

J. AARON SIMMONS
Furman University

IN WHOM, THEN, DO WE PUT OUR TRUST?

But here we are in the midst of theology!
Emmanuel Levinas, 1998, 94

I.

Drew Dalton's *Longing for the Other* is an impressive book due to its being analytically rigorous, philosophically fecund, and historically sensitive.¹ Motivated by Dalton's book, in what follows, I will engage in something of a thought-experiment regarding Levinasian philosophy of religion.² Though I will only be able to trace the rough outlines of an argument that will admittedly need filled-out in another essay, my, albeit tentative, hypothesis is that, contra Dalton, Levinas's philosophy *might* require a decidedly personalistic notion of the divine if his account of "God" is to do the philosophical work it seems intended to do. My, also tentative, conclusion is that Continental philosophers of religion who would resist such a personalist approach to the divine ought to offer arguments that personalism is false rather than simply assuming that it is a non-starter due to some of Levinas's own remarks.

¹ Dalton, Drew M, *Longing for the Other: Levinas and Metaphysical Desire* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2009).

² For just a few considerations of Levinas's philosophy of religion, see Hart, Kevin and Michael A. Signer, eds., *The Exorbitant: Emmanuel Levinas Between Jews and Christians* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2009); Koskey, Jeffrey L., *Levinas and the Philosophy of Religion* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2001); Purcell, Michael, *Levinas and Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

II.

That the notion of a “religious phenomenon” is problematic is something many scholars have identified. Indeed, Jean-Luc Marion famously says that it would seem to be an “impossible” phenomenon because the question is not a matter of whether a people group takes a phenomenon to be religious, which then becomes an issue better considered by sociologists, but of how it is possible to receive a phenomenon *as religious* in the first place. That is, what criterion is being deployed such that object A is religious while object B is not? And, from whence would this criterion come? Moreover, for Marion and other New Phenomenologists (viz., Jean-Louis Chrétien, Michel Henry, Emmanuel Levinas, Jacques Derrida, Jean-Yves Lacoste, and perhaps even Paul Ricoeur), the *phenomenological* aspect of such inquiry seems to remain in place so long as one does not cross from a question of the possibility of religious phenomena to an affirmation of the actuality of a particular phenomenon *as religious* (though one can certainly make such moves internal to theology).³

Famously, such questions led Marion and Derrida to participate in an extended debate about the status of phenomenality as it concerns revelation (or revealability, as such, if we return to the distinction between *Offenbarung* and *Offenbarkeit* considered by Heidegger).⁴ For Marion, the religious phenomenon must present itself as overflowing the horizons by which it is received, perceived, and judged. As he says, it is “saturated” because it conveys more than can be conveyed.⁵ In this sense, Marion comes close to Kierkegaard’s claim that a religious phenomenon must present more than an occasion for understanding, but the very conditions

³ For just a few studies of New Phenomenology, see Janicaud, Dominique, Jean-François Courtine, Jean-Louis Chrétien, Michel Henry, Jean-Luc Marion, and Paul Ricoeur, *Phenomenology and the “Theological Turn”: The French Debate* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2000); Jonkers, Peter and Ruud Welten, eds., *God in France: Eight Contemporary French Thinkers on God* (Leuven: Peeters, 2005); Benson, Bruce Ellis and Norman Wirzba, eds., *Words of Life: New Theological Turns in French Phenomenology* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2010); Simmons, J. Aaron, *God and the Other: Ethics and Politics After the Theological Turn* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2011).

⁴ For the engagement between Marion and Derrida, see especially Caputo, John D. and Michael J. Scanlon, eds., *God, the Gift, and Postmodernism* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1999). For other considerations of how phenomenology might be a resource for the philosophy of religion, see Caputo, John D., Mark Dooley, and Michael J. Scanlon, eds., *Questioning God* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2001); Caputo, ed., *The Religious* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002); Joy, Morney, ed., *Continental Philosophy and Philosophy of Religion* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2010); Baker, Deane-Peter and Patrick Maxwell, *Explorations in Contemporary Continental Philosophy of Religion* (Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2003).

⁵ See, for example Marion, Jean-Luc, *The Crossing of the Visible*, Trans. James K.A. Smith (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004), and Marion *In Excess: Studies of Saturated Phenomena*, Trans. Robyn Horner and Vincent Berraud (New York: Fordham University Press, 2002). For a good analysis of Marion’s thought, see Horner, Robyn, *Jean-Luc Marion: A Theo-logical Introduction* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005).

for understanding the occasion as such.⁶ In contrast, Derrida's suggestion is that no phenomena can "appear" except within a horizon of intelligibility. Accordingly, since religious phenomena rupture such horizontality, they are *impossible in a different sense* than proposed by Marion. For Derrida, and this is a point acknowledged by Marion, phenomenological discussions of "religious phenomena" might invite charges of phenomenological heresy.⁷

I propose that it is in light of this basic disagreement between Marion and Derrida, upon which quite a bit hangs, that we should consider Levinas's account of metaphysical desire and human longing. According to Dalton, "by examining Levinas's analysis of metaphysical desire as a human longing, something with which we are presumably more immediately familiar, we begin to glimpse what is really at stake in Levinas's account of metaphysical desire: namely, a phenomenology of human longing as an ethical, and *ultimately*, religious, phenomenon" (Dalton 2009, 3, emphasis added). In light of the new phenomenological debates concerning religious phenomenality, if Dalton is right to say that, for Levinas, human longing is a "religious phenomenon," then we must ask what it means for a phenomenon to be "religious." Yet, if metaphysical desire is "ultimately" a religious phenomenon, then Dalton recognizes that problems arise insofar as "the connection between the metaphysical and the ethical is made so thoroughly by Levinas that the actual difference between the metaphysical and the ethical all but disappears therein" (*Ibid.*, 114). That is, though it seems that Dalton attempts to distinguish between an ethical phenomenon on the one hand and a religious phenomenon on the other hand, he realizes that this very distinction is not only blurred, but also might "all but disappear" internal to Levinas's formulations.

While I certainly advocate the importance of the ineradicable intimacy between the ethical relation and the religious relation, such that the self is rightly defined as ethico-religiously constituted (see Simmons 2011), if the religious is reducible to the ethical, then one wonders if all the "religious" language gets us anything other than rhetorical flourish. And, indeed, it may be the case that such language can *potentially* end up being patronizing to historical participants in determinate religious traditions, which would itself be ethically problematic.⁸ If God is "transcendent to the point of absence" and the infinity of God is possibly confused with the indifference of the *il y a*, then we would not be wrong to ask whether it would be better to just stop talking about "God" in the first place. What exactly does all this "God-talk" get us *as philosophers*?

Now, before we get too far in, it is likely that Levinas scholars will quickly protest at this point that Levinas is clear that the alterity of God is not the same as the alterity of the Other. Granted.

⁶ See, Kierkegaard, Søren, *Philosophical Fragments* and *Johannes Climacus*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985).

⁷ See Derrida, Jacques, *The Gift of Death*, trans. David Wills (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1995). I am appreciative to Bruce Ellis Benson for helping me to think through this issue. His paper, "How to be a phenomenological heretic," presented at Hendrix College in 2008, offers a careful consideration of how this "heresy" might unfold.

⁸ I have argued this point in more detail elsewhere. See, Simmons 2011, chapters 6 and 7.

As Levinas writes in *God, Death, and Time*: "God is not simply the first other but other than the other, other otherwise, other with an alterity prior to the alterity of the other person, prior to the ethical compulsion to the neighbor. In this way God is different from every neighbor" (Levinas 2000, 224).⁹ That Levinas has in mind two different alterities when he distinguishes between God and the other person is a frequent refrain in his work: "It would be advisable nevertheless to ask here whether it is a question of a transcendence toward God or a transcendence out of which a word such as 'God' alone reveals its meaning. That this transcendence be produced from the (horizontal?) relationship with the other means neither that the other man is God, nor that God is a great Other" (Levinas 1998, 108).¹⁰ In light of Dalton's reading of Levinas, though, the question is not whether Levinas *claims* to distinguish between the two alterities, but whether the distinction is one that *can be coherently maintained with any warrant and with any consequence* internal to his philosophical framework.

Perhaps better than anyone else, Derrida has expressed this complexity in his consideration of the phrase "*Tout Autre est Tout Autre*":

If every human is wholly other, if everyone else, or every other one, is every it other, then one can no longer distinguish between a claimed generality of ethics that would need to be sacrificed in sacrifice, and the faith that turns towards God alone, as wholly other, turning away from human duty. But since Levinas also wants to distinguish between the infinite alterity of God and the "same" infinite alterity of every human, or of the other in general, then he cannot simply be said to be saying something different from Kierkegaard. Neither one nor the other can assure himself of a concept of the ethical and of the religious that is of consequence; and consequently they are especially unable to determine the limit between those two orders. . . . He cannot therefore distinguish so conveniently between the ethical and the religious. But for his part, in taking into account absolute singularity, that is, the absolute alterity obtaining in relations between one human and another, Levinas is no longer able to distinguish between the infinite alterity of God and that of every human. *His ethics is already a religious one.* (Derrida 1995, 84, emphasis added)

While Derrida concludes that Levinas's ethics is "already a religious one," one might ask whether Derrida's own suggestion that there is no way for Levinas to "conveniently" distinguish between the ethical and the religious undermines the weight of the claim that this is a *religious* ethics. Indeed, it seems that it would be just as legitimate to say that it is simply an *ethical* ethics, or just *ethics pure and simple*. What exactly does the "religious" dimension add? And if we are able to answer this question in any productive way, which I believe that we

⁹ Levinas, Emmanuel, *God, Death, and Time*, trans. Bettina Bergo (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000).

¹⁰ Levinas, Emmanuel, *Of God Who Comes to Mind*, trans. Bettina Bergo (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998).

should be able to do if we are to keep using all the religious language, then this requires that God be “visible” (read: knowable), as it were, *at least to the extent that we can give our claims about the religious dimension’s distinctiveness some semantic heft*. That is, if the “religious” descriptor is to make any philosophical difference when describing Levinasian ethics, then it needs differentiated from a “nonreligious” version of the same thing. But, if one reads “invisibility” to indicate unknowability as such, then the Levinasian insistence that, as Dalton writes, “God is fundamentally *invisible* and, as such, can only be intuited through the ethical relationship with another” (2009, 240), would appear to be in need of some revision because this would lead us back into the cul-de-sac of a *religious* ethics being indistinguishable from an *ethical* ethics, a *non-religious* ethics, or *simply* ethics, etc.

John D. Caputo (and several others) has suggested that Levinas is perhaps rightly considered an atheist. I take Caputo to mean this as a compliment to the way that Levinasian ethics overcomes the “strong theology” of the ontological tradition and instead invites a receptivity to the call of an alterity that is irreducible to the categories and concepts of determinate, and often violent, religious traditions.¹¹ While I understand and appreciate the point of Caputo’s gesture, I am not convinced that, *as philosophers*, we should be so quick to grant this generally apophatic slide. Simply put, not all “strong theology” entails the problems about which Caputo so rightly worries.¹² Accordingly, in light of the seeming problems that attend the inability to distinguish between the ethical and the religious, I contend that continental philosophers of religion should take seriously *the possibility* that a transcendence “so transcendent that it risks being confused with a pure absence” (Dalton 2009, 235), is a transcendence that *makes no difference*.

III.

Importantly, kataphatic commitments are just as risky (if not more so) than apophatic ones, but philosophers must be open to the possibility that they are *perhaps* (a term of which Caputo and Derrida are quite fond) just as philosophically defensible. Indeed, it is plausible that Levinas’s own arguments require a more *substantive* (and I use that word intentionally) account of a *personal* God. Dalton’s descriptions of Levinas’s theory of creation lead me to think that they might. Consider the following:

This is the ethical legacy of creation. So it is for Levinas that the ethical act is exemplified in the “after you, sir” that one addresses to the Other when one finds oneself in competition with the Other, an act which, for him, follows in the wake of God’s “after you, sir” addressed to determinate existents at the dawn of creation. (Dalton 2009, 214)

¹¹ For Caputo’s own critique of “strong theology,” see Caputo, *The Weakness of God: A Theology of the Event* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2006).

¹² For just one example, Open Theism would rather clearly count as a “strong theology” and yet it explicitly resists the sort of excesses against which Caputo warns. See, for example, Sanders, John, *The God Who Risks: A Theology of Divine Providence, Revised Edition* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2007).

If the analogy between my “after you, sir” said to the Other and God’s “after you, sir” said to existents at creation is to do any work for us in either our philosophical speculation or our lives of service to concrete others, then it seems to require some sort of willed consciousness on behalf of both me and God. If God has no choice in the matter because God is not personal in any strong sense, then this is not much of a normative ethico-political legacy, but merely a descriptive fact.

I expect that protestations will be offered here that I am introducing a decisionistic and agent-centered account into the mix that is anathema to Levinas’s own account of a radical ethical passivity. However, it is crucial that one distinguish between the absolute passivity of the ethical encounter that inaugurates subjectivity, on the one hand, and the active participation that is required of each person at every moment of political existence opened by the ethical encounter, on the other hand. To assume that because one does not choose to welcome the Other, but always already finds oneself as having said “yes,” does not mean that one can abdicate the choice of whether one will continue to say “yes” here and now in light of the concrete confrontation with needy others. Levinas’s entire conception of the political as the space in which decision, calculation, choice, and action is demanded, requires that *we not get so bogged-down by the passivity of the ethical that we fail to strive for justice in our daily lives*. Even though the “here I am” is always a response to a prior call/command that one has not chosen, how one takes up this call requires that one be capable of making decisions and considering evidence for which of the relevant alternatives are worthy of one’s assent and action.¹³

God’s “after you, sir” only works as an illuminating analogy with my “after you, sir” if God could have alternatively affirmed divine self-importance by metaphorically preferring power to hospitality and arrogance to humility.¹⁴ If there is no choice in the matter then the analogy breaks down because it makes a hash out of the existential decision that attends living in political contexts with multiple others. Further, Dalton describes God’s withdrawal, which makes room for determinate “atheist” beings, as an act of love and this is why it is not identical to the *il y a*. But, again, it is unclear what *love* would mean here outside a context of personhood such that love is differentiated from hate or indifference. This is the very point of Levinas’s rethinking of atheism itself, I would argue. Just as only originally atheist beings could have faith, it seems plausible that only personal beings (capable of hate) could genuinely love.

¹³ For an excellent account of the fragility of Levinasian ethics and the importance of individual decision in light of such fragility, see Perpich, Diane, *The Ethics of Emmanuel Levinas* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008).

¹⁴ Importantly, I think that this favors those accounts of divine personalism that stress the relationality and temporality of God, such as that offered by Open Theism, for example (see Sanders 2007). Moreover, drawing on recent studies in cognitive science have suggested that a personalist notion of God is more “natural” for cognitive development than is a non-personalist notion due to the way our brains are structured. See Barrett, Justin L., *Why Would Anyone Believe in God?* (Walnut Creek: AltaMira Press: 2004).

Drawing upon Schelling, Dalton attempts to defend a notion of God and love without presupposing a divine personalism:

God, acting out of love, and thus, by definition for Schelling, stretching out beyond being, does not therefore emerge from the creative process as a determinate being, but rather as a determinate possibility – a determinate possibility which grounds the emergence of all actual beings. Thus, while God may never achieve the status of *actuality* in the same way that other determinate beings, like human beings, are actual; God must nevertheless be conceived of as *real* – for it is God’s contraction into the *ground* of existence that ushers in reality as we know it. (Dalton 2009, 198)

While one can grant that something like God’s withdrawal *might be* a better way to make sense of creation than the traditional conception of being’s imposition upon nothingness,¹⁵ and to be sure such an idea would require a robust epistemic humility regarding our conception of God, *to describe this withdrawal as God’s “acting out of love” rather than out of something like a Neoplatonic necessity changes things.* I take this point to be one that Richard Kearney has already quite persuasively made regarding current debates in Continental philosophy of religion.¹⁶ Considering John Caputo’s defense of a Derridean “religion without religion,” Kearney suggests that it makes a difference if one chooses to talk about “God” or “*khora*”:

God and *khora* are conceivably two different names for the same thing – the same nameless, indescribable experience of the abyss. But the choice between names is not insignificant. Which direction you leap surely matters. For while the former theistic option sees the experience in the empty desert as “a dark night of the soul” on the way towards the encounter with God, the latter sees it rather as a night without end, a place where prayer, promise, praise, or faith is *not* applicable. Not a place the desert fathers would want to hand around for very long, I suspect. . . . There is a genuine difference between anchorite fathers and deconstructive sons. (Kearney 2003, 111).

Perhaps Dalton is right to say that for Schelling and for Levinas God is not “a determinate being, but rather . . . a determinate possibility.” Even so, following on Kearney’s insistence that “which direction you leap surely matters,” how are we to understand what this “determinate possibility” would mean except as according to the categories that we bring to the table as finite, embodied, *personal* existents? Admitting that God is “beyond being” does not preclude

¹⁵ Though drawing heavily upon process theology, Catherine Keller (in *Face of the Deep: A Theology of Becoming*, London and New York: Routledge, 2004) provides a robust account of what such a notion of creation might entail.

¹⁶ Kearney, Richard, “Khora or God?” In *A Passion for the Impossible: John D. Caputo in Focus*. Ed. Mark Dooley (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2003), 107-122.

the possibility that God is *at least* a being. Marion clearly understands this and, if Dalton is right about Levinas, then Levinas probably should have understood it as well.¹⁷

IV.

When it comes to the Other, Levinas rightly says that ethics precedes ontology, but in doing so he surely does *not* mean to say that the Other doesn't exist. This would be to play fast and loose with the concrete relationships that obtain in the world between individuals in need of care, compassion, and justice. Just as Levinas can maintain the existence of the Other while rejecting the primacy of a self-interested ontological foundation, it seems to follows that he should be willing to be a bit more patient with the idea of an existing (personal) God while rejecting the primacy of a self-sufficient onto-theology.¹⁸ It might be that the Derridian "messianism without a messiah" or the Levinasian notion of "an awaiting without an awaited" is simply nothing more than a name for our own, all too human, unwillingness to admit that we have been abandoned to ourselves. Accordingly, what someone like Kierkegaard offers and what Levinas might not offer is *trust* in the love of God and *hope* in what that love will achieve (whether in history or in the eschaton). Hope need not entail certainty, *indeed it must not*. Yet, saying that God is the one in whom I trust and hope to "let justice roll down like waters" (Amos 5:24) is not to abdicate my responsibility to work for justice in a contingent historical world. Instead, it is to make the analogy between God's "after you, sir" and my own "after you, sir" something that inspires a life lived in service to others.¹⁹

Ultimately, though Levinas did not believe that the rejection of a personalist divine ontology leads to what can rightly be termed 'atheism', it is not clear that he is right about this.²⁰ Consider the following: "I think that if the infinite was *an* in-finite, under which there would be substance . . . it would not at all be the absolutely other, it would be an other 'same'. And there is no atheism in this way of not taking God for a term. I think that God has no meaning outside

¹⁷ Importantly, though, this is not to say that a personalist account reduces the divine transcendence to a vulgar humanism. Instead, it is simply a matter of meaning and relationship given our perspectival location in existence, and not a claim about ontological identification between being and thought. Simone Weil (*First and Last Notebooks*, trans. Richard Rees (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970)) makes a similar point when she notes that "God is the Good. He is neither a thing nor a person nor a thought. But in order to grasp him we have to conceive him as a thing, a person, and a thought" (1970, 300). I am indebted to Robert Reed for bringing this passage to my attention.

¹⁸ In this way, one could walk between Caputo's dichotomy of "strong" and "weak" theology, I believe.

¹⁹ Here, I would suggest that Edith Wyschogrod's (*Saints and Postmodernism: Revisioning Moral Philosophy*, Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1990) conception of a "postmodern saint" is a crucial resource for thinking about ethical life in a postmodern world. Elsewhere I have given a more sustained consideration of how Wychogrod's account can be appropriated as a model of "postmodern ethico-political exemplars" (see, Simmons 2011, chapter 13).

²⁰ Importantly, one possible strategy open to Levinas here might be to tap into non-theistic religions. However, my questions about how such a non-theistic conception would do the philosophical work that Levinas needs it to do, would remain.

the search for God" (Levinas 1998, 95). If God has no meaning outside the search for God, then it is plausible that the search for God is nothing more than a search into ourselves, or a search for others, or simply a misguided search that we would be better off to abandon. Now, I expect that some critics will suggest that my claim here reflects nothing more than an immature desire for safety and that I would do well to "grow up" and admit that Levinas's "religion for adults" is the only game left in town once one has done away with religious personalism as merely a relic of an outdated (modernist) theism. In response, I don't consider such individual psychological diagnoses to carry much philosophical weight and so the key here is *whether or not the "religion for adults" is the only viable option given Levinas's philosophical framework*. In this short essay, motivated by Dalton's book, I have merely suggested that there may be more alternatives left on the table and Continental philosophers of religion, whether they are religious or not, should be willing to consider this possibility and then to offer arguments accordingly. For those who would suggest that religion is indistinguishable from ethics, arguments are required to demonstrate how religion is not *simply* ethics. For those who would suggest that religion is irreducible to ethics, arguments are required to demonstrate what "religion" (or "God") means such that this reduction is inappropriate.

J. AARON SIMMONS (Ph.D., Vanderbilt) is an Assistant Professor of Philosophy at Furman University. He is the author of *God and the Other: Ethics and Politics After the Theological Turn* (Indiana U.P., 2011) and co-editor of *Kierkegaard and Levinas: Ethics, Politics, and Religion* (Indiana U.P., 2008). Currently, he is co-authoring a book (with Bruce Ellis Benson) on New Phenomenology.

©J. Aaron Simmons.

Simmons, J. Aaron. "In Whom, Then, Do We Put Our Trust?," in *Journal for Cultural and Religious Theory* vol. 11 no. 3 (Fall 2011): 37-45.