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Author(s): Jeffrey L Kosky

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Kosky - Contemporary Encounters with Apophatic Theology - JCRT 1.3
 Jeffrey L. Kosky

Of those places where mystical traditions of Christian thought have received a warm welcome, post-Heideggerian continental thought is perhaps the most surprising. One of the first of the post-Heideggerians to make this move, Jean-Luc Marion turns to mystical theology in two related works, *L'idole et la distance* (1977) and *Dieu sans l'être* (1982).¹ There, mystical theology, represented most especially by Pseudo-Dionysius and Gregory of Nyssa, proves integral to Marion's attempt to formulate a theological position that evades the reigning Heideggerian understanding of theology as part and parcel of an onto-theo-logically determined metaphysics. Going one step further, Marion argues that mystical theology, especially in its naming of a Good Beyond Being, would even exceed Heidegger's own step back from metaphysics in the direction of the thought of Being by inscribing Being, beings and the difference between them within the play of the Good.

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1. *Good Beyond Being*. Insofar as responsibility describes the genesis of the subject prior to its being, responsibility must be described in terms of a Good beyond Being. Levinas writes, "If ethical terms arise in our discourse..., it is because' the subject finds himself committed to the Good in the very passivity of supporting" (OB, 122). This commitment to the Good, according to Levinas, is the very genesis or birth of the subject in responsibility. "The Good chooses me first before I can be in a position to choose, that is, welcome its choice' The Good is before being" (OB, 122). As in Dionysius, the Good summons me before I am, before I have being, and it is in response to that summons that I am born as a responsible self. "The way I appear is a summons" (OB, 139). Again, as with Pseudo-Dionysius, the relation between the Good and the self whose origin it marks is here described in terms of a summons, or call, which cannot be reduced to the relation between cause and effect or to any relation between two beings since the summons precedes and determines the eventual being of the other. The drama played out in responsibility is not acted by two beings, each seeking to pursue their own ends and to persevere in their own being, but in terms of goodness where I give up all that I could call my own in obedient response to the command of the hidden Good. Levinas writes, "the self is goodness, or under the exigency for an abandon of all having' Goodness invests me in my obedience to the hidden Good" (OB, 118). Like the created soul who is what it is in terms of the good it has received, the responsible self exists only on account of its having received an investment of goodness which demands the dispossession of its own being.
2. *Hierarchy and asymmetry*. The fact that the Good calls me before I am implies that the relation between the Good and me is hierarchical or, in Levinas' terms "asymmetrical" and "irreversible." Contrary to many contemporary moralists who see relations to be ethical or just when they are reciprocal or mutual, Levinas insists that responsibility breaks reciprocity insofar as I alone am responsible. To institute reciprocity and exchanged obligations would be to institute measure and comparison which would ground calculation and rational action

¹*L'idole et la distance* (Paris: Grasset, 1977) and *Dieu sans l'être* (Paris: Fayard, 1982) [English translation as *God Without Being*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991)].

and, according to Levinas, thereby miss ethics or responsibility insofar as calculation and rational action refer back to the priority of an I or ego who counts and reasons in advance of taking on responsibility. In contrast to such mutuality or comparable obligations in morality, the subject, Levinas writes, is assigned to itself in the “one-way irreversible being affected of responsibility” (OB, 84). The irreversibility of responsibility, like the hierarchical structure of the universe, reflects the transcendence of the Good whose summons is the irreversible origin of my being.

3. *Infinity and abandon of desire.* Always coming after its summons, the response of responsibility comes to no end insofar as that to which I respond has already left the scene when I am there. My belatedness to my own origin, the fact that I come after the summons which summons me to be, returns in the end which recedes the nearer I draw to it. Responsibility, Levinas claims, is “without measure, for it increases in the measure ‘ or absence of measure ‘ to which response is made” (DQV, 119). Just as for Dionysius the created soul desires God with a desire that feeds on its own satisfaction, so too will Levinas claim “The more I respond the more responsible I am.” The ever increasing burden of responsibility is figured for Levinas in the notion of substitution. In responsibility, I am a self not insofar as I alone appropriate my being or realize my end, but in that only I substitute myself for every other, taking responsibility even for what they are responsible for, and thereby dispossess myself of my own: “the self is goodness, or under the exigency for an abandon of all having” (OB, 118). Structured in terms of responsibility, the I obeys a strange logic wherein the more I am I, the more I desire an end I can never fulfill since meeting it would entail the abandon of myself. “The more I return to myself, the more I divest myself’ the more I discover myself to be responsible” (OB, 112). This self-abandon in response to the summons of the hidden Good can be compared to the advice that Dionysius gives Timothy: “My advice is ‘ by an undivided and absolute abandonment of yourself and everything, shedding all and freed from all, you will be uplifted to the ray of divine shadow which is above everything that is” (MT 1000A). The ecstatic soul, here Timothy, responding to its hidden Cause finds that it can meet this end only by abandoning itself, which is to say that it itself cannot meet this end. Like the ecstasy of the soul yearning beyond itself, responsibility demands an apprenticeship in unknowing and dispossession, an abandon of my self in the approach of an other.”
4. *Hyper-terms.* Insofar as the ethical relation is not to be described in terms of Being but in terms of the Good, Levinas will have recourse to a form of language that does not depend on knowledge and the priority it accords to being. Such a form of language remains beyond and irreducible to a language determined by the simple negativity of the opposition between affirmation and negation, positive and negative. Levinas insists that “negativity, still correlate with being, will not be enough to signify the *other than being*” (OB, 9). To speak, however inadequately and improperly, of this “other than being”, this Good beyond being, he will use a language that resembles the mystical mode of theology in that it has recourse to a redoubled negation to push language beyond its apophantic function of revealing being according to the categorical alternative of truth and falsity. Pointing toward this third moment, Levinas claims that the “non-presence of the infinite is not only a figure of negative theology. All the negative attributes which state what is beyond essence become positive in responsibility” (OB, 11-12) or “what makes this more than a term of negative theology, is my responsibility for the other” (OB, 13). Now I admit that these citations seem to suggest that Levinas takes his distance from negative theology; but let me just recall that even Dionysius takes his distance from negative theology insofar as it is succeeded by a third or mystical way. The responsibility

that Levinas says is “more than” or “not only” negative theology will be spoken of in terms that resemble those proffered in the mystical discourse of Dionysius. Let me cite just one example. The passivity of the subject is a “passivity more passive than any passivity that is correlative to the voluntary” (OB, 51). “More passive than any passivity” is what might be called, following Dionysius, a hyper-passivity. This hyper-passivity is, according to Levinas, “a passivity prior to the passivity-activity alternative” (OB, 121). Like the hyper-terms used by the mystical mode of Dionysius’ theology, this passivity more passive than passivity articulates the strange logic of a neither/nor that would exceed the predicative function of language. It would resemble the “redoubled negation” that does not return to an affirmation in and through its negation of the negative. To say that responsibility happens in a passivity more passive than any passivity is in effect to speak without saying anything determinate about the subject beyond the reach of speech and language.

5. *The saying of praise.* Just as redoubled negation and the hyper- terms in Dionysius suggest a form of language that cannot be understood to function in terms of the predicative logos, so too does Levinas suggest another, non-apophantic function of language. He calls this form of language which signifies beyond the categorical alternative of the logos *saying*: “apophansis does not exhaust what there is in saying” (OB, 6). “The saying is beyond the logos, beyond being and non-being, beyond true and non-true” (OB, 45). Neither true nor false, the signification of saying, like that marked by the hyper-terms, lies beyond the categorical alternatives posed by logical signification. Levinas tells us more precisely what this saying consists of when he writes, “Saying states and thematizes the said, but signifies it to the other, a neighbor, with a signification that has to be distinguished from that borne by words in the said” (OB, 46). In contrast to the said or what is said in language, the saying does not signify by making determinations about being or securing an ultimate meaning or sense of that about which it speaks. Like praise in Dionysius, saying endlessly undoes the fixed determination of meaning that a predicative language would affirm ‘ even in its negations ’ as is witnessed by the incessant and unending necessity of unsaying what is said in every saying when it is a matter of approaching the otherwise than Being. While Levinas does not elaborate a coherent theory or list of the proliferation of names for the beyond Being, the fact that the saying cannot be exhausted in the said would mark the endlessness of reference in a mode similar to that used in praise.

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3. Shortly after Marion’s work appeared and pursuing lines also internal to his own progress of thought, Jacques Derrida offered his own reading of mystical theology in “Comment ne pas parler: D’negations” and “Sauf le nom (Post-Scriptum).” These essays, which can be read as part of an ongoing debate with Marion, suggest that mystical theology, far from evading onto-theo-logical determination, remains part of the metaphysical tradition whose beyond it seeks to state. Seeking to understand not just what Derrida has said about mystical theology, several book length studies have made the relationship between Derrida’s deconstruction and Christian negative theology one of their central concerns ‘ most notably John D. Caputo’s *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida: Religion Without Religion* and Kevin Hart’s *The Trespass of the Sign: Deconstruction, Theology and Philosophy*.² Caputo has argued that deconstruction’s

²See Kevin Hart, *The Trespass of the Sign: Deconstruction, Theology and Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University

confrontation with negative theology opens something like the possibility of generalizing the significance of the apophatic moment into non-theological realms such as ethics or politics. In a similar but significantly different reading, Hart sees apophatic theology already working deconstructively. While both Hart and Caputo are at pains to emphasize that deconstruction is not a negative theology and negative theology is not a deconstruction, their work is part of a growing body of research that has altered the common perception of contemporary continental thought as antithetical to religion and theological forms of thought. At the same time and inversely, work such as theirs has begun to challenge a long dominant framework that left the study of negative theology solely in the hands of academic historians or church theologians where it was *isolated from discussion with* the theoretical issues and debates that engage culture at large.

4. What is often noted but not examined in these discussions is that one of Derrida's earliest encounters with apophatic traditions of thought occurs not in an essay on an acknowledged theological figure, but in an essay dating from 1964 on the ethical phenomenology of Emmanuel Levinas.³ In this essay, entitled "Violence and Metaphysics," citations from acknowledged mystics or apophatic theologians such as Meister Eckhart, Pseudo-Dionysius, and Nicholas of Cusa play a central role in Derrida's argument that Levinas' thought of ethics is determined by a theological conceptuality.⁴ In the context of Derrida's essay, these references are meant to prove that Levinas maintains the consistency of onto-theo-logical tradition even when he claims to state its beyond. Whether or not Derrida is justified in making this claim of Levinas and whether or not his interpretation of these theologians is to be defended will not be the questions of the present essay. Instead, I want to pursue (1) what is implied by the mere fact of these references to apophatic theology in an essay on Levinas and (2) show that Levinas, far from remaining in the background of discussions about contemporary encounters with apophaticism, should figure prominently therein.
5. I understand that *for* both the postmodern disciples of Levinas and the scholars of Christian mysticism such a claim might seem forced or arbitrary. To suggest 'in advance of my argument' that I am not reading too much into the texts, I can give two textual indications that will serve as probable cause for my inquiry. First, when Levinas concludes the preliminary note to his major work, *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, he says his aim is "to hear a God not contaminated by Being." Second, when referring to the method he employs, Levinas claims, "I believe I am recovering the *via eminentiae*."⁵ Perhaps it goes without saying, but a God above or beyond Being and the *via eminentiae* are two decisive characteristics of mystical theology in the Christian tradition. Even if one wants to claim, rightly, that a God beyond Being is a Platonic notion (The Good Beyond Being of *Republic VI*) and therefore not necessarily indicative of a mystical inheritance, the fact that Levinas names the *via eminentiae*, the way of eminence, cannot but suggest that the possibility and the significance of his relation to mystical theology warrant further consideration..
6. Recognizing that the classical or historically dominant scheme of apophatic discourse can

Press, 1989) and John D. Caputo, *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida: Religion without Religion* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997).

³This has been noted [by] John D. Caputo and Edith Wyschogrod. See Edith Wyschogrod "How to Say 'No' in French," in *Negation and Theology*, Robert Scharlemann ed., (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1992) and John D. Caputo, *Against Ethics* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993).

⁴See "Violence and Metaphysics" in *Writing and Difference*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978): pp. 79-153.

⁵*De Dieu Qui vient ' l'id'e* (Paris: J. Vrin, 1992); p. 142. *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence* (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1991); p. xlii. Hereafter cited intertextually as DQV and OB.

be traced back to the sixth century monk bearing the name Dionysius, I will begin with a consideration of his mystical framework and theological method. I will then show how key elements of this mystical theology can be seen to operate within Levinas' ethical thought and language so that at times Levinas might seem to be speaking in the manner of an apophatic or mystical theologian. In other words, I will show how what Caputo has called a "generalized apophatics" is operative in Levinas' thought so that we might then ask: Without the inheritance he received or recovered from an apophatic or mystical tradition, is it likely that Levinas would have been able to cross the threshold to which his phenomenological investigations brought him when he glimpsed an underside of consciousness, beyond being and knowledge? Would he have been able to articulate this beyond being, and would he have been able to articulate it for us, his readers?

7. I begin with Dionysius, and at the outset I wish to acknowledge that my reading follows closely the interpretation of Dionysius advanced by Thomas Carlson in his *Indiscretion: Finitude and the Naming of God*. The contribution that this book has made to the contemporary discussion of mystical theology in and among the post-moderns is immeasurably aided by its clear and insightful reading of the Dionysian corpus and the literature concerning it.⁶
8. The Dionysian conception of the universe is structured according to the Neo-Platonic dynamic of a procession from and return to God who remains identical to himself *transcendently beyond the universe in his superessence*. Within such a schema, God as divine cause, or *aitia*, holds a central place. As cause of the procession of beings, God is immanent in all things and all things can be said to manifest God. However, precisely as cause, God stands transcendently outside or beyond each and every created being which manifests him. Considering this transcendent divine cause in the introduction to his *Divine Names*, Dionysius claims, "It is and it is as no other being is. Cause of all existence and therefore itself transcending existence" (DN, 587B) and similarly, "Although it is the cause of everything, it is not a thing since it transcends all things" (DN, 593C).⁷ The divine cause of beings is not itself a being among the beings which manifest it. The universe therefore can be seen as the manifestation of the unmanifest or hidden divine cause, a manifestation in which divine transcendence is manifest precisely and paradoxically as unmanifest."⁸
9. Within the schema of procession from and return to the divine cause, the created world therefore serves as a sensible symbol displaying the unlikely relation between the transcendent God and the world that manifests this hidden transcendence. As Bernard McGinn has put it, "All things both reveal and conceal God. The 'dissimilar similarity' that constitutes every created manifestation of God is both a similarity to be affirmed and a dissimilarity to be denied."⁸ Created in and through the ecstatic procession of God out of himself into the cosmos, beings manifest their divine cause who transcends them absolutely.
10. It is important to emphasize here that the symbolic character of creation, which underlies Dionysius' theological method, bespeaks a relation which goes irreversibly one-way. If there is an analogy between God and the created cosmos, which there undeniably is, it would be a special form of analogy, one which is well put by Hans Urs von Balthasar: "Things are

⁶Thomas A. Carlson, *Indiscretion: Finitude and the Naming of God* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999).

⁷Citations from Dionysius are taken from *Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works* (New York: Paulist Press, 1987). From here on out, references will appear intertextually. DN = The Divine Names; MT = The Mystical Theology; CH = The Celestial Hierarchy; Letter = Letters.

⁸Bernard McGinn, *The Foundations of Mysticism* (New York: Crossroad Press, 1992): p. 174.

both like God and unlike him, but God is not like things.”⁹ This would be implied in the hierarchical determination of reality. While beings as caused are both like and unlike God who is their cause, God is not like any of the beings whom he has caused. “As the secret and sacred tradition has instructed, God is in no way like the things which have being” (CH, 140D). Or better: “The Trinity is present to all things, though all things are not present to it” (DN, 680B). Causality is a one-way, irreversible relation of this Trinitarian Cause to the beings whose revelation conceals it. Well before Hume’s refutation of the argument from design, the irreversibility of the hierarchical relation protected the transcendence and unknowability of the divine Cause manifested in the hierarchical universe. It also has important consequences for how Dionysius will understand the relations which structure the modes of theology. Anticipating a more complete discussion below, it can be said that insofar as God is not like the things which nevertheless manifest him, the negative names or apophatic mode of theology will be superior to the positive names or kataphatic mode ‘ even if neither form of naming or mode of theology will prove ultimately adequate to the divine transcendence.

11. The same essence of manifestation, of revealing that conceals and concealing that reveals, is incarnate in “Jesus, the source and perfection of every hierarchy” (EH, 373B). Far from being an irrelevant or extraneous afterthought to the Dionysian conception of the divine process, the figure of Jesus provides the indispensable ground and completion of the hierarchical universe. Embodying the hierarchical principle that structures the cosmos in each of its parts and in its entirety, Christ will incarnate the same essence of manifestation according to the principle of dissimilar similarity. This is evident in Dionysius’ interpretation of the Love of Christ as a
12. hint that the transcendent has put aside its own hiddenness and has revealed itself to us by becoming a human being. But he is hidden even after his revelation, or, if I may speak in a more divine fashion, is hidden even amid the revelation. For this mystery of Jesus remains hidden and can be drawn out by no word or mind. What is to be said of it remains unsayable; what is to be understood of it remains unknowable (Letter 3).
13. _This is not absolutely convincing evidence, or a sign that would refer simply and unambiguously to the divine, but a “hint, the revelation of the transcendent concealing itself by hiding in its very manifestation as Christ._ Hidden even amid the revelation”, the transcendent reveals itself in Christ as such, that is to say as hidden or mysterious, so that all language and thought proves ultimately incapable of putting into words or thoughts what it can only hint at in and through thought and language.”
14. Now what is the relation of this paradoxical manifestation of the unmanifest to the modes of theology? Kataphatic or positive language would correspond with the procession of the divine out of itself into its manifestation in and as the cosmos, while apophatic or negative language would articulate the path of the created soul’s return to the unmanifest divine transcendence. The third and final mode of language, the way of eminence, would bespeak the completion of the created soul’s return to God as the unmanifest source of the manifestation *which the creature is*. This is summed up in a classic text from *The Mystical Theology*:

Since it is the Cause of all beings we should posit and ascribe to it all the affirmations we make in regard to beings (kataphasis), and more appropriately, we should negate all these affirmations since it surpasses all being (apophasis). Now we should not conclude that the negations are simply the opposites of the affirmations, but rather

⁹Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics*, vol. 2 (New York: Crossroad, 1982); p. 168.’

that the cause of all is considerably prior to this; as it is beyond privations, it is also beyond every denial, beyond every assertion (MT, 1000B).

15. In the movement of procession, the transcendent cause shows itself transcendently in the cosmos whose procession it is. The divine procession thus forms the basis for the kataphatic or affirmative mode of theology wherein the hidden and inconceivable God is considered in light of the fact that this hidden divine Cause nonetheless makes itself known in and through its procession into creation. As von Balthasar has put it, in the kataphatic mode of theology, emphasis is placed on the “*manifestation of the unmanifest*.”¹⁰ As immanent to all creation, God “has the name of everything that is” (DN 596C) and “the theologians praise it by every name” (DN 596A). Grounded in the causal activity which related God to each and every being, the naming of God is an infinite proliferation of names drawn from all creation, including even things we would not ordinarily expect to be suited to God such as “stone”, “worm”, and even “drunkenness.” God, for Dionysius, then “is all things since he is the Cause of all things. The sources and the goals of all things are in him and are anticipated in him. But, Dionysius continues, he is superior to them all because he precedes them and is transcendently above them. Therefore every attribute may be predicated of him and yet he is not any one thing” (DN 824B). Not any of the things which it has caused, the divine cause is therefore not grasped or adequately determined by the proliferation of affirmations which name it according to its manifestation in beings. Each of these affirmations therefore implies a negation. That is, since God remains transcendently above creation as Cause, not being a being among beings, a second, negative mode is called for: apophatic theology. To *again cite* the classic text from *Mystical Theology*, “Since it is the Cause of all beings we should posit and ascribe to it all the affirmations we make in regard to beings, and, more appropriately, we should negate all the affirmations, since it surpasses all being” (MT 1000B). These negations correspond to the movement of return whereby the created soul passes beyond the beings which manifest the divine cause in the direction of the unmanifest, hidden source of creation. Reversing the movement of procession, the apophatic mode of theology articulates the same “*manifestation of the unmanifest*” only now with emphasis placed on the unmanifest.¹¹ It therefore bespeaks the soul’s return to the unknowable and transcendent cause. This “*coimplication*” of positive and negative theologies¹² leads to the paradoxical conclusion that “as Cause of all and transcending all, he is rightly nameless and yet has the names of everything that is” (DN 596C).
16. It is important to notice here that the apophatic moment is not simply an affirmation of the negative. In the apophatic moment, it is not being said, for example, that God is not a being, where this proposition would be read as affirming or predicating the attribute “not being” of a hypothetical subject “God.” Apophasis is not simply a reversal of the kataphatic mode affirming the opposite or negation of what was affirmed in the kataphatic mode. It is instead the necessary recognition of the fact that the divine Cause transcends the beings which manifest it. As Dionysius cautions in the classic text on naming God from *The Mystical Theology*, “we should not conclude that the negations are simply the opposites of the affirmations, but rather that the cause of all is considerably prior to this, as it is beyond privations, it is also beyond every denial and beyond every assertion” (MT 1000B).

¹⁰*Ibid.*, p. 164.

¹¹*Ibid.*

¹²On “*coimplication*,” see Ren’ Roques, “De l’implication des m’thodes th’ologiques chez le Pseudo-Denys” in *Revue d’ascetique et de mystique* 119 (1954): pp. 267-274.

17. Within the implicated methods of kataphatic and apophatic theology, the name Good holds a special place. Dionysius places it above the name Being and uses it to ground the naming of God as *cause, therefore determining* how causality operates in the case of the divine Cause. The Good, above and beyond Being, is the term which Dionysius uses to express the cause of all beings, seeing that it is, as cause, immanent to all beings but, as cause, is not itself a being and so must be named without Being. This Good that is the cause of all beings is equivalent, for Dionysius, with Beauty, and to understand the causality of the divine cause it is necessary to consider how the Good and Beautiful operate in the theological system.
18. According to Dionysius, the theologians “call it Cause of beings since in its goodness it employed its creative power to summon all things into being” (DN 592A). The relation between Cause and effect or the operation of the Good is here stated as a “summons” ‘ which is not the causality of an efficient cause, the form of causality that has dominated western philosophy since Descartes. Efficiency pertains between two beings, already existing, who can be coordinated such that the cause can be read from the effects and vice-versa. This form of causal relation, in its reversibility, would reduce the divine cause to the level of a being and would deny the transcendence asserted in the hierarchical structure of the cosmos. The “causality” implied in the name Good is instead that of a summons or a command which calls. The Good, Dionysius writes, “is’ the Source and the Cause of all life and of all being, for out of its goodness it *commands* all things to be” (DN 589C).
19. Exercising causality in the form of a summons or command, the Good or the Beautiful calls beyond being and beings, reaching even nonbeings. Dionysius writes, “The divine name ‘Good’ tells of all the processions of the universal Cause; it extends to beings *and nonbeings* and that Cause is superior to being and nonbeings” (DN 816B); or, “Everything looks to the Beautiful and Good as the cause of Being’ I would even be so bold as to claim that *nonbeing also* shares in the Beautiful and the Good” (DN 704B). The causality of the Good can be understood as a call or summons which brings beings out of nothingness in the form of desire or longing. “Their longing for the Good makes them what they are” (DN 696A). This longing or desire for the Good does not originate in the desiring beings, seeing as their desire or longing answers a summons which called them before they were. “From this beauty comes the existence of everything’ It is the great creating cause which bestirs the world and holds all things in existence by the longing inside them to have beauty’ It is ahead of all as Goal, as the Beloved, as the Cause toward which all things move, since it is the longing for beauty which actually brings them into being” (704A). On this reading, the created cosmos is not to be understood first in terms of an ontic or even ontological relation between God and creatures, but in terms of Goodness. Beings’ way to be is at first thoroughly determined by the Good and Beautiful which marks their origin in the form of a summons and their end in the form of the desirable. Beings both come from and head beyond Being ‘ namely, to the Good. Their desire might therefore be thought of as endless yearning insofar as what they desire is the source of their desire. Such desire would increase in the presence of the desirable rather than being sated by it.
20. That neither kataphatic nor apophatic theology are ultimately sufficient when naming the divine Goodness, that yearning and desiring being never comes to an end, is what the third or mystical moment of theology suggests. Operative in this form of theology would be a second moment or what Michel Corbin has called a “redoubled negation”, the negation of negation, where even the negative discourse of theology is negated as insufficient to the

divine cause beyond all that is and is not.¹³ This “redoubled negation” is contained in one of Dionysius’ most significant contributions to the history of mysticism: the “hyper-” terms. With such terms, Dionysius means to speak a language which is neither positive nor negative, but beyond the categorical alternative of affirmation and negation. “We should not conclude that the negations are simply the opposite of the affirmations, but rather that the cause of all is considerably prior to this, beyond privations, beyond every denial, beyond every assertion” (MT 1000B). Beyond both affirmation and negation, the third mystical moment is articulated according to the illogical logic of a neither/nor, beyond this/beyond that, which answers to an inconceivable hyperessential Good.

21. Standing outside the categorical alternative of affirmation and negation, the third or mystical form of theology would suggest that theological language in Dionysius has exceeded what modern philosophy calls its apophantic or predicative function. In a conceptual framework in which Being has priority, knowledge is the central concern and language has the form of naming what is. The priority of the Good, on the other hand, would seem to demand that the theologians speak a language which does not correspond with Being and its manifestation in knowledge and predicative statements.
22. This language is the language of prayer or praise. As von Balthasar has pointed out, “Where it is a matter of God and the divine, the word *hymnein* (to praise) almost replaces the word “to say.”¹⁴ Illustrating this point, Dionysius himself writes, “The purpose of this discourse is not to reveal that superessential essence as superessential, for this is something beyond words, something unknown and wholly unrevealed” “What I wish to do is sing a hymn of praise for the being-making procession of the divine Source” (DN 816B).¹⁵ The necessity for a language of praise over and above a language that reveals being or essence is based on the same necessity at work in the mystical moment or “hyper-” terms: that is, the necessity of speaking the ineffable or thinking the unthinkable transcendent divine Cause. It is not made necessary on account of the insufficiencies of finite, human language, but because of the superessential essence of the divine.’
23. The unknowability and ineffability of the transcendent cause demands a language that does not reveal or show what it speaks of. This language which speaks without describing anything is praise. Jean-Luc Marion, in *L’idole et la distance*, argues that that this non-apophantic function of prayer/praise is marked by the fact that praise always praises God “as”, where “as” serves as an index marking the inadequacy or shortcoming of the language used in naming the divine transcendence. Neither true nor false, praise praises “as” and so functions without anything signified in it, *precisely, being it*. Praise is not subject to verification by empirical evidence, observation, intuitive fulfillment or any other means of objective checking. What Wallace

¹³This “redoubled negation” would mark a negation of the negation that does not, like the Hegelian negation of negation, return to the self-identity of the knowing subject but opens to what is beyond the categorical alternatives of affirmation and negation.’ The term “redoubled negation” is borrowed from Michel Corbin, “N’gation et transcendence dans l’œuvre de Denys,” *Revue des sciences philosophiques et théologiques* 69 (1985): 41-76.

¹⁴*The Glory of the Lord*, vol. 2, p. 173.’ Von Balthasar here takes up a remark made centuries before by Maximus Confessor in his commentary on Dionysius’ *Divine Names*: “It is as cause of all things that God is praised; for Dionysius does not say: these things are predicated of God; but properly speaking he is praised by them” (cited by Jean-Luc Marion in *L’idole et la distance*, ed. de Poche, p. 190).

¹⁵See also, “My speech desires to celebrate the divine names which manifest the Providence of God. My speech will not say the absolutely transcendent goodness, being, life, and wisdom of that Godhead beyond all which, as scripture tells us, has its foundation in a secret place above all goodness, divinity, being, wisdom, and life.’ My speech wants to praise the transcendently good Cause of all good things” (DN 816C).’ Both these translations have been slightly altered following readings proposed by Jean-Luc Marion.

Stevens has called the “intricate evasion of as”¹⁶ serves to keep the unnamable transcendent God ever in the distance, ever eluding the grasp of a language which thinks to seize it itself. Always praising as’ and so always seeing its “object” evade final determination by the terms it uses, praise speaks an endless proliferation of names’ with these names, neither singly nor in sum, ever capturing or fully determining that which they address. “Realizing this, the theologians praise it as anonymous and with every name’ As Cause of all and as transcending all, he is rightly nameless and yet has the names of everything that is” (DN 596A; 596C). The polynomy of God, the proliferation of divine names drawn from all creation, would be the flip side of the anonymity implied by the ineffability of the transcendent divine Cause. Because it is anonymous, the divine Cause can and must be praised by all the names, where the proliferation of names, following the twisting paths of the “intricate evasion of as”, testifies to the fact that none is or can be adequate to the anonymous.”

24. To understand how and why Levinas might be seen to represent the apophatic inheritance of the 20th Century, at least part of such an inheritance, it is necessary to understand his conception of the subject; for it is in his phenomenological investigation of subjectivity that Levinas is driven to quasi-mystical forms of speech and language.
25. In opposition to the model of subjectivity that has dominated phenomenology since Husserl and even Hegel, Levinas holds that subjectivity is not exhausted by its determination as consciousness. According to Levinas, when philosophy takes the subject to be equivalent to consciousness, the very fact of being a subject is overlooked. “Consciousness, already rests on a ‘subjective condition,’ an identity that one calls ego or I” (OB, 102). This subjective condition of the subject is what Levinas calls the responsible self. As responsibility, the subjectivity of the subject means that, from the outset, I am subjected to the demands of the other’ in other words, that from the moment I am, I am concerned not for myself but for the other. Within Levinas’ ethical understanding of subjectivity, then, the I or ego no longer stands at the origin of any and all experience, as in a phenomenology of *consciousness*. I come radically after the other who calls me to responsibility before I am there. I am not my own origin since I am born in response to the other: “responsibility is thus the latent birth of the subject. Latent birth for prior to an origin, an initiative” (OB, 139). Responsibility thus is not an active engagement or commitment that a conscious I undertakes at its own initiative; for from the beginning, before it even is, it is assigned to its responsibility for the other. The responsible self is thus “compelled before commencing” in an essential and irreducible passivity (OB, 103). Such a passivity, one that precedes the activity of the I or ego, cannot be interpreted in terms of a phenomenology of consciousness where everything that befalls the self finds its origin in a possibility that consciousness constitutes beforehand, *transcendentally for itself*.
26. Since the subjective condition of the subject precedes and undoes consciousness, the I finds itself excluded from the field where knowledge and judgment are possible. The Other who summons the subject therefore radically transcends language and knowing. The responsible self and the other cannot be coordinated within a common horizon, and terms other than those derived from knowledge and being are called for. It is at this point that Levinas seems haunted by the same problem as Dionysius: how to speak from and about a situation of radical transcendence, one where the “object” of discourse is not a being or object like other objects found in the world. While this radical transcendence, for Levinas, has an irreducibly ethical significance and for Dionysius its significance is irreducibly theological, it remains that

¹⁶Wallace Stevens, “An Ordinary Evening in New Haven” in *The Collected Poems* (New York: Vintage Books, 1990).

an unmistakable analogy or generalized structure is operative. For purposes of convenience, I have highlighted five points from my discussion of Dionysius that seem integral to Levinas' articulation of the ethical relation.

27. Before concluding, one important distinction should be noted. The theologians, Dionysius claims, praise God with all names insofar as God is immanent in all beings. Praise is authorized by acknowledging that while the divine Cause transcends all beings, it is also immanent to them and can be named, however inadequately, on the basis of this dissimilar similarity. Levinas, however, will insist on the absolute difference or radical separation of the Other and the self. Any immanence of the two would reduce the otherness of the Other and so compromise the ethical status of the relation. He will therefore expose himself to criticisms like that made by Jacques Derrida: "Levinas *in fact* speaks of the infinitely other, but' he deprives himself of the very foundation and possibility of his own language. What authorizes him to say infinitely other if the infinitely other does not also appear as such in the zone that he calls the same?"¹⁷ By insisting on the radical and unbridgeable separation between the self and the Other, Levinas is left without a basis or justification for saying or knowing anything at all about the Other. This is why the description of the saying drifts toward the border where it becomes a saying without anything said, the pure address of a speech which speaks only interjections and proper names or the pure cry of the widow, the orphan, and the poor.
28. To conclude, then, I want to emphasize the point of this somewhat unusual comparison and to offer some possible interpretation of the evidence I have cited. With this comparison, I am not saying that the real meaning of apophatic or mystical theology is ethics and that what Dionysius really means when he says God is the Other. The parallels I want to indicate are, on the one hand, structural: they pertain to the relation between God and the soul and the relation between the responsible self and the Other. On the other hand, and more importantly, they pertain to the forms of language used to articulate an ineffable or unknowable transcendence and the self's relation to it, which is not to say anything about the sameness or difference of the terms "described" or addressed in such language.
29. The question raised by the operation of an "apophatic analogy" or "generalized apophatics"¹⁸ in Levinas illuminates what I believe are certain unasked questions and assumptions in and among readers of Levinas. For instance, in Levinas, the phenomenological description of the otherwise than being or beyond essence is carried out in unquestionably ethical terms and it has an irreducibly ethical significance. Now, Levinas insists that "the ethical experience we have resorted to does not arise out of a special moral experience independent of the description hitherto elaborated' The tropes of ethical language are found to be adequate for certain structures of the description: for the sense of the approach in its contrast with knowing, etc." (OB, 120). Shortly after this passage, he also claims, "Phenomenology can follow out the reverting of thematization into anarchy in the description of the approach. Then ethical language succeeds in expressing the paradox in which phenomenology finds itself abruptly thrown" (OB, 121). In other words, for Levinas, when it is a question of the otherwise

¹⁷Jacques Derrida, "Violence and Metaphysics," p. 125.

¹⁸"Apophatic analogy" is the phrase used by Thomas Carlson in *Indiscretion: Finitude and the Naming of God* to speak primarily of the operation of something like the Dionysian structure in Heideggerian thought of death, though he does recognize and acknowledge the possibility of its being operative elsewhere. "Generalized apophatics" is the phrase used by John D. Caputo in *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques [Derrida]* to describe the operation of something like mystical language in Derrida's deconstructive practice. What I have done to show how this analogy or *general* [delete] is at work in Levinas' ethics.

than being and the beyond essence, ethical language is the sole means of signification. The necessity for having recourse to this form of language arises from the descriptive project, not from a prephilosophical concern. And yet, in light of the similarity I have shown between ethical and theological language, it seems appropriate to ask: Why no language but ethics? Are other languages adequate to this approach of the transcendent? In particular, why not theological language, or at least the language of mystical theology? Indeed, I believe that Levinas, especially in his early writings, is often too hasty or perhaps historically inconsiderate when dismissing theology and mysticism *seeing as* when they too are capable of articulating a signification otherwise than being and beyond essence.¹⁹

30. Inversely, I would suggest that this comparison or analogy shows the ethical structure of the Dionysian universe. *Thought in terms of Levinas' ethics, the hierarchies would obey an ethical structure and it could be said that something like an "ethical analogy" or a "generalized ethics" is at work in Dionysius' theological system.* Just as Persse McGarrigle wrote an important work tracing T.S. Eliot's influence on Shakespeare,²⁰ a work can be imagined in which Levinas' influence on Dionysius were teased out, creatively and constructively, in order to show the ethics of apophysis or the operation of not an apophatic analogy but an ethical analogy. A faint glimpse of something like this can perhaps be found in Thomas Carlson's use of ethical language (Levinasian, to be sure, but perhaps inherited indirectly via Marion) to describe the constitution of the cosmos and the soul in Dionysius. For instance, commenting on the nature of existence as erotic longing or yearning, Carlson writes: "The call that brings beings to birth here is the call of a beauty that provokes or instills the longing desire through which beings are as such 'in the mode of response,'" and further on: "This play of positing and removal, affirmation and denial, characterizes the thought and language of that ecstatic being who ever is, who ever responds"²¹ Carlson's emphasis on "response" as determinative of beings would undoubtedly echo Levinas' interpretation of the genesis of the self in and as the response in responsibility. Similarly, Carlson will offer evidence for the operation of a generalized ethics when he claims that the meaning of the hierarchies is "dispossession," where the quotation marks perhaps indicate that this is indeed a reference to another's (Levinas') text."

In the yearning through which it is, being finds itself oriented toward an end that is without end or beyond completion. Such yearning renders that being irreducibly ecstatic and will thus imply that being's 'dispossession.' Ecstasy, which structures the whole movement of the erotic circle of the Good marks, as I have suggested, the 'dispossession' of the beings whose very existence it sustains. Thus while the truth of hierarchy is found in the ecstasy of divine yearning or desire, the meaning

¹⁹On this dismissal, see for instance: "there can be no 'knowledge' of God separated from the relationship with men... Everything that cannot be reduced to an interhuman relation represents not the superior but the forever primitive form of religion" (TI, 78-9); "our relation with the Metaphysical [a term equivalent to the transcendent] is an ethical behavior and not theology, not a thematization, be it a knowledge by analogy of the attributes of God" (TI, 78); "there is no theology nor any mysticism dissimulated in the analysis which we just gave of the encounter with *Autrui*" (*Entre Nous*, "p. 20). I should note that while Levinas dismisses theology and mysticism his later work will indeed point toward God in its articulation of the otherwise than being. Theology, then, would mean primarily a thematizing discourse, a theology in which the logos of theo-logy is decisive; it would be surpassed for the same reasons that Dionysius says predicative discourse must be surpassed.

²⁰Bernard McGinn in *Foundations of Mysticism* (p. 265) refers his readers to McGarrigle's project when justifying his own reasons for including a discussion of the modern perspectives on mysticism in what is, by and large, a reading of historical evidence. For more on McGarrigle, see David Lodge, *Small World* (New York: MacMillan, 1984)."

²¹*Indiscretion: Finitude and the Naming of God*, p. 181.

conveyed by that truth is dispossession.²²

31. "Dispossession", here identified as the meaning conveyed by the hierarchies, belongs to the ethical order of signification in that it would be the issue of Levinas' determination of the responsible self as substitution. That the uniqueness or selfhood of the self would be sustained by its very dispossession is what Levinas describes as the ethical structure of the self in responsibility: "The more I return to myself, the more I divest myself the more I discover myself to be responsible" (OB, 112). Finally, when Carlson speaks of the highest angelic order, the Seraphim who are found "in a proximity to God enjoyed by no other" (CH 201A), he again shows how the hierarchies might obey an ethical structure of the type articulated by Levinas. Giving to other orders what they have received from the divine, the Seraphim's proximity to God consists in "a capacity to stamp their own image on subordinates by arousing and uplifting in them too a like flame, the same warmth" (CH 205B-C). Carlson makes clear how an ethical analogy would operate here when he writes, "As proximate to God, one shares with others the warmth, illumination, or flame of the divine. To exceed oneself in the movement toward God is also to exceed oneself in a movement toward others. Proximity to the Other and proximity to others would in this manner remain inextricably linked."²³ This is precisely the movement defined by Levinas' ethical. "The Goodness of the Good' inclines the movement it calls forth to turn it away from the Good and orient it toward the other, and only thus toward God' His absolute remoteness, his transcendence, turns into my responsibility for the other" (DQV, 114-15). Following what seems to be implied by Carlson's interpretation (without his defending this position), might we therefore speak of a "generalized ethics" at work in the Dionysian structure of the cosmos?
32. The case I have been making for a substitutability or, to adopt Carlson's term, an "indiscretion" of theological and ethical language would be all the stronger in that both Dionysius and Levinas insist that the transcendent beyond is met outside the logos, the universal, etc. where identification or knowledge would be possible, the as-such. Given such anonymity, why must the description of the transcendent in Levinas be exclusively and necessarily ethical? And in Dionysius why must it be exclusively and necessarily theological? Going farther, why would the analogy be an apophatic analogy and not equally an ethical analogy, or the general structure a generalized ethics instead of a generalized apophatics? Putting things this way, we are reminded that when speaking of God as when speaking of the ethical other we no longer know what we know.

Notes

Jeffrey L. Kosky received his Ph.D. from The University of Chicago. He has published articles in religious studies and philosophy, and his book *The Philosophy of Religion in Emmanuel Levinas* will appear from Indiana University Press in the spring of 2001. He is the translator of Jean-Luc Marion's *On Descartes' Metaphysical Prism: The Constitution and the Limits of Onto-theo-logy in Cartesian Thought* and is completing a translation of Marion's *Etant donn e: Essai d'une ph nom nologie de la donation*. He has taught at Williams College and now lives in Chicago.

²² *Ibid.*, pp. 182-183.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 166-167.

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