear. Even in an experience characterized by ambiguity and uncertainty, the tools of hermeneutics remain relevant here.

5.3 Language and Meaning

Lévinas recognized that meaning-formation that occurs within consciousness is not as simple a process as selecting words to signify the essence of thoughts. He distinguished between the “saying” and the “said” to emphasize the inadequacy of language to express one’s religious experience. He believed that human experience of the divine occurs outside of time and prior to consciousness—and that the transformation of such perceptions into language remains imperfect. The transcendent truth found there, in the view of Lévinas, exceeds the possibility of cognition; words are inadequate to convey what has been experienced. While Lévinas’s primary intention is to highlight inadequacy of human comprehension when perceiving the face of the Other, I find his perspective to be insightful in its acknowledgment of language-formation as a fundamental component of religious experience. He depicts one’s experience of the Other as a saying without words that culminates in an imprecise said with words that are ultimately inadequate to express the experience.⁶⁰

As I considered the writings of Lévinas I found myself asking whether it is philosophically relevant to consider the existence of an experience of meaning-formation *as*

⁶⁰ Richard Rorty would take issue with any questioning of whether language is adequate to the task of “properly representing the structure of nonhuman reality” (1995, 11). For him, language is not a medium between self and reality; rather it is only a tool for making sentences. He sees no purpose in pursuing questions such as “What is the relationship of language to thought?” because, in his view language and consciousness are inseparable (10). In contrast to the views of Lévinas, he argues that “there is no prelinguistic consciousness to which language needs to be adequate” (21).

such—an unveiling, not just of a phenomenon, but of the complex meaning of that phenomenon. The hermeneutic community of scholars sometimes talks of experiencing language in the context of literary criticism, but I think in that context, they refer to a far less primal experience than I am attempting to describe here. It is one thing to “experience” a literary character’s despair or an author’s attempts at irony, but quite another to experience thinking the impossible,⁶¹ as some philosophers propose to do. If one were to pursue such an inquiry, how should an experience of language be defined? Do the workings of consciousness prior to signification constitute an experience of language? Or would the experience be better understood as one of language-formation, an experience of creating meaning? Or are these experiences inseparable? As I will argue below, the thinking of Marion may give support to the concept of an experience of language as such, and the views of Caputo may give insight as to the nature of any such experience. However, an in-depth consideration of the implications of meaning-formation as an experience recognizable by phenomenology is something requiring a more sustained analysis than I have attempted in this dissertation.

For Marion, who strives mightily to frame his thinking within the parameters of phenomenology, religious experience is depicted as a glimpse of impossibility: a saturated phenomenon that triggers a failure of language. Marion calls philosophy to account for the possibility of phenomena that are, in fact, divinely revealed truths. Yet we are warned that, as manifested, the phenomena are bedazzling and largely beyond comprehension; the phenomena are infused with impossibility. Marion is not describing how the prophets of old experienced the voice of God; rather he is endeavoring to provide a means for philosophers to talk about contemporary manifestations of truth from a God that Marion believes to be real but far less

⁶¹ “Thinking the impossible,” as I have noted in earlier chapters, is almost always characterized by perplexity, but includes a spectrum of contexts ranging from consideration of aporiae that involve a deadlock in reason to the “im-possible” as used by Caputo to denote the unexpected to the *literally* impossible as used by Marion. Derrida’s use of the word, in my view, most resembles Platonic aporiae in deconstruction’s focus on indeterminability and undecidability.

comprehensible than the God depicted in the sacred texts of Western religion. Is an encounter with a bedazzling, incomprehensible phenomenon described by Marion an experience reducible to thinking impossibility? It is by Marion's own account typically an encounter that results in an inadequate attempt to find language for what is manifested to consciousness by God. I believe that such a phenomenon can be understood as an experience of language: thought that struggles to find adequate signification. To be clear, Marion does not contend that all such manifestations from outside of Being remain incomprehensible. Without fully explaining his reasoning, Marion asserts that the existence of *comprehensible* divine revelation, including that found in the sacred texts of Western religion, is consistent with his view of phenomenology. One might conclude that one's experience of saturated phenomena must ultimately be guided by faith in order for that which reveals itself to be comprehensible and, ultimately, to be given credence as truth.

At this juncture, I feel compelled to ask what subset of readers nod their heads when reading Marion and murmur, "Yes, I've had occasional experiences of bedazzling, incomprehensible manifestations from an ambiguous source. Now I understand better what was happening." I wonder, along with Caputo, Janicaud, and others whether there is hyperbole in most facets of what Marion offers. Bedazzling incomprehensibility is not what William James described as a particularly common variety of religious experience. Although James did not claim to have found a uniform variety of religious experience that was predominate among those claiming to have had them, he did find some commonality: "consciousness [of] *a sense of reality, a feeling of objective presence, a perception* of what we may call 'something there,' more deep and more general than any of the special and particular 'senses' by which the current psychology supposes existent realities to be originally revealed" (1999, 66-67). It is possible that Marion intended by his project to explain only those rare experiences that mystics and prophets claim to have had—and there is likely some merit in such an endeavor. However, such a focus would ignore other and likely more common forms of religious experience.

Caputo considers the concerns that are central to Marion's project in a manner that disclaims any need for assumptions with respect to the existence of God or any divine force. He does not precisely align his thinking with so-called "death of God theologians,"⁶² however, he states with clarity that the call which he perceives to be common in human experience does not emanate from a divine, otherworldly source. Human consciousness is not approached by God or a force that resembles God. Caputo denies that anything is given to consciousness from beyond Being: "If we say a revelation is *tout autre*, that means it breaks in upon us not from another world but comes as *another worlding* of the world, another world-disclosure, another way the world itself opens up, is reconfigured, is 'revealed' in an unforeseeable and unanticipated way" (2013, 137). Yet he finds within human experience a nagging expectation, a longing for the messianic. Unlike Nietzsche, he finds valuable elements within the Christian tradition.

For Caputo, hermeneutics and, in particular, deconstruction offer another way to talk about the human desire for the Other that Lévinas perceives. It allows one to consider incomprehensibility and impossibility with a more concrete thought process. Deconstruction targets fundamental words and names found within Western religion for unflinching and patient interrogation, searching for answers that may be found beneath the surface of language. Many critics are quick to point out that answers, as such, are rarely found through deconstruction. As a method it is characterized by undecidability and indeterminability. Yet, possibly that is the true nature of experience that comes out of an exploration into one's perception of a divine Other. If one is to undertake a deconstructionist response to a call that is perceived, he or she must, fundamentally, accept the paradoxical nature of that call, because—in the parlance of Caputo—the call comes out of a desert in which nothing is there. As an experience of language, it is the

⁶² In the 1960's a radical and controversial form of theology appeared that attempted to offer religious practice and moral values while denying the existence of God.

opposite of what Marion describes. Rather than abundant excess, there is an absence of language; words simply do not exist to depict what is going on.

Although Caputo is generally respectful of the traditions of Western religion and, in particular, the intellectual struggles of theologians and mystics, he is dismissive about the possibility of any genuine experience of the divine. He offers, instead, the possibility of a radical hermeneutic experience emerging out of reading and contemplating texts that contain the names and events of Western religion. In so doing, he indirectly offers a different lens through which to view the conclusions of Lévinas and Marion. Perhaps there is room for more to be said about the manner in which the pursuits of phenomenology and hermeneutics coincide. At its extreme limits, phenomenology can possibly consider things lacking in any physical manifestation that are, nevertheless, perceived by consciousness. Any such perception would be one in which meaning is created by consciousness—or alternatively, in which consciousness struggles to create meaning. I believe that hermeneutics has much to offer in this realm. Deconstruction, in the manner practiced by Caputo and Derrida, provides the potential for an experience of language that is almost mystical. Deconstruction recognizes in the human condition an innate desire for the absolute other, a desire that has left its imprint in the language that we use in worship. One can recognize the possibility of truth being revealed in a deconstructionist interpretation, without any obligation to concede that the subject matter consists only of words rather than divine manifestations. Similarly, in phenomenology one can acknowledge a sense in which meaning is *given* to consciousness, without forming a rigid conclusion as to the source of givenness.

5.4 “Post-Phenomenological” Pursuits

Perhaps the absolute acceptance by new phenomenology of all that is given to consciousness is a valuable advance in thinking, but one that has significant limitations in its capacity to reveal meaning and truth if unaided by hermeneutical undertakings. As we have seen,

Husserl sees limited value to phenomenology in matters of intuition that are incapable of fulfillment. By contrast, Lévinas and Marion argue for an expansion of phenomenology that includes phenomena beyond comprehension. Caputo perceives hyperbole in their depictions of incomprehensibility, but is by no means daunted by the challenges encountered in finding meaning in aporiae that are perceived by consciousness as emanating from divine sources. Such a hermeneutical undertaking is, for Caputo, a “post-phenomenological experience” (1997, 209). Perhaps the phrase “post-phenomenological” adroitly captures the nature of the philosophical undertaking needed to find meaning in religious experiences recognized by phenomenology. The concept is key, in my view, to integrate the thinking of the three philosopher-theologians considered in this dissertation. Marion boldly offers philosophy the means to recognize possible revelation (with a lower case “r”), but he stops short of explaining what form any such revelation may take. The revelations are depicted as bedazzling and incomprehensible, but to be more concrete, are they perceptions that defy signification, perceptions for which, in a literal sense, there are no words? Or are such revelations reducible to words or mental pictures that are, nevertheless, beyond unaided human comprehension? Marion does not say. I see in the hermeneutics of Caputo and even in the interpretive efforts of theologians a necessary adjunct to the thinking of phenomenologists who proffer incomprehensible revelation. Caputo does not disagree. He finds revelation to be within the capacity of radical hermeneutics: revelation is “a moment in the passage from the sensuous through the pictorial to the conceptual grasp of truth” (2013, 136). For him, a revelation is beyond reason “because it exceeds the faculty of reason by way of other faculties. It is beyond reason the way any work of imagination lies beyond reason: It eludes reason’s formal-logical skills while opening up the world in another way, in a more singular and preconceptual way... A revelation reveals by dis-closing a singular and idiomatic world, a life-world, a form of life, a linguistic and cultural framework” (137).

In a compilation of essays titled *Theopoetic Folds*, various writers, including Caputo, argue for religious experience to be understood through “theopoetics” or simply “poetics.” In this context poetics is not poetry or some form of “poetic adornment” of religious premises, but rather is “a repertoire of strategies, discursive and rhetorical, constative and performative, semantic, syntactical and pragmatic, all loosely assembled” used to find meaning in religious experience (138). Caputo sees the connection between what is gleaned from phenomenology and this manner of undertaking; for him, religious phenomena “resonate” with events which are the subject matter of “post-phenomenological poetics” (140). Marion, too, perceived a commonality in the perspectives of phenomenology and hermeneutics, observing that the phenomenological method is practiced as a deconstruction. He considered both to be “derived equally from the reduction, the difference [stemming] solely from the nature of the obstacles cleared away: objectivity, Being as presence, [and] the ‘history of Being’” (2013, 328n1).

The commonality noted by Marion has been observed by others, as well. Other contemporary philosophers have adopted the phraseology of both phenomenology and deconstruction. For example, Jean-Luc Nancy in recently published works that blend philosophy and theology has used deconstruction as a means to reconsider (and reaffirm) tenets of the Christian faith. In his view, to do so “means neither to destroy in order to found anew nor to perpetuate...[but rather] to take apart, to disassemble, to loosen the assembled structure in order to give some play to the possibility from which it emerged but which, qua assembled structure, it hides” (2008, 148). Yet he also considers matters of faith in the phenomenological context of what may be within or outside of the “horizon of sense,” describing his project as a “(de)construction” of that horizon” (156-157). He seizes upon the motif of “opening” as being “at the bottom of the real question” (145), providing a doubling of the inquiry: both into an opening into the presumed horizon of finitude and as an inquiry into the “latent, hidden, repressed” Christian and Jewish sources (140). Nancy’s approach appears to be one that

integrates the framework of phenomenology with methods used by hermeneutics—in a manner productive to understanding rather than gratuitous.

Some philosophers and theologians have delved into concepts relevant to both phenomenology and hermeneutics in explorations of acts of worship as a means of access to an otherwise inaccessible divine. In his work, Lacoste explores what he terms “a phenomenology of liturgy,” defining liturgy as the ceremonies of divine worship (2004, 2).⁶³ His work is heavily influenced by Heidegger’s concept of a phenomenological “unveiling” which “gives to the there of being-there the dimensions of the world” (40). In his view, liturgy allows for an unveiling of God, a religious experience that Lacoste sees as being supported by phenomenological thinking. Yet his project includes a parsing of the words used in worship in a manner familiar to hermeneutics. In the experience of worship, Caputo also finds a deconstructive activity, in which one can experience “a creative-discursive evocation of an unnamable faith to come” (2013, 138). Perhaps a deconstructive experience of worship—much like the experience of poetics or theopoetics—is a post-phenomenological undertaking that offers meaning out of something otherwise incomprehensible.

Performing reductions—the mental process of stripping away preexisting suppositions with respect to what is perceived—is certainly not at odds with a deconstructive endeavor that seeks to uncover what is beneath the surface of an idea. The meditative process of recognizing and setting aside what we already think we know about the world and what is revealed to us

⁶³ Lacoste’s project is largely devoted to liturgy, and it would be a mistake to characterize his views as a mere advocacy for traditional understandings of worship. Rather, for Lacoste, liturgy is a means for us “to rigorously ground the ethical meaning of our facticity” (2004, 70). He argues that it is a source of diverse elements of knowledge: “It knows, first of all, that the world does not have in its possession the conditions by which it can or ever could bring about the *eschaton*. It also knows...the fragility of the gestures it makes within its order and the suspicion in which it can be held. It knows, finally, that the world from which it diverts itself is not handed over to the rule of violence with no possible recourse, but can be the shelter for insuperably human conduct” (73).

through our senses can well be undertaken in a deconstructive project. The anticipated outcomes might be different: phenomenology anticipates the finding of truth, while deconstruction anticipates undecidability. Their traditional targets for consideration are also different. Classical phenomenology was designed to address that which is revealed to consciousness. There is greater clarity in the workings of the methodology in connection with perceptions provided by the “testimony of the senses” or by concrete ideas such as mathematical formulas. Marion made the case for expansion to accept phenomena that are incomprehensible—but nevertheless actually given to consciousness. Neither classical phenomenology nor new phenomenology appears to give much thought to the possibility that, at least in some contexts, the experience of meaning-formation within consciousness could be a phenomenon worthy of consideration. Various writers have asserted that perception of the extreme Other, of Infinity, of Impossibility, of the Nothing, of Life, and of Being should be considered as being within the realm of phenomenology. But are these concepts not inherently only enigmas or paradoxes with which consciousness struggles to find meaning—sometimes in the very literal sense of unsuccessfully striving to comprehend? What comes out of a struggle to comprehend? Is it deemed an “experience”? Can that struggle be deemed to be a phenomenon that is *given* to consciousness? Perhaps a “post-phenomenological” endeavor worthy of consideration would be evaluating such an experience of meaning-formation using a radical hermeneutic exploration of the words that emerge from such experience.

5.5 Phenomenology, Deconstruction, and Truth: What is Missing Here?

For Lévinas and Marion, phenomenology is not just a “tool” for critical thinkers to find dispassionate clarity about what is fact and what is superstition. In their projects, an expanded phenomenology offers the potential to allow a new source of truth to be considered by contemporary philosophy. Of course this source of truth—God or something that resembles God—is new only in the sense that it is new to phenomenological methodology. More precisely,

one could say that Lévinas and Marion are seeking terminology for contemporary philosophy to discuss the possibility of truth being revealed to human consciousness from a divine source. They have seized upon phenomenology as a methodology that at least offers the possibility that truth may be given to consciousness from an unknowable source. I am emphasizing their aspiration for finding truth, because that may be the most consequential aspect of their endeavors to expand phenomenology. One could imagine arguments being made to recognize phenomena that originate from outside of Being, on a purely theoretical basis, without positing anything of substance actually being manifested to us. In fact, Marion establishes a framework for expanding phenomenology in just that manner. However, Marion touts that expansion as a means by which truth is actually revealed through divine revelation. Lévinas is less coy in his arguments: he finds that ethical truths are, *in fact*, manifested by the Other.

Perhaps one could say that their projects endeavor to force philosophy to reconsider twentieth-century nihilism in all its forms and re-engage with the possibility that truth exists. Although it is something of an over-simplification, nihilism became a central concern of modern philosophy, when philosophers concluded that without a divine source of truth, one could no longer credibly claim to know truth. Caputo does not mince words when addressing this topic. Although dismissive of the extremes of nihilistic thought, he asserts that there is no divinely-revealed truth and we must each find our way without any such Truth. He is not persuaded by Lévinas's and Marion's arguments to the contrary. Yet he finds value in a kind of truth-seeking that occurs in deconstruction of names and events associated with Western religion. The truth that emerges through that endeavor for him is that there is no Truth—other than observations about the human condition and the desires that motivate us.

An expansion of phenomenology to include consideration of what may be manifested to consciousness from a divine source can be seen as a focused re-engagement of philosophy with the possibility that a divine source of truth may exist. It does not eliminate the need for

philosophers to address the implications of nihilism on humankind's innate desire for truth, because nothing in this expansion serves as conclusive evidence that God exists or is, in fact, a source of truth. Where does this leave us? What has been accomplished through the efforts of Lévinas, Marion and Caputo? What is yet to be accomplished?

As we have seen, the “theological turn” in phenomenology has offered a basis on which to accept phenomena originating from beyond Being that are potentially incomprehensible. More needs to be said regarding the capacity for meaning and truth to be found in such phenomena. How do we define the post-phenomenological task of creating meaning out of incomprehensibility?

In my view, more consideration could be given by philosophy to the role of faith in ascertaining truth and meaning—a broadly defined faith that is independent of religious dogma. For both Lévinas and Marion, divine manifestations to consciousness were conditioned on a “yes” given by the recipient, an affirmative response that reflects the recipient's openness to the gift offered by the Other. Even from a thoroughly agnostic perspective, Caputo echoed the implications of openness to the gift, finding a promise embedded in language that compels consciousness to say “yes.” For me, this openness is an aspect of faith that could be further explored. Again, I am not suggesting here that philosophy needs to join with theology in explicating Biblical faith, but rather that philosophy needs to better understand a-theistic faith. How does faith function in consciousness? Is the divine manifested only to those who are open to such perceptions? And similarly, how does faith aid in comprehending what is manifested?

I also find that much more could be said by phenomenology about *unfulfilled* intuition. Of what does unfulfilled intuition consist—words of uncertain meaning or meaning without words? This questioning of cognition could delve into circumstances in which intuition is unfulfilled because the subject matter of intuition is the struggle of language-formation. Is faith as I have described it above sometimes a component to fulfillment of intuition? Marion suggests

as much with respect to revelation. How can philosophy view a state of mind that exhibits faith, if one were to strip away all preconceptions as phenomenology seeks to do with its reductions? Is faith a refusal to relinquish preconceptions or could it be better understood—for the purposes of philosophy—as radical openness?

Finally, one must accept that the expansions offered by new phenomenology provide for only the *possibility* of a divine source of truth and meaning. Neither reason nor sensory experience supports the *actuality* of a divine source of truth and meaning. Perhaps it is an odd question, but does experience of “the divine” require the actual existence of a divinity? Perhaps the thinkers cited in this dissertation are unnecessarily conflating emanations from beyond Being with the voice of God or something resembling God. Further critical consideration could be given to the nature of manifestations that are perceived in this manner.

In my view, Lévinas, Marion, and other similar thinkers have broken through a barrier that had largely prevented contemporary philosophy from considering and evaluating religious experience. At the very least, they have benefited this endeavor by merely offering the framework of phenomenology as a credible means to talk about such concerns. Of course, their projects have also offered bold conclusions, conclusions that have often inspired their readers. However, as we can see from the sources cited in this dissertation, thinking among their readers—and even their critics—is by no means monolithic. As existing and new voices address the implications of Lévinas’s, Marion’s, and Caputo’s projects—and perhaps some of the unanswered questions I have raised—greater clarity will no doubt emerge with respect to ethical concerns that are common to both philosophy and theology.

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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

William E. (“Bill”) Swart is a lawyer who has pursued creative writing projects and studies in the humanities for many years alongside his full-time practice of law. He was born in Abilene, Texas, but lived in a variety of towns in Texas, New Mexico, Oklahoma, and Kansas prior to high school graduation. He attended Texas Tech University, where he took advantage of the opportunity there to craft a broad-based curriculum of math, science, and language. As a law student at The University of Texas, he focused on corporate law while, at the same time, collaborating with student filmmakers and musicians in a variety of creative endeavors. He has been a partner with several large national law firms, frequently representing parties engaged in buying and selling businesses. He has been active throughout his career as a volunteer with nonprofits that support education, the written word, and music. He pursued a PhD at The University of Texas at Dallas, where he studied modern literature and philosophy of religion. He lives in Dallas, Texas with his wife, to whom he has been married for over forty years.

CURRICULUM VITAE

William E. Swart

Education

Ph.D., Humanities - Studies in Literature **Anticipated December 2017**
The University of Texas at Dallas, Richardson, Texas

Dissertation Title: *Contemporary Philosophy of Religion at a Loss for Words: An Exploration of Adequacy of Reason and Language for Understanding Religious Experience*

Examination Fields passed: Contemporary Philosophy of Religion; Comparative Study of Creation Myths; and Reception and Reader-Response Theory

Juris Doctor **1978**
The University of Texas, Austin, Texas

B.A., Journalism (Minor, Mathematics) **1975**
Texas Tech University, Lubbock, Texas

Employment

For over thirty-five years I have been practicing law, providing corporate counsel to businesses and their investors, frequently representing private equity firms in mergers, acquisitions and financings.

Perkin Coie LLP	February 2017 to the present
Polsinelli PC	2011 to 2017
K&L Gates (and predecessor Hughes and Luce)	2006 to 2011
Bell Nunnally LLP	1993 to 2006

Publications, Writing Recognitions and Lectures

When I Set Myself on Fire (Novel published 2014)

“Monologues on Grace” (Short story selected for reading at DMA’s Arts & Letters Live in 2007 and 2008)

“Pinstripe Man” (Short play performed by Playwrights Project Play Festival 1999)

Frequent speaker and writer on legal topics involving mergers and acquisitions.

Memberships and Leadership Roles

The University of Texas at Dallas Arts & Humanities Advisory Council (2000 to present)

Undermain Theatre - Board of Trustees (2014 to present)

Wordspace - Board of Directors (2007 to 2012)

WaterTower Theatre - Board of Directors (2007 to 2010)

Preston Hollow Presbyterian School (Chair 1992 to 1998)

City of Dallas Cultural Affairs Commission (Chair 1989 to 1991)

Dallas Opera -Board of Directors (1987 to 1994)

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