The Experience of Atheism

Phenomenology, Metaphysics and Religion

Edited by

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Atheism, Faith, and Experience

Claude Romano and Robyn Horner

I. Atheism and the irreducible

The present volume has come about because of the conviction that it is timely to look anew at the question of atheism. Of course, there are already many fine books that have been written about atheism, but very often, they come down to an argument about whether or not one can reasonably believe in "God"—or in what one substitutes for God.[1] Such a polarization of views leads only to a stalemate, so that in the end there is nothing very interesting left to say. In late 2016, a group of scholars from Australia, Europe, and North America met in Rome to discuss the possibility that one can approach atheism otherwise, and very quickly it became evident that for many of us, it was not even clear what we meant when we used the term. There are many atheisms: some of these atheisms actually inhabit theism or are even seen to live out theism's ends. Between 2017 and 2019, three further meetings were hosted by Australian Catholic University at the campus in Rome to extend the work of that first group. This book arises in large part from the final seminar in 2019, where we pursued the question of the relationship atheism bears to experience. Why experience? Because in our view, as editors, while there are plenty of intellectual arguments to be made about atheism, atheism is not first a question of conceptual knowledge. People rarely argue themselves entirely to belief or unbelief in God; more commonly, they have already crossed a particular threshold before they begin to make such arguments—or at least, before they have reached their conclusion. We ventured to begin the conversation with the idea that atheism (or theism) is a way of finding oneself in the world, a characteristic of experience that is perhaps first affective rather than thetic. So, with this in mind, we asked our interlocutors to reflect on what the experience of atheism might look like.

This volume is characterized by conversations that have largely had their genesis in France, conversations that relate to the French reception and development of phenomenology. All the contributors to the book are readers of French philosophy

[1] Here we place the word "God" in inverted commas along the lines of the usage suggested by Kevin Hart, who writes: "the word and the concept 'God' . . . can never fail to divide and multiply once they enter dis-course." Kevin Hart, *The Trespass of the Sign*, 2nd. ed. (New York: Fordham University Press, 2000), 290.

and, more often than not, in phenomenology as it has developed in a particular trajectory from Husserl, whose thought was introduced to France in the early twentieth century and which, together with the work of Heidegger, has had a profound effect in that context and beyond. There is a certain way in which phenomenology shapes the present constellation of authors—even beyond their expressed concerns here—so that questions about the status, scope and limits of experience are frequently to the fore. In particular, while not all the contributors have an interest in the question of God, the question of the irreducible figures prominently in their work, and the irreducible is sometimes understood to mark experience prior to any division into concepts of theism and atheism. This is nowhere more the case than in the work of the two authors who have been chosen to "bookend" this collection: Jean-Luc Nancy and Jean-Luc Marion.

II. Atheism and alienation

It is well-known that atheism is a modern phenomenon, and that it is a phenomenon intrinsically related to our modernity. In the West, during a period that extends from early Christianity to the Renaissance, Patristic and Medieval apologetics had to engage in discussion only with other religions: Judaism, Paganism, Islam. The figure of the atheist makes its appearance in the course of the Renaissance period, with the renewal of Paganism and the resistance to the authority of the Church which accompanies it.[2] Giordano Bruno, Machiavelli, Aretino, and Vanini—and, soon after them, those who are called "the Libertines"—do not yet openly claim that God does not exist; instead, they reject the tutelage of the ecclesial institutions and oppose to them a free exercise of reason. It is only when Spinoza applies exegetical rules to the Scriptures which are comparable to those governing the reading of profane texts, and when he underscores the contradictions and inconsistencies of the Bible that betray, in his view, its human provenance, that an utterly new attitude toward monotheist revelation starts to take shape. And even then, Spinoza is far from considering himself an atheist: it is only in the view of his detractors that he personifies atheism for the seventeenth century.

The appearance of atheism is thus inseparable from the tide of secularization on which Western societies from the fifteenth century onwards have been carried. The word "secularization" is not only a political and institutional fact, an ever-sharpening separation between Church and State, but is often understood to reflect a privatization of religion or especially a decline of religious belief and institutional participation in our societies. It is a commonplace that this last view of secularization, which suggests that religion is simply no longer relevant or is dying out, has been largely set aside by

[2] Granted, we find "atheists" before that period. One example in the Greek world is the Pythagorean Hippon of Metapontion (or of Rhegion) who used to be called "Hippon the Atheist" because, according to John Philoponous, he claimed that the unique cause of all beings is water (*Commentary on Aristotle's Treatise of the Soul,* 88, 23). But it is hard to have a clear idea of what the word "atheist" was supposed to convey in that context. As we shall see, Oedipus himself is also called "atheist" in Sophocles' tragedy.

the sociologists, many of whom recognize the fact of pluralization.[3] Secularization—in the sense in which it accompanies the very possibility of atheism—should instead be understood according to the definition given by Charles Taylor, as the change "which takes us from a society in which it was virtually impossible not to believe in God, to one in which faith, even for the staunchest believer, is just one human possibility among others."[4] Secularization defines our present situation in so far as faith or belonging to a religious community only represents for us today *one option among others*, and certainly not a norm that should apply to everyone.

Nevertheless, this *prima facie* choice is complicated by the unfolding of a concomitant phenomenon that is sometimes known as detraditionalization, which refers to the manner in which the conditions for tradition-transmission in Western societies have changed.[5] This affects the ways in which individuals shape their identities, so that it seems not only that there are many possible options for religious belief but that the very conditions for religious believing are now different to what they might once have been. French sociologist Danièle Hervieu-Léger draws from the work of Maurice Halbwachs when she speaks of a radical forgetting that seems to have affected Western societies with respect to tradition, a forgetting that breaks lineages of belief.[6] Communities that were once bound together by strong frameworks of tradition have been fractured by the many elements which culminate in pluralization and globalization: ease of international communications, rapid transport and travel, mass migration, the explosion of media of all kinds, economic development, advances in education, increased individualization, and so on. In particular, the mass distribution of symbols weakens their particularity and capacity to speak. The recognition of the role of social memory in the continuity of religious and other traditions transposes the question of atheism into an entirely different key. In short, the secular age of the West seems to be accompanied by a haze of disorientation, in which it is sometimes hard to remember why the question matters in the first place.

The situation where adherence to a religious tradition becomes not only optional but also often strangely alienating deeply modifies the experience of the believer as much as that of the non-believer. For the believer, the possibility of atheism in the society to which he or she belongs should not, perhaps, be considered only as something

[3] See Peter L. Berger, "The Desecularization of the World: A Global Overview," in *The Desecularization of the World: Resurgent Religion and World Politics*, ed. Peter L. Berger (Washington, DC/Grand Rapids. MI: Ethics and Public Policy Center/Eerdmans, 1999); José Casanova, "The Secular, Secularizations, Secularisms," in *Rethinking Secularism*, ed. Craig J Calhoun, Mark Juergensmeyer, and Jonathan Van Antwerpen (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011); Peter L. Berger, *The Many Altars of Modernity: Toward a Paradigm for Religion in a Pluralist Age* (Berlin/Boston: De Gruyter, 2014).

[4] Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA/London: Belknap /Harvard University, 2007), 3.

[5] Paul Heelas, Scott Lash, and Paul Morris, *Detraditionalization: Critical Reflections on Authority and Identity* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 1996); Lieven Boeve, "Religion after Detraditionalization: Christian Faith in a Post-Secular Europe," *Irish Theological Quarterly* 70, no. 2 (2005); Linda Woodhead, "The Rise of 'No Religion' in Britain: The Emergence of a New Cultural Majority," *Journal of the British Academy* 4 (2016).

[6] Maurice Halbwachs, *La mémoire collective*, 2 ed. (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1968); Danièle Hervieu-Léger, *Religion as a Chain of Memory*, trans. Simon Lee (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000).

regrettable. The possibility of atheism obliges that person to relate to faith in a different manner, possibly even with more depth and intensity, since it is no longer a commonly shared, obvious or uncontroversial attitude, but instead, a stance that is existentially lived-through and which potentially makes room for different forms of uncertainty. Such uncertainty includes doubt, of course, but it must also include challenges to particular forms of naivety.[7] This does not mean that believers never experienced uncertainty prior to the secular age: the experience of the "dark night of the soul" is a basic, inescapable experience reported by all the mystics. But even for the one who does not reach the peaks of mysticism, the possibility of atheism inevitably upends the very experience of faith or may even become indispensable to the living of that faith.

Moreover, as much as the theist, the atheist can perfectly acknowledge the dimension of mystery inherent to our lives, and so be open to dimensions of the religious phenomenon. Mystery does not only amount to the "problematic" of the meaning of all human life; it is, instead, something stronger which seizes us and in which we are always already engaged. Gabriel Marcel famously distinguished between a mystery and a problem: "It seems, indeed," he writes, "that between a problem and a mystery there is this essential difference: that a problem is something I encounter, that I find entirely displayed in front of me, and thus, that I can circumscribe and reduce—while a mystery is something in which I am myself engaged, which is therefore conceivable only as a domain in which the distinction of the 'in me' and the 'in front of me' loses its meaning and its initial value."[8] It is thus far from certain that the attitude of the atheist can only be defined as a stepping backward in the face of mystery or as a rejection of mystery, as it is also at play in faith, and one could even propose to broaden the meaning of the "religious" in order to understand it otherwise than as the belonging to a religious community defined by dogmas or beliefs. As Thomas Mann suggests: "We live and die in mystery, and one can eventually call 'religious' the awareness that one has of this fact."[9]

Neither of the two terms of the disjunction believer/atheist is, therefore, a simple one. Our living in societies including believers and atheists implies, first of all, the necessity of sharing different, but probably not incommensurable experiences. First, it should not be forgotten that the Christian was defined, at the beginning, as an atheist—with respect to the official religion of Rome until Constantine: Polytheism. One is often the atheist of someone else, of the one who does not share "the faith." Interreligious conflicts and even the resurgence of religious wars in our time remind us every day of this obvious fact.[10] Second, the word "atheism" can refer to very different experiences and dispositions. Hence, the importance of the notion of experience that we have placed at the heart of our investigations. If God cannot be defined, cannot be reduced to the measure of our thinking, but can be only *encountered* in a personal experience, in a paradoxical experience which pushes experience to its limits, the atheist is primarily the one who has not had such an experience, and not the one who denies the existence of

[7] See the final chapter of Paul Ricœur, *The Symbolism of Evil*, trans. Emerson Buchanan (Boston: Beacon, 1967).
[8] Gabriel Marcel, *Être et avoir* (Paris: éditions Montaigne, 1935), 169.
[9] *Lettres de Thomas Mann 1948–1955* (Paris, Gallimard, 1973), 424.
[10] Yet on the question of religious violence, see William T. Cavanaugh, *The Myth of Religious Violence: Secular Ideology and the Roots of Modern Conflict* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

God. Now, no one can assert that such an experience can never be had. Nevertheless, the meaning of such an experience needs to be specified, and along with it, all the illusions to which such a so-called experience can give rise. Contemporary phenomenology, by attempting to broaden the concept of experience to allow it to include paradoxical experiences ("saturated phenomena," to borrow Marion's expression) cannot avoid the question of how to differentiate between a paradoxical experience that would only reflect our own desires or fantasies, and which is thus only illusory, and one that would *really* deviate from the conditions of our ordinary experience.

III. Literalist atheism

In its simplest form, atheism is often thought as the negation of belief in (a) divine being, and as we have already noted, this tends to limit any discussion to an exchange of irreconcilable truth claims. A dogmatic a-theism of this kind asserts the pure and simple non-existence of God as something that can be demonstrated: we observe this kind of atheism in the works of infamous atheists such as Richard Dawkins and Christopher Hitchens.[11] Now, such an atheism often borders on inconsistency. On the one hand, outside the realm of *a priori* sciences in which it is, indeed, possible to prove the non-existence of certain things (for instance, in Euclidian geometry, the non-existence or impossibility of a triangle the sum of whose angles would amount to more or less than 180 degrees), it is already very difficult to prove the non-existence of anything whatsoever in the world. If God is not only a concept, a mere object of thought, but a being who can perhaps be encountered, of whom it is perhaps possible to have an "experience," an *a priori* proof of God's non-existence does not even make sense. It makes probably even less sense than the traditional alleged "proofs" of the existence of God. The believer is here more rational than the non-believer, since the believer can at least allege an experience (perhaps illusory) as the basis of his or her belief, while the non-believer cannot for his or her disbelief: it does not follow from the fact that one does not experience something that this thing does not exist. Even more seriously, the atheist who wants to justify an assertion of the "non-existence of God" is committed inevitably to defining what the word "God" means. It is here, precisely, that the trouble begins. The atheist must rely at least on a *nominal* definition of what is intended by "God," and this definition often turns out to be arbitrary. Such is the argument of Jean-Luc Marion, who observes that the death of God asserted by Nietzsche is no more than the death of a particular idol that has come to stand for God.[12] In each case of such proofs, one must always ask whether it is the true God, the revealed God who is at stake in the question. As for negative theism or the assertive and militant type of atheism we have observed in exponents such as Dawkins, the question

[11] Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2006/2008); Christopher Hitchens, *God Is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything* (New York: Hachette, 2007).

[12] Jean-Luc Marion, *The Idol and Distance: Five Studies*, ed. John D. Caputo, trans. Thomas A. Carlson, Perspectives in Continental Philosophy (New York: Fordham University Press, 2001), 32; *God Without Being*, trans. Thomas A. Carlson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 29.

is always to determine whether such an atheism, grounded on an implicit, but often arbitrary definition of God, does not border on theological naivety. In a word, the God about whom it is possible to prove non-existence on the basis of a definition that is always dogmatic or chanced, can easily be suspected of not being the true God—granted, of course, that God exists.

If God were to exist, God would undoubtedly be the one who cannot be defined, that is, who defies our representational capacities, who cannot be measured by our conceptual resources. In order to claim that God does not exist, one necessarily has to claim to possess a concept of God, a definition of what God is, but this is precisely what is problematic from the outset. Even the "divine names" only reach God according to our own point of view. God can be characterized precisely—and in the Hebrew scriptures is shown to characterize Godself—as the one *who does not allow self-definition.* It is worth recalling that the primary meaning of the formula of Exodus 3, 14, *'ehyèh 'ashèr 'ehyèh,* which has been often understood as the first word of a "metaphysics of the Exodus," in no way amounts to a definition ("I am the one who is"), but is on the contrary *a refusal to be defined:* it means literally "I am who I am" (and so "you don't have to ask me this question"), or even more literally "I will be who I will be"—a reiteration of the promise which underlies the Alliance.[13] And so, to a request for nomination and definition, God answers with a reiteration of the oath: "I will keep my word, I will not betray my promise." Does this not make any dogmatic a-theism a contradictory undertaking? In this respect, the Marxist critique of Feuerbach's atheistic humanism is right on target: in some of its forms at least, atheism is nothing other than a reverse theology, a parody of a theology. William James already acknowledged such a possibility when he observed: "'He believes in No-God and he worships him' said a colleague of mine of a student who was manifesting a fine atheistic ardor; and the more fervent opponents of Christian doctrine have often enough shown a temper which, psychologically considered, is indistinguishable from religious zeal."[14]

IV. Atheism and the flight of the gods

However, a second form of atheism must be considered, according to which atheism is no longer a theoretical assertion about the non-existence of God, but a modality of our relation to the divine, be the latter purely chimeric: the experience of the loss of God, of the "flight of gods"—or God. Even Paganism was not unaware of this kind of experience. The tragic hero undergoes the experience of the withdrawal of the gods, of his abandonment by them. Oedipus defines himself as *atheos* in *Oedipus Rex* (verse 166), and this expression, of course, does not mean here "atheist" in the modern sense of the word. It means, instead, deserted by the god who has turned away from him, and

[13] See André Caquot, "Les énigmes d'un hémistiche biblique," in Paul Vignaux, éd., *Dieu et l'être. Exégèses d'Exode 3, 14 et de Coran 20, 11–24* (Paris: Institut des études augustiniennes, 1978), 18–26. See also Stéphane Mosès, *L'Éros et la Loi* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1999) who insists on the double future and interprets it as an expression of the promise.

[14] William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, in *Writings 1902–1910* (New York: The Library of America, 1987), 39.

so condemned him to a radical solitude that is testified to by his long perambulation in *Oedipus at Colonus.* "Atheist" does not mean in this context "the one who does not believe in the gods," in the first place because the very idea of a *belief* in the gods is problematic for Paganism. As Paul Veyne has stressed, the pagan religion never truly had "believers," even if it is true that it had "non-believers," that is, the early Christians.[15]

This other form of atheism, marked by the experience of the withdrawal of the gods (Hölderlin), and possibly even of a pure and simple death of the Christian God, is foreshadowed in Pascal's *Pensées* and fully developed for the first time by the young Hegel in *Faith and Knowledge*: Hegel identifies in this text "the feeling on which the religion of modern times rests—the feeling that 'God Himself is dead'"; it is of course taken over by Nietzsche in paragraph 125 of *The Gay Science*.[16] Such an atheism is utterly different from a negative theism or a dogmatic a-theism, and it addresses a challenge much more difficult for theology to meet. This time, the God who is dead is no longer a nominal definition, an idea of God. Instead, God has an intimate connection to "the Crucified," as Nietzsche calls him, and God's very disappearance gestures toward a *historical experience,* that of the "devaluation of all values" proper to the epoch of nihilism. Yet, on the other hand, as it has often been noted, the "death of God" of which Nietzsche speaks seems to have its place prepared in advance in theology and Christology: it is prefigured by the complaint of Psalm 22: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?," and the very words of Christ on the Cross (Matt. 27:46; Mark 15:34). Could such an atheism be understood as an element of the divine dramaturgy, liable to receive an eschatological meaning? Or else, is it the announcement of an end of Christianity and Monotheism as such? Whatever is the response to this question, that second atheism bears more intimate relationships to Christian theology than the first one. It raises especially the question of whether the God who "is dead" and whose death prescribes God's meaning in the age of "nihilism" is a mere metaphysical idol, as Jean-Luc Marion has claimed, or else is the Revealed God himself, according to Nietzsche's interpretation.

V. Before theism and atheism

Is it possible to describe an atheism that is not simply a denial of God, or does not co-implicate the loss of all value? Jean-Luc Nancy attempts to pursue this task, which means that he does not describe himself *simply* as an atheist.[17] In *Dis-Enclosure: The*

[15] Paul Veyne, *Le pain et le cirque: Sociologie historique d'un pluralisme politique* (Paris: Seuil, 1976) 589: "La divinité des souverains n'avait pas de croyants. En revanche, elle a eu ses incroyants, les chrétiens." ("The divinity of the sovereigns had no believers. On the other hand, it had its unbelievers, the Christians.")

[16] "Nature is such that she testifies everywhere, both within man and without him, to a lost God," Blaise Pascal, *Thoughts, Letters and Minor Works*, trans. by W. F. Trotter, The Harvard Classics 48 (Harvard UP: 1910), 148. G. W. Hegel, *Faith and Knowledge*, trans. Walter Cerf and H. S. Harris (New York, State University of New York Press, 1977), 190. Trans. modified.

[17] See the discussion of Nancy's uses of atheism, absentheism and atheology in Christopher Watkin, *Difficult Atheism: Post-Theological Thinking in Alain Badiou, Jean-Luc Nancy and Quentin Meillassoux* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011) especially 53, 56, 113ff.

Deconstruction of Christianity volume 1, he argues that the force of Monotheism in Western thought builds toward its own overcoming. He declares that metaphysics is complicit with Christianity in that it "sets a founding, warranting presence beyond the world," and everything "is played out in the mutual referral of these two regimes of beings or presence."[18] The exhaustion of metaphysics is fulfilled in the nihilism of Nietzsche, yet at the same time, metaphysics "deconstructs itself constitutively" and reveals "the extreme limits of reason in an excess of and over reason itself."[19] Christianity as metaphysics thus harbors a resource within itself that is deeper than Christianity: in its Anselmian formulation, thought "thinks something in excess over itself. It penetrates the impenetrable, or rather is penetrated by it."[20]

Nancy thus maintains that both theism and atheism are positions defined by an appeal to a higher principle upon which reason is founded. However, he writes: "the signal weakness of any logic of the premise . . . shows itself at the crucial point where theism and atheism prove to belong to each other . . . The decisive point is this—it ought to be the task of the principle . . . *to exceed qua principle principiation itself.*"[21] In this way, Nancy argues for the priority of a kind of experience or intentionality that he names "faith," but by this he refers neither to a relationship of trust with a transcendent being nor to a set of religious beliefs—as we might otherwise understand the term. This is described in his chapter in the present work, where we read: "No activity, no implementation, no praxis is possible without *an energy that allows one to devote oneself to a project without a program*, that is, not to the execution of a defined task but to the impulse and even to *the adventure or the experience of something that by definition is neither given nor presentable*."[22] As a type of intentionality or consciousness, then, faith is "the act of reason" that bears witness to "the event" (to *the adventure or the experience of something that by definition is neither given nor presentable*) while having no-thing to show for it.

> Faith is not weak, hypothetical, or subjective knowledge. It is neither unverifiable nor received through submission, nor even through reason. It is not a belief in the ordinary sense of the term. On the contrary, it is the act of the reason that relates, itself, to that which, in it, passes it infinitely: faith stands precisely at the point of an altogether consequent atheism. This is to say that it stands at the point where atheism is dispossessed of belief in the premise or principle and in principiate, in general. . . . Reason does not suffice unto itself: for itself it is not a sufficient reason.[23]

For Nancy, "the name 'God,' or that of the 'holy'" always comes too late, but it is an "attempt to designate" where no designation can take place, "as that which exceeds thinking infinitely without in any way being principial to it."[24] Faith opens reason, then,

[18] Jean-Luc Nancy, *Dis-Enclosure: The Deconstruction of Christianity*, trans. Bettina Bergo, Gabriel Malenfant, and Michael B. Smith (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), 6.
[19] Nancy, *Dis-Enclosure*, 7.
[20] Nancy, *Dis-Enclosure*, 11.
[21] Nancy, *Dis-Enclosure*, 22–3.
[22] See page 22 of the present work.
[23] Nancy, *Dis-Enclosure*, 25.
[24] Nancy, *Dis-Enclosure*, 25.

to its own insufficiency. However—and this is the crucial point for Nancy—while faith opens reason to its beyond, the event onto which faith opens is nothing *other* than reason.[25]

To the extent that Nancy relies on something deep within or deeper than Christianity to overcome Christianity, Jacques Derrida suggests that he is liable to the criticism that he is more Christian than the Christians. This would reinscribe Nancy within the very binary he seeks to evade.[26] However, Nancy's reference to the event whence faith opens reason to its beyond is an attempt to think the experience of what precedes the distinction between theism and atheism without becoming available as a principle for resolving their difference: this event is no-thing at all. Now, interestingly enough, Jean-Luc Marion seems to traverse the same terrain when he writes of "an opening of that which already no longer is . . ." It is here that Marion discerns the possibility of the event of the impossible: "If God ever has to appear to our eyes that have become blind to the twilight of the idols, clearly *it will be in this opening*, and no longer in the desertlike domain of the possible."[27]

What might such an experience look like? If it is unavailable except by means of a discursive reflection that always comes *too late*, how might it be known as such? For Nancy, the event prompting that discursive reflection comes as a *surprise* to thought.[28] For Marion, this event is known to feeling.[29] If we were to think this with a definitively Heideggerian inflection and not with a Schleiermacherian one, we might say that it is known to mood (*Stimmung*), which discloses our how of being in the world. Both atheist and theist would thus come to self-conscious reflection having always and already crossed a threshold. They would bring with themselves a mood that, according to Heidegger, is the co-condition of knowing. What would be at stake, then, in the difference between Marion and Nancy—our two bookends—is not so much that one believes in God and the other does not, but how each is fundamentally affected at that point of opening onto the world which is life, and how that is then understood and interpreted as experience.[30]

Let us say in concluding this brief sketch of a way of describing an atheism which is no longer an atheism but precedes the very distinction between atheism and theism—that it is echoed in the works of John Caputo and Richard Kearney, although in different ways. Caputo proposes that his notion of "religion without religion" "turns on a deeper resonance with the unconditional in our lives, which subtends the furious and futile

[25] "I propose here, simply, that nothing gives itself and that nothing shows itself—and that is what is." Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Creation of the World or Globalisation*, trans. François Raffoul and David Pettigrew (New York: SUNY, 2007), 123 note 24.

[26] Jacques Derrida, *On Touching: Jean-Luc Nancy*, trans. Christine Irizarry (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005), 220.

[27] Jean-Luc Marion, *Negative Certainties*, trans. Stephen E. Lewis (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015), 62. Emphasis added.

[28] Jean-Luc Nancy, "The Surprise of the Event," in *Hegel after Derrida*, ed. Stuart Barnett (London/New York: Routledge, 1998), 91.

[29] Jean-Luc Marion, *In Excess: Studies of Saturated* Phenomena, trans. Robyn Horner and Vincent Berraud (New York: Fordham University Press, 2002) 162.

[30] For an extended argument along these lines, see Robyn Horner, *Experience of God: A Phenomenology of Revelation* (forthcoming).

debate between theism and atheism."[31] In contrast, Kearney emphasizes that his anatheism comes both before any division between atheism and theism as well as after them.[32] Moreover, since his anatheism rests on a wager, he does not exclude (as Caputo does) that "God" might have passed or will pass again.

VI. A very brief introduction to the works in this book

The atheistic desert

According to Jean-Christophe Bailly, "atheism has not found a way to irrigate its own desert." But what would it mean for atheism to perform such a task? What kind of energy could vivify the desert created by the absence of God? By investigating Marx's theory of spirit, Jean-Luc Nancy questions the paradoxical proximity of atheism to Christianity. What defines Marx's view of Christianity is the lack of real love, and by contrast, Marx's atheism is characterized first of all by a trust (a faith?) in the reality of a genuine love taking place between concrete individuals in concrete socio-economic conditions, a trust in what Marx sometimes calls "spirit." Marx's atheism is not, therefore, the substitution of a material god for a spiritual god; instead, it is the deepening of a resolute faith whose character as a "faith" stands out through the fundamental trust that Marx puts in the possibility of a reality of spirit. With that example—which is not unparalleled—it is possible more generally to suggest that there is no atheistic existence that does not imply a faith of some order. This faith is even stronger in the atheism of intellectuals of our time (philosophers, artists, scientists) because of the fact that it is not related to any god. Yet –Nancy asks—is this enough to vivify the desert of atheism?

The atheism of desire

If atheism and theism are ways of being in the world rather than ways of believing, no one brings this out more poignantly in the present volume than Jeffrey Bloechl, who describes the atheism of those who, wanting to believe, nevertheless find themselves unable to do so. Bloechl introduces us to the character of Jack Boughton, the main protagonist in Marilynne Robinson's novel *Home*. Everything in the story suggests that Jack lives and moves wholly outside the grace of God, though neither because we can be sure that grace is in no way extended to him nor because he is simply unwilling to see it. Jack has only his adhesion to the world and the things of the world, and they answer more readily to his cares than does the God whose love he nonetheless wishes to have – across a gulf of alienation as old and deep as his very life. The character of Jack reveals that existence is such that we are not predetermined to faith in God's love, but only called to it from a condition that admits the real possibility of living instead as if the world is all there is.

[31] John D. Caputo, *The Folly of God: A Theology of the Unconditional* (Salem, OR: Polebridge Press, 2015), 2.

[32] Richard Kearney and Jens Zimmerman, eds., *Reimagining the Sacred: Richard Kearney Debates God* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016) 7.

Anarchic atheism

In her consideration of critiques of the metaphysical "archic paradigm"—that is, of the ontological sovereignty of the *arche* and what derives from it—Catherine Malabou credits French Politician Pierre-Joseph Proudhon with being the author of a semantic "revolution" in the use of the term "anarchy." Before Proudhon, anarchy refers to disorder, or chaos. Proudhon gives anarchy a new, positive meaning: politically, it is not a rejection of power as such, but a rejection of the domination or abuse of power. Malabou argues that this idea underlies theological and philosophical attempts at a deconstruction of the archic paradigm, and she illustrates this using the work of three thinkers. Christian anarchists, like Jacques Ellul, try to subtract God—so to speak—from all idea of domination and so to liberate Christianity from the domination of the Church. In contrast, Levinas advocates a dismantling of the archic paradigm in ethics under the form of "anarchic responsibility," because he suspects Heidegger's "Being" of being unable to resist the archic paradigm of Western metaphysics. In contrast again, Reiner Schürmann shows in relation to Heidegger that "anarchy" is the name of the destiny of thinking after the deconstruction of metaphysics. In these ways, is anarchy an atheism? Are the various deconstructions—undertaken by Ellul, Levinas, and Schürmann—deconstructions of God? Alternatively, Malabou asks: do they pave the way for a new way of approaching religion, in such a way that "God" is here a name for the deconstructive force of the archic paradigm, the self-dismantling move of the *arche*?

The "death of God" and "the death of God"

In his 1953 study of Stéphane Mallarmé, Jean-Paul Sartre writes about the author of "Un coup de dés": "More and better than Nietzsche he experienced the death of God." Quentin Meillassoux actually maintains an opposing thesis: contrary to what has been advanced, Mallarmé's famous letter on the Nothing (April 28, 1866)—from which all his later research proceeds—cannot be understood as the discovery of such a *topos*. The experience of the death of God had, indeed, already nourished his writing before that date, and led him to an impasse. The profound originality of Mallarmé's crisis of 1866 is, instead, that it is an experience of nothingness that constitutes a break with this theme of his youth. By introducing a new writing centered on this discovery, Mallarmé will avoid both a return to religious transcendence and the renewal of the death of God as a poetically exhausted commonplace.

Ana-theism

One of the lasting contributions of Richard Kearney to philosophy of religion will be his coining of the term to which we have already referred, "ana-theism." Anatheism is a "returning to God after God": a critical retrieval of sacred things that have passed but still bear radical potentialities that may be reanimated in the future. As such, anatheism proposes a future for the forgotten or still unfulfilled calls of divine history: it is an "after-faith," which is more than any "after-thought" or "after-affect." After-faith is eschatological: something ultimate in the end that was already there from the

beginning. Yet anatheism is not a dialectical third term which supersedes theism and atheism in some Hegelian synthesis or final resolution. It contains a moment of atheism within itself, as it does a moment of theism, or to be more precise: anatheism pre-contains both, for it operates from a space and time before the dichotomy of atheism and theism (as well as after). The double "a" of anatheism holds out the possibility, but not the necessity, of a second affirmation once the "death of God" has done its work. Resisting the logic of theodicy, anatheism is always a wager—a risk that can go either way. It is a matter of discernment and decision on our part, responding to the Call of the instant. As such, anatheism reactivates suspended or unsuspected possibilities often experienced in the a-theism of non-knowing; the "a-" marking an act of abstention and withdrawal rather than passive privation. Such a-theism is less a matter of epistemological argument against God than a pre-reflective lived experience of lostness and solitude—a mood of *Angst* or abandon, an existential "dark night of the soul" which most people experience at some point in their lives.

Atheism as apocalypse

A discourse on "the end times" has renewed relevance during a period of catastrophic climate change. For Emmanuel Falque, the end times is not only a religious concept, but also finds an atheistic meaning in the scientific discourse of climatology. How can a Christian concept of the apocalypse as revelation interact with an atheistic discourse on the end, today? There is an amphibology in the concepts of "revelation" and "apocalypse"; thinking revelation as "unveiling" in Greek thought and the "removing of the veil" in Judaism, it is possible to argue that these traditions are united and transformed in a Christian understanding. The Christian apocalypse, as the revelation of Jesus Christ, integrates the various meanings of revelation and apocalypse in order to suggest that God dwells with humanity in even the most cataclysmic events. The possibility of such a transformation is central to thinking about the future of humanity in the midst of a climate crisis.

Atheism as loving critique

Anthony Steinbock observes that participation in being is a belief posture that can be characterized phenomenologically as naïve participation. This naïve belief posture includes a belief in the God of religion. Evidently, there is also another possibility—the possibility of a critical approach to religion which entails holding this belief attitude in abeyance: a phenomenological atheism that would thus call into question the being of God. This is a very common stance in contemporary philosophy.[33] Yet, he argues, atheism can also evolve from love, and could be described as a different kind of critique, a discernment of the heart. Steinbock maintains that we should speak about the "religious" in critical terms in order to keep the discourse attuned to religious experience.

[33] Hent de Vries, *Religion and Violence: Philosophical Perspectives from Kant to Derrida* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002), xii.

Atheism and Indifference

Philippe Cabestan asks about the significance of philosophical responses to the proclamation of the "death of God." On the one hand, this event provokes a positive humanism, which reads it as the triumph of modern sciences over obscurantism. Cabestan argues that this approach is simplistic: amongst other things, it ignores the historicity of the events which concern the Christian God. On the other hand, in the works of Heidegger and Sartre, the death of God assumes a very different character. For Sartre, the death of God relates largely to his personal atheism. His indifference to the event ultimately leads to his assumption of a Marxist materialism that is ironically linked once more to a narrative of progress. For Heidegger, the death of God is intrinsically tied to the end of metaphysics. From this perspective, Heidegger maintains that Nietzsche's death of God is only an inadequate interpretation of nihilism: to Nietzsche's limited sense of nihilism, Heidegger opposes the nihilism of being. Cabestan argues this demonstrates Heidegger's failure to deal with modernity and the real questions that are raised by the event of the death of God.

Atheism and intersubjective experience

Tamsin Jones considers the question of how excessive experiences signify inter-subjectively through the lens of debates within the disciplines of religious studies and trauma theory. Within religious studies—which most recently has been occupied with a return to the material—social constructivist positions argue that all forms of religious experience are humanly constructed. Historians, however, argue against foreclosing the limits of legitimate objects of study according to an enforced naturalism or positivism within the study of religion. Thinkers such as Robert Orsi develop this position materially: it is a radical empiricism because it attends to what appears on bodies, in communities, in ritual and performance. Jones demonstrates how an analysis of undergoing and interpreting a traumatic experience can challenge this divide between social constructivist and radical empiricist positions. Through an analogy with the excess of traumatic experience, religious experience can be understood in both a persistently realist mode and, at the same time, only made meaningful through an interpretation that is socially constructed.

Atheism in metaphysics and phenomenology

Many contemporary philosophers of religion abandon metaphysical speculation and take up the challenge of attending to the traces of God's phenomenality through the discipline of phenomenology. Most famously, Jean-Luc Marion claims that phenomenology "relieves" theology of metaphysics. Patrick Masterson argues that a realist metaphysics has as important a role to play as phenomenology in the philosophical elucidation of religion. They offer complementary rather than incompatible approaches; each being both appropriate and incomplete. Phenomenologically, God is affirmed as existing in salvific correlation with religious experiences of contingency, finitude and hope. In metaphysical realism, by way of

contrast, the relationship between humanity and God is affirmed as an asymmetric one of radical causal dependence upon an ontologically independent and utterly transcendent Infinite Being. The asymmetry involved in realist metaphysics between independently existing being and our intuition of it resembles what is presupposed by the various ways in which God can be envisaged phenomenologically as correlative to the religious exigencies of our conscious subjectivity.

Atheism and revelation

Christina M. Gschwandtner asks: does the line between theist and atheist experience run through *what* phenomena one experiences or *how* one experiences them? Do atheists and theists have different experiences, or do they, instead, respond to or interpret the same phenomena differently? Can experience distinguish between or provide a basis for a theist rather than an atheist or non-theist position? What makes them different, and does either have a more convincing, more coherent, more phenomenological position? Jean-Luc Marion, she argues, attempts to provide such phenomenological distinctions in his work. While the positions he suggests are all recognizable, by his own admission, it ultimately proves impossible to give an account of an experience of revelation, because the (atheistic) blindness that refuses to see is indistinguishable, on phenomenological terms, from the (theistic) blindness that is bedazzled by the overwhelmingly, paradoxically saturated phenomenon. Marion makes various attempts to distinguish the first kind of blindness from the second—that is, what might be called various "atheist" or non-theist experiences versus a more genuinely "theist" one, although this is not language Marion himself employs. Gschwandtner complicates his account of the first kind of blindness and challenges Marion's assurance that the latter kind is evidence of having experienced a phenomenon of revelation.

Jean-Luc Marion

In his essay, "Doubling Metaphysics," Jean-Luc Marion underlines the indeterminacy of the concept of "philosophy of religion" which has entered a crisis today insofar as it derives from the establishment of metaphysics, starting from Duns Scotus, and more clearly still with Suarez, that is to say, from the movement by which, by making the *metaphysica* a *scientia transcendentalis,* one subordinates God to the question of *ens in quantum ens*. In subordinating God to the transcendental device, we conceive God as the supreme being (*ens supremum*) whose function is to found all beings (as *principium, causa,* and even ultimately *causa sui*). God is thereby subject to the requirements of human representation and thought, and subordinate to the *ens cogitabile* in general. So, the main consequence of the establishment of ontotheology is an idolatrous determination of God.

The need for a post-metaphysical theology therefore passes through the deconstruction of the metaphysical device, beginning with its founding opposition between the possible and the impossible: to God, nothing is impossible, which also puts the principle of sufficient reason out of play. Hence, the possibility that takes shape for the thought of God, not to "go beyond" metaphysics, but rather to "double its cape,"

which requires ratifying the gap established by Pascal between theology and philosophy through his doctrine of the three orders—the third order, that of the "divine truths," being characterized by the fact that here "one only enters truth by charity": we must therefore love the truth to know it. A Christian thought can only be built starting from *agapē,* that is to say, in formulating an autonomous and strong doctrine of love—or better, by letting itself be built up and edified by *agapē* as such. Such thinking does not need the foundation of the *metaphysica* in any of its versions, but, in it, love must prevail over any other metaphysical rationality and "submit everything to the one who submits all to the Father."[34]

VII. Postlude

It will be apparent from this brief survey of our interlocutors that there are many shades to debates about atheism, most especially in relation to experience. What is clear, however, is that a view that restricts the concept of atheism to an argument about belief in God will often miss the point. In the context of Western societies, particularly, where such belief and its attendant dogmatics can appear simply to make no sense, there must be other ways to engage with questions of ultimate meaning. It is our hope that in the richness of the responses in this volume, such ways may be explored by our readers.

Australian poet, Bruce Dawe (1930–2020), was once asked by a priest to write about his "experience of God." In the poem which forms Dawe's reply, he observes that this is "like being asked to write about/ what it's like to be good at maths or the world's best/ ocarina-player." Dawe cannot respond, because such an experience—as he claims in his response—has simply passed him by. For some people, he writes, "when the one special thing comes along/ they're out of town for the day and the vision of the godhead/goes to the bloke next door."[35] The impossible, it seems, resists experience, but experience also resists the impossible. It is this resistance that we explore in these pages.

[34] See page 198 of the present text.
[35] Bruce Dawe, *Sometimes Gladness: Collected Poems*, 1954–1987, 3rd ed. (Melbourne: Longman Cheshire, 1988), 237.