

## God and Metaphysics in Contemporary Theology: Reframing the Debate

Theological Studies  
2016, Vol. 77(4) 823–844  
© Theological Studies, Inc. 2016  
Reprints and permissions:  
sagepub.co.uk/journalsPermissions.nav  
DOI: 10.1177/0040563916666821  
tsj.sagepub.com  


**Joseph Rivera**

Dublin City University, Dublin, Ireland

### Abstract

Recent post-metaphysical trends in contemporary theology seek to overcome “metaphysics,” in order to free God-language from the trappings of onto-theology. This means that theology prioritizes the conventional discourse of the church over the universal ambitions of metaphysical language. This article offers a corrective to the “post-metaphysical” corrective by proposing a broader definition of metaphysics, one rooted in concrete experience. In this regard I constructively consider Jean-Yves Lacoste’s “conceptual rescue operation” metaphysics in his wide-ranging *Être en danger* (2011)

### Keywords

abstraction, Jean-Yves Lacoste, metaphysics, onto-theology, post-metaphysics, sacramental experience

### Theology without Metaphysics?

Twentieth-century theology, Protestant and Catholic, has been embroiled in a vigorous debate about the identification of God and “Being.” For much of the Christian tradition God has been understood as Being precisely because Exodus 3:14 (“I am who I am”) provides warrant for such a metaphysical grammar. Arguably one of Etienne Gilson’s most enduring and wide-ranging insights lies in his simple contention that with the “metaphysics of Exodus” patristic and medieval theology reached a kind of

---

### Corresponding author:

Joseph Rivera, Dublin City University, Clonliffe Road, Dublin, Ireland  
Email: rivera30@gmail.com

philosophical consensus, the truth or ultimate *principium* by which speech about God is guided, manifest in the work of nearly every major figure from Irenaeus to Augustine to Aquinas.<sup>1</sup> This consensus suggests that theology itself had determinable parameters, within which theologians could arrange the place of one set of concepts relative to other sets of concepts, and thereby define and address an authoritative catalogue of problems proper to the discipline itself, be they moral, spiritual, doctrinal, or philosophical.

A chorus of contemporary voices, from Jean-Luc Marion to George Pattison to John Caputo and postmodern theology broadly conceived, to most recently the “analytic theology” of Kevin Hector, have sounded a “post-metaphysical” note now audible in contemporary theology.<sup>2</sup> The collective force of this trend may serve to justify a critical reassessment of the very idea of Christian metaphysics. This, in turn, tells us that theology as a discipline, in the present, is fragmented.<sup>3</sup> It would take a long book to begin to do justice to this complex and varied post-metaphysical trajectory, as well as to the contested state of theology as a discipline. Instead, I wish to focus on a recent treatment of the post-metaphysical method, in the figure of Jean-Yves Lacoste, whose work is singular in its subtlety and range.

Lacoste, in *Être en danger* (2011), works under the assumption, now de rigueur in France at least, that Heidegger’s conception of onto-theology involves an important critique of God-language.<sup>4</sup> In this climate Lacoste interrogates the “question of Being” (*Seinsfrage*) by submitting to rigorous critique the classical model of metaphysics, governed by the Aristotelian notions of substance and efficient causality. Following from this, however, Lacoste does not advance a straightforward post-metaphysical itinerary, but rather explores, cautiously, the possibility of a “conceptual rescue operation” of metaphysics as such (*opération de sauvetage conceptuel*). The Heideggerian critique, while admittedly potent, does not characterize metaphysics as a whole, and therefore should restrict, but not eradicate, the intellectual task of naming God.<sup>5</sup>

- 
1. See for example, Etienne Gilson, *The Spirit of Medieval Philosophy*, trans. A.H.C. Downes (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1940) 52–54; also *Thomism: The Philosophy of Thomas Aquinas*, trans. Laurence K. Shook and Armand Mauerer, 6th ed. (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 2002) chapter 3, “The Divine Being.”
  2. I need not rehearse here a comprehensive bibliography, but the most important texts are noteworthy: Jean-Luc Marion, *God without Being: Hors-texte*, trans. Thomas A. Carlson, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2012); George Pattison, *God and Being: An Enquiry* (Oxford: Oxford University, 2011); John Caputo, *The Weakness of God: A Theology of the Event* (Indianapolis: Indiana University, 2006); Kevin Hector, *Theology without Metaphysics: God, Language and the Spirit of Recognition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 2011).
  3. Fragmentation and multiplicity express the richness of the world as I or anyone else experiences it. I do not therefore seek out an absolute consensus or unity by which theology as a discipline “hangs” together, but I do want to find a voice in which theology can speak on its own terms that is both intelligible and meaningful to those outside of the seminary and the church.
  4. Jean-Yves Lacoste, *Être en danger* (Paris: Les éditions du Cerf, 2011).
  5. Lacoste, *Être en danger* 18.

How should onto-theology restrict theological language? Conceptualism, the reduction of God to a concept, may often license total representation, which counts as a “totalizing” strategy, an event of abstracting God out from concrete experience. The violent inclination toward totalizing God under an abstract concept maximizes the power of representation, as if to exhaust God referentially. Most philosophers and theologians will agree that concepts inform our noetic value of the divine, and they provide linguistic resources with which we reach out to God. But in my view, conceptualism will aspire to grasp or apprehend, and thus, exhaust the mystery of God in that projective or overly speculative act, precisely by way of abstraction.<sup>6</sup> The mind so premised sets into operation the act of constitution, on the strength of its power to cultivate and “mold” objects to its concept; in a real sense the mind does not see God but only an abstract principle, which becomes a dazzling reflection of the mind’s own gaze: conceptualism is onto-theology. These dangers associated with onto-theology or conceptualism notwithstanding, a series of related questions ensues: Can we employ concepts at all in speech about God? The very idea of metaphysics, to which I will turn momentarily, measures reality by concepts and linguistic signs. But does metaphysics, in principle and of necessity, yield forth only one kind of God, the abstract God of the philosophers and academics? Is abstraction the underlying logic of metaphysics? Or can metaphysics advance toward experience, in order to examine the ultimacy of religious experience? Not speculative abstraction, but experience, sacramental experience in particular, is the chief object of metaphysics for Lacoste.

Onto-theology has cast a pall over metaphysics, and it now constitutes for philosophy and theology embattled intellectual terrain. Post-metaphysics retreats altogether from the question of Being in order to escape from totality’s economy of abstraction, and the conceptual violence such an act entails. I judge this to be an understandable reactive posture. However, I am not convinced that such a recoil enables theology to function as a discourse properly formulated; that is, as an account of what is taken to be true, and what is the experiential ground of truth (even if theology does not propose a necessary master narrative of grounding). Reframing the debate as it is currently underway consists, in part, of challenging the parochialism of the partisans of “overcoming metaphysics.” Rooted in the praxis of a particular community’s form of life, post-metaphysics enacts a deliberate retreat from the universal, to that place where a particular community decides the truth value of its speech, for example, the pragmatics of the sanctuary of the church or seminary (or any other community’s language game). Post-metaphysics effects a shift in perspective, so to speak, away from abstract speculation to concrete experience, given shape by a particular community. I applaud this shift in emphasis. However, metaphysics and “experience” are not mutually exclusive. In my view, the risk of post-metaphysics is that of parochialism, in which experience constitutes an order of practice intelligible only within a particular community. This restrictive definition of experience denies the universal in favor of the incommensurability of

---

6. For more on the dangers of “conceptualism,” see Gregory Rocca, *Speaking the Incomprehensible God: Thomas Aquinas on the Interplay of Positive and Negative Theology* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America, 2004) 155ff.

the particular, whereas I want to suggest a fuller theological narrative accepts both the ultimacy and the conventionality of experience. I experience the world consistent with my particular “here,” my context, but I share experiences with others all the time, quite apart from a thorough consideration of their particular context. A christological arrangement of the two terms follows: metaphysics embraces, without eliding, the ineluctably conventional nature of Christ’s first-century Palestinian ministry (the particularity of his humanity) and the prophetic call of grace that appeals to every form or convention of experience (the universality of his divinity). I will address the problem of the tension between the ultimate and conventional forms of expression in more detail in the final remarks. Presently we can say that on both counts, then, as irrelevant parochialism and as truculent conceptualism, metaphysics invites critical retrieval, framed by the mystery of mediation of the ultimate in and through the conventional.

What form, then, can such an attentive critique of post-metaphysical theology take? For Lacoste, theology may specify in a new register where its conceptual “place” lies: in a deflationary metaphysical model that justifies the mysterious character of theological speech mediated through the conventional structures of experience, as long as I acknowledge theological speech is bereft of any final power to exhaust that mystery through a concept.<sup>7</sup> Much depends on a definition, as important as it is obvious, of metaphysics. How is metaphysics, an elusive and controversial category, to be understood, even if tentatively, after all?<sup>8</sup> Metaphysics has undergone a narrowing or constriction; in response to this narrow definition (that is I admit a historically legitimate interpretation), I want to expand or broaden the basic boundaries of the conceptual scope of metaphysics, accomplished in part by looking at another definition of metaphysics, which focuses on experience as primary. Once I outline a definition of metaphysics in the broadest sense, a constructive interchange between metaphysics and theology will come into fuller view.

## Metaphysics in the Broadest Sense

Spatial metaphors and analogies abound in literature which concerns the nature and scope of metaphysics. Some say metaphysics functions like a “horizon” of meaning or a maximal field of vision in which all analysis of objects occurs.<sup>9</sup> Others have invoked the image of

7. Lacoste specifically invokes the label “deflationary metaphysics,” but what he means by the term, outlined below, is distinct from the term as it is employed in analytic philosophy and their intramural debates about metaphysics vs. anti-metaphysics. For a review of this stimulating dialogue, conducted among well-known Anglo-American voices such as Michael Dummett, Richard Rorty, and other epigones of Wittgenstein, see Hilary Putnam’s lucid presentation in *Threefold Cord: Mind, Body and World* (New York: Columbia University, 2000) 44ff.

8. For a comprehensive treatment of the complex genealogy of metaphysics up to the present, which attends to both Continental and analytic debates, see Frédéric Nef’s excellent, if prolix, *Qu’est-ce que la métaphysique?* (Paris: Folio, 2004).

9. Bernard Lonergan, “Metaphysics as Horizon,” in *Collection*, ed. Frederick Crowe and Robert M. Doran, CW 4 (Toronto: University of Toronto, 1988) 188–204.

the tree, in which metaphysics symbolizes the roots, physics the trunk, and all the remaining disciplines the branches.<sup>10</sup> Others, still more, have said metaphysics operates like a subterranean “grammar” that expresses the most basic features of the human condition.<sup>11</sup> Metaphysics could also represent, in its more polemical form, a battleground (*Kampfplatz*) where seemingly incommensurable epistemic languages, paradigms, or propositions work out their differences.<sup>12</sup> Each “picture” outlined here has something in common: each offers a broad definition of metaphysics, whereby the science of being enjoys such broad scope that it has become a kind of gathering place, in which all other sciences converge.

Aristotle contrasts the ultimacy of metaphysics with the conventionality of experience. Whereas physics investigates the sensible forms of the world, and mathematics treats the ideality of numbers, the scope of metaphysics transcends the boundaries of any one particular locale or form or experiential ground. It is all-encompassing, an absolute form: it typically seeks to answer the question that bears on the highest form, or simply, being; indeed Aristotle’s *Metaphysics* defines the science of metaphysics as the science of “being qua being,” which implies the study of “first principles and the highest causes.”<sup>13</sup> But, in such a quest for first principles, a first philosophy as such, Aristotle, perhaps like Plato before him, explicitly roots metaphysics in an abstract type of theology, for “the highest science must deal with the highest genus . . . something eternal and immovable and separable . . . [here] the divine appears to us.”<sup>14</sup> The scope of metaphysics and theology coincide, since both seek a first cause. This science of Being forges an alliance with the science of God: “knowledge of it belongs to a theoretical science—not, however, to physics nor to mathematics, but to a science prior to both.” Theology is this “science prior to both,” and is therefore to be more “desired than the other theoretical sciences,” because its object belongs to the highest genus predicated of Being, the eternal and immovable substance.<sup>15</sup> There is much here in Aristotle, in my view, to appropriate for theological purposes, even if Aristotle’s “eternal and immovable substance” abstracted out from experience cannot stand up to the post-metaphysical critique.<sup>16</sup> Heidegger certainly marks Aristotle, one could argue precisely in book Epsilon in the *Metaphysics*, as the beginning of onto-theology.<sup>17</sup>

- 
10. Martin Heidegger invokes this metaphor, drawn from Descartes. Heidegger, *Pathmarks*, ed. William McNeill (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1998) 277.
  11. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Gay Science*, ed. Bernard Williams, trans. Josefine Nauckhoff (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 2001) 214; also see P. F. Strawson, who similarly has recourse to the metaphor of grammar; *Analysis and Metaphysics: An Introduction to Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University, 1992) chapter 1.
  12. Nef, *Qu’est-ce que la métaphysique?* 50.
  13. Aristotle, *Metaphysics* 4.1, 1003a.
  14. Aristotle, *Metaphysics* 6.1, 1026a.
  15. Aristotle, *Metaphysics* 6.1, 1026a.
  16. For more on the possibility of theology in Aristotle’s Epsilon of the *Metaphysics*, see Nef, *Qu’est-ce que la métaphysique?* 238ff.
  17. Martin Heidegger, *Identify and Difference*, trans. Joan Stambaugh (New York: Harper & Row, 1969) 70–71. Here the allusion to Aristotle is obvious; interestingly, Nef defends

Currently, the many detractors of metaphysics say “metaphysics” is onto-theological inasmuch as it exhausts the otherness God in a violent act of abstraction. It assails in its very conceptual reach the otherness of the supreme Other, for the profit of the same. The dialectic between the same and the other completes an understanding of God as an event of correspondence, which, properly conceived, is a form of conceptualism between mind and God. Understood in this way, metaphysics in the narrow sense (i.e., as onto-theology) prepares us to consider it not only as a theoretical science but also as an oppressive existential specter; a philosophy of pure identity, metaphysics eliminates the otherness and transcendence of divine mystery. It serves the purpose of conceptual “war,” a desire to dominate the other’s alterity. Unsurprisingly, proponents of post-metaphysical paradigms, writing under both Christian and secular inclinations,<sup>18</sup> say this totalizing economy of metaphysics appears to have reached its “end.”<sup>19</sup>

For the sake of dramatizing the non-metaphysical trend, I wish to highlight the observation Nietzsche made about the inner logic of metaphysics. Master of suspicion though he was, I should add up front that I appreciate, but do not accept wholesale, his critique. His critique of metaphysics continues to be borne out in an aspiration, increasingly common in the late modern epoch, to celebrate the end of metaphysics. Nietzsche claims metaphysics remains “stuck” in its Platonic legacy. What does this mean?

Metaphysicians, often unconsciously, revert to philosophical “savagery,” which is to “slip into the unchanging,” a mode of discourse that suspends the flux of experience in an attempt to find refuge in a reliable and steady Archimedean principle; the long-celebrated discovery of an unmoved mover illustrates a case in point of such savagery.<sup>20</sup> Nietzsche claims metaphysics consists of a fundamental sickness of the soul,

---

Aristotle against charges of onto-theology, because Aristotle’s overall metaphysics concerns sensible forms and physics, but also because, if we read carefully, Aristotle does not say there is without question an immovable ground separated out from experience, but only that there “may” be one. Nef, *Qu’est-ce que la métaphysique?* 250ff.

18. A purely secular critic of metaphysics, I note here, is Jürgen Habermas. See Jürgen Habermas, *Post-metaphysical Thought*, trans. William Mark Hogengarten (Cambridge, MA: MIT University, 1992); on p. 32 he condemns metaphysics as a totalizing rubric of ontology, as it tries to “secure the precedence of identity over difference and that of ideas over matter.”
19. Technically, Heidegger’s expression the “end of metaphysics” descends into terminological equivalence. He does not claim necessarily that metaphysics has “ended” or “subsided,” but rather that metaphysics has reached a point where it has consummated itself and is now ready to move into a new phase. The German for the word “overcoming” that he employs is *Überwindung* which may intend to convey the idea advancing, not leaving behind, metaphysics into new territory. See Martin Heidegger, *The End of Philosophy*, trans. Joan Stambaugh (New York: Harper & Row, 1971) 84ff. For commentary on this concept, see Jean-Luc Marion, “The End of the End of Metaphysics,” trans. Bettina Bergo, *Epoché: A Journal for the History of Philosophy* 2:2 (1994) 1–22.
20. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, trans. Walter Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale (New York: Vintage, 1968) 333.

which arouses the impulse to secure something “final,” a “craving for some Apart, Beyond, Outside, Above” the world of becoming.<sup>21</sup> Metaphysicians create, fabricate, and contrive narratives of stability and foster and conserve thereby the human mind’s need for certainty. They have become “artists in abstraction,” insofar as they invent such strategies of epistemic security, be they eternal forms, apriori categories or scientific laws, converting these metaphysical abstractions into immutable divine law, as if the supreme Being was their guarantor.<sup>22</sup> The Platonic legacy of metaphysics lives on in post-Cartesian paradigms of first philosophy, and can be seen in Descartes’s chief name for God, *causa sui*, as well as Kant’s interpretation of the divine as an impersonal (or abstract) moral order.<sup>23</sup> It is unsurprising that a recent detractor of metaphysics, Kevin Hector, concludes that metaphysics “seems to alienate us from experience, to do violence to objects, and to reduce God to an idol.”<sup>24</sup>

By way of commentary on this frequent post-metaphysical refrain, and to avoid confusion from the outset, I want to make clear that I think metaphysics is improperly cast in a wholly negative light; reframing the debate requires that I effectively reconfigure metaphysics precisely not as “abstraction,” in order to move the debate out from under the shadow of the onto-theological critique. A genuinely constructive dialogue about the point of departure of metaphysics shall originate with lived experience. Such a shift in focus breaks the link between metaphysics and the tyranny of conceptualism and the totalizing power set into operation and ensured by abstraction. I accomplish this reconfiguration by broadening the scope of metaphysics, which enables me to “picture” metaphysics as the study of the objects in which we traffic daily with the aim of detecting in what manner experience may mediate a glimpse of the ground of existence.<sup>25</sup>

One might characterize, then, the theoretical field of metaphysics in a twofold manner: the internal differentiation between on the one hand beings that I experience and, on the other, their fundamental ground. Metaphysics involves the study of Being par excellence (a supreme being or *summum ens*) and second, the contingent beings in general (*ens commune*) who appeal to the supreme Being for their causal ground and

21. Nietzsche, *The Gay Science* 5.

22. Nietzsche, *The Will to Power* 277.

23. See Jean-Luc Marion for a wider discussion of early modern forms of onto-theology in *On Descartes’ Metaphysical Prism: The Constitution and the Limits of Onto-theology in Cartesian Thought*, trans. Jeffrey L. Kosky (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1999).

24. Hector, *Theology without Metaphysics* 46.

25. Jean-Luc Marion, alert to the crucial distinctions to be made on behalf of the term metaphysics in the early modern period, says that Heidegger’s term “onto-theology” provides us with the most rigorous determination of metaphysics currently at our disposal. This historically narrow definition of metaphysics as onto-theology “offers the most powerful working hypothesis for the historian of philosophy.” Is this in fact the case? I argue that metaphysics can be understood from an alternative, and equally acceptable, vantage. Should the debate be reframed, the working hypothesis of metaphysics as such must undergo a broadening. See Marion, *The Visible and the Revealed*, trans. Christina M. Gschwandtner (New York: Fordham University, 2008) 52.

even for their moral norms. Is metaphysics necessarily tied to a “ground” or a divine being? The positive answer will indicate that, within any metaphysical economy, the divine assumes a prominent, and indeed, an unimpeachable “grounding” role. It could be argued that many surrogates have replaced the supreme Being. Terry Eagleton has shown recently that, beginning in the nineteenth century, culture, reason, the nation, humanity, the state, morality have supplanted divine transcendence. The supreme Being is not dead but is reborn with each new surrogate.<sup>26</sup> Husserl reoccupies metaphysics in this way when he quite consciously admits the ground he seeks is the pure ego, illumined as the grounding structure of a community of monadic egos, which therefore can be grasped by the philosopher as the supreme and ultimate ground: humanity’s self-explication of its experience in a community of other egos is the “first being.”<sup>27</sup> Even Nietzsche’s uncompromising atheism replaced God with the eternal return of the same: “In place of ‘metaphysics’ and religion, the theory of eternal recurrence.”<sup>28</sup> Whatever the ground supposed, metaphysics consists of the whole *in* experience but not the whole *of* experience as such. There is no final or complete apprehension of the ground of experience, for no principle can be “abstract” or “separated out” from the ensemble of experience that prompts further interrogation of that ground, no matter how diffuse the interpretations are of what the ground may consist of.

Metaphysics, then, in its quest for the ultimacy and meaning, for a “ground,” asks a most basic question: Why is there something instead of nothing? Heidegger himself, alert to the historical evolution of metaphysics, explores this particularly broad vantage fruitfully in his *Introduction to Metaphysics*. While Heidegger may have imparted into contemporary thought the now well-worn vocabulary of onto-theology, his earlier work attends in a more nuanced fashion to the fundamental “question” of metaphysics: Why is there something instead of nothing? This question is for him inexhaustible.<sup>29</sup> Onto-theology, imposed retrospectively, rests on a totalizing answer to this question (usually associated with Descartes, Leibniz, Kant, and other Enlightenment figures). For this

26. Terry Eagleton, *Culture and the Death of God* (New Haven: Yale University, 2014) 151.

27. Husserl, *Cartesian Meditations: An Introduction to Phenomenology*, trans. Dorion Cairns (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1960) 156.

28. Nietzsche, *Will to Power* 255.

29. See Martin Heidegger, *Introduction to Metaphysics*, trans. Gregory Fried and Richard Polt (New Haven: Yale University, 2000) 1ff. In my view, Heidegger carries out his analysis in an “exclusivist” or polemical register, evident in his claim that Christianity (and by extension all religions) cannot contribute to the dialogue. He argues that Christianity, as a well-developed theological tradition, fails to explore the fundamental question of metaphysics because it presupposes beforehand how to answer it. Christianity, its ambitious metanarrative, exhausts the metaphysical question before it is asked, contends Heidegger. It constructs an idol because it expresses a clear agenda that lays out a variety of principles and propositions, drawn from revelation, whose intention is to give expression to what is an inexpressible metaphysical question. For a direct challenge of this facile grasp of Christian theology, see Joseph G. Trabbic, “A Critique of Heidegger’s Critique of Christian Philosophy in the *Introduction to Metaphysics*,” *Religious Studies*, First View, (2015) 1–16, doi:10.1017/S0034412515000505.



reason onto-theology neither represents the full range of possible “grounds” in metaphysics nor does it articulate a ground that is integral to experience; onto-theology refers to a narrow early modern trajectory within the long career of metaphysics.

If we are careful not to reduce metaphysics to a determinate system of rules guided by abstract and formal principles, which suffer from the ill-effects of procedural totalization, but to cultivate its complex and “open” character, then we may become mindful that metaphysics invites a quest to bring into focus the possible grounds of experience. Metaphysics conceived in this broadest sense is fragile; it is crucial not to underestimate this fact, and I think Christian theology’s metaphysical inclinations (more often than not) remain fertile, open, and incomplete, a vision of the divine in relationship with a community, a metaphysical “optics” that looks through a glass darkly, a form of speech that thematizes faith, hope, and love, a spiritual practice that grows out of a concrete community of agape. Awe and wonder, as primal moods, accompany the fundamental question of metaphysics, and Christianity nurtures those moods. The Christian doctrine of God, to be more direct, refuses totality’s economy of conceptual violence. Karl Rahner says theology is like “endless allegory,” inasmuch as it works within the boundaries of the world, which theology cannot transcend, even while it seeks to subvert and expand those boundaries. Theology, as a discourse, belongs to the province of the world; Rahner, to continue with this picture of theological language, argues that theologians cannot help but employ the world’s vocabulary of finitude. The lesson to be learned from Rahner is the following: if I could transcend or master my existence, then I could look at the world from a God’s-eye point of view. These conditions of knowing would enable me to defy contingency; I would be divine. But, as a mortal, I continue to explore existence because I am contingent, insofar as I am not able either to choose or to transcend my world. I interrogate without ceasing divine Being as ground of beings, because the mystery of their interrelation eludes me in my condition as a contingent and finite creature.<sup>30</sup>

Metaphysics, broadly conceived, then, offers a “picture” of experience that includes not just theological, but scientific or secular perspectives as well. Whatever the surrogate (that serves the function of a supreme ground), it should not surprise the metaphysically inclined theologian that secularists bear witness to an increasingly common phenomenon: they speak of their awe before the world they experience. One atheist labels the sublime feeling of excess a kind of “Aweism.”<sup>31</sup> Daniel Dennett, who intends to disenchant the world by means of evolution, which measures the world according to the conditions of a “mindless algorithm,” invokes the word “awe” as that feeling which best describes what he regularly feels when reflection on evolution and the world escapes full comprehension.<sup>32</sup> Evolution, turned into an ideology or form of truth, is of

30. Karl Rahner, *Spirit in the World*, trans. William Dych (New York: Continuum, 1994) 58–62.

31. Phil Zuckerman, *Living the Secular Life* (Oxford: Oxford University, 2015) chapter 12, “Aweism.”

32. Daniel Dennett, *Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon* (New York: Penguin, 2006) 268, for example. Dennett is quick to say his awe does not generate a religion, for he has none. But does he have a metaphysics?

course intrinsically metaphysical because it address the question “why.”<sup>33</sup> Hubert Dreyfus and Sean Kelly co-authored the secular manifesto *All Things Shining*, which has enjoyed a wide readership already; they depict their experience of awe before the world with a vivid word, “whoosh,” which evokes a primitive, inarticulate feeling many undergo in the face of radiance and mystery.<sup>34</sup> Metaphysics, posed as a limit question, grows out of this primal feeling of awe; conceived in this broad way, metaphysics yields forth a point of overlap, in which anyone who ventures to reflect on the “why” of existence, its ground, can engage in a public and mutually illuminating exchange of reasons. J. J. C. Smart, an atheist, sees mystery “in the fact that the universe exists at all, and that there is something wrong with us if we do not feel this mystery.”<sup>35</sup> The fundamental question of metaphysics may defeat our powers of comprehension, but it does not silence the voice in search of this mystery: metaphysics is inescapable.

Christian theology maintains that no one answer properly resolves the fundamental question “why,” because it represents a “limit question.”<sup>36</sup> The *logos* of Christianity, its economy of mystery, addresses this most basic question with humility. Lacoste teaches that theology, informed by the humility of the Cross, does not entail the totalizing calculus of onto-theology. Nor does theology call us to retreat into an internal narrative or community of practice that lives independent of metaphysical claims. Metaphysics, in the broadest sense, fosters dialogue, debate, and the exchange of “deep” forms of reasoning, employed by all faiths and none in their quest for a fundamental ground. If metaphysics is inescapable, and yet, it admits of no final “ground,” how may Christian theology propose that the Being of God be understood? Is God mediated in and through concrete objects? If so, how? It is to these theological questions, taken up in Lacoste’s work, that we now turn.

### Starting from Experience: From “beings to Being”

Metaphysics, in its historically narrow definition, abstracts a divine principle out from the “becoming” of the world of experience; such a philosophical *coup d’oeil* rejects the language of becoming in favor of a reality the mind has wrought within itself

- 
33. Daniel Dennett, *Darwin’s Dangerous Idea: Evolution and the Meanings of Life* (New York: Penguin, 1995) 21. He writes, “Whenever Darwinism is the topic, the temperature rises, because more is at stake than just the empirical facts about how life on Earth evolved, or the correct logic of the theory that accounts for those facts. One of the precious things that is at stake is a vision of what it means to ask, and answer, the question ‘Why?’”
  34. Hubert Dreyfus and Sean D. Kelly, *All Things Shining: Reading the Western Classics to Find Meaning in a Secular Age* (New York: Free Press, 2011) 200ff.
  35. J. J. C. Smart and John J. Haldane, *Atheism and Theism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996) 36; cited in Denys Turner, *Faith, Reason and the Existence of God* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 2004) 234.
  36. Turner, *Faith, Reason and the Existence of God* 236–47. Turner makes the case that Thomas Aquinas’s five ways or proofs of God may constitute a response to the question why there is something instead of nothing.

suitable to the logic of abstraction: an immovable concept, *causa sui*. Many name this danger onto-theology or conceptualism. I have challenged this interpretation as one particular “interpretation” that in no way accounts for metaphysics as such. In its broadest configuration, metaphysics refuses to abstract a divine principle from the world of objects; instead I suggest in what follows that metaphysics shall be the occasion for a focus on the world itself as a site of mediation. The world so understood is a site from which the soul stretches forward, and so enacts a lived movement from the objects of experience to higher things. If unending ascent from lower to higher constitutes the movement of metaphysics, it is not a system of completion, but is itself creative, and so is always infinite; and because the contemplative quest is properly an economy of “seeking,” one that is always open to the mystery of the other, it can include concepts in itself without exhausting that which it seeks.

Jean-Yves Lacoste’s most recent study, *Être en danger* (2011), intends to explore how this natural desire to see God presupposes a metaphysical framework. Theology, born of metaphysical inclinations, endeavors to understand God. It seems obvious that here we must be talking about the tradition of the “divine names,” and of the ontology of Exodus 3:14 (I am who I am), and so in both cases of a desire to predicate of God an “Apart, Beyond or Above” endemic to the classical interpretation of YWHW’s eternal form. From the vantage of prayer and sacrament, the moment speculation on the divine names suffers the fate of hubristic misadventure becomes acute when the power of abstraction relegates concrete experience to marginalia. To avoid not speculation, but its excess, my counterclaim involves the following deflation strategy: a metaphysical search for a “ground” does not of necessity terminate in a static or abstract principle, but rather accommodates, indeed, exalts in the becoming of experience. Seeking for a ground in and through shifting sands of experience is endless, so that what is grasped at any particular point renews motivation, prompts infinitely greater researches. In other words, while the process of metaphysical ascent may involve a level of fulfilment, the soul never rests content with what has been discovered in the mediation of experience. The soul’s proper focus, to speak biblically for the present, is to “seek his face always” (Psalm 105:3, NIV), and true progress lies not in comprehension but in endurance, wherein the failure to obtain God prompts not grief but further seeking, not disappointment but incomprehensibility, which in turn generates a “stretching forward” in desire and hope for what is at once beyond and integral to the soul.

Certainly physicalism or bald materialism, once one makes experience the locus of metaphysics, constitutes a principal conceptual danger. Lacoste, who advocates for speculative restraint, acknowledges that a tireless focus on lived experience, if the prejudices of physicalism prevail, reduces something complicated and ambiguous to something simple and unitary. But phenomenology, in principle, refuses such naivety.<sup>37</sup> Experience is a contested affair, accompanied by much interdisciplinary conflict. Late

---

37. Husserl himself will say phenomenology, as he defines it, does not reject metaphysics as such, but only naïve metaphysics, typically associated with empiricism (what he calls objectivism) or the myth of “things in themselves.” Lacoste is deeply indebted to the Husserlian style of phenomenological method. Husserl, *Cartesian Meditations* 4, 35, 150, 156.

modern technology and philosophy that trade on materialism strip experience of its subjective valence and the elusive mystery of ground to which it is oriented; materialists are not in the least reluctant to dispense with all talk of a divine ground. For Lacoste, to adopt a physicalist position in this way is to see the world as a field of “beings without Being.”<sup>38</sup> This “physicalist” danger doubtlessly makes the idea that there is a grounding Being a fragile one, that is, one that could be unreflectively and with little effort be denied in favor of beings and their many modes of objectivity. But Lacoste suggest an alternative paradigm, hermeneutical in method, that challenges the reduction of experience to the rank of object.

The thesis of *Être en danger* is relatively simple: human beings can approach God, like anything else, only inductively. But they do so in a way that does not belong wholly to the strict objective limitations, which is the trademark of physicalism. For Lacoste experience is as much subjective as it is objective, for the self consists of a prism through which I see phenomena; experience so understood occasions, indeed shapes, my apprehension of an object, whether it is a chair, a piece of art, or God. This is not the place to conduct a sustained or detailed reading of Lacoste’s book as whole, but there are particular insights relevant to my immediate object of study: If God is *not* abstracted from the world of experience, how then may experience mediate the divine? Of critical importance, then, among other things, is the fundamental phenomenological character of experience: it is partial and plural. If this is indeed the case, it follows that one may question whether experience serves as a reliable guide to address metaphysical questions at all, or equally problematic, to prepare one to have faith in the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. If experience enables me to look at God only through a glass darkly, and in an enigma, how may I extrapolate from experience to name God, not least posit his existence?

The problem, to reinforce the point, is compounded by the complex “shape” of experience: my experience of the world eludes, even subverts, linear logic or static taxonomies. Imagine, for example, you are sitting in a lecture theatre listening to a world-renowned speaker on a topic of great interest to you.<sup>39</sup> You are immediately absorbed by the content as much as by the stimulating style of presentation. The delivery, in fact, electrifies the audience, you among them. You follow each sentence on the edge of your seat, as the narrative of the lecture reaches its climax, after which you feel a moment of satisfaction, perhaps a cathartic expenditure. Exhausted but satisfied, you leave the theatre and drive home. In this experience you had completely forgotten you were sitting in an uncomfortable lecture seat. There was the stage, other furniture, the microphone, hundreds of other people, and so on. You forgot them all for a while. Obviously your chair did not disappear during the lecture, nor did the microphone or the hundreds of other enthralled listeners. What did occur, then? Lacoste, an attentive phenomenologist, observes that, for a moment, you “bracketed” or “put between parentheses” every object that proved unnecessary to your being able to attend to the content of the lecture. You “forgot” your surroundings for a little while, even if it was

38. Lacoste, *Être en danger* 4, 345.

39. Lacoste, *Être en danger* 18–19, 37.

unintentional. Now imagine you are a school-aged boy, admitted to the same lecture with his parents, but allowed only to sit in the back. The boy's particular interests converge on his fire truck; that object occupies a special place in the imaginative story he invents in his mind for the two-hour lecture. While playing quietly on the floor, he forgets the lecture altogether; he does not comprehend one word. The chairs and the floor in the back of the lecture theatre do not disappear for a little while, but become instead objects of intense focus, for the fire truck negotiates among them as road blocks. What does this simple observation of the experience of a lecture, told from two distinct perspectives, tell us about the complex and plural shape of experience as such? And how may a more detailed analysis reframe how we perceive God from the point of view of experience?

Experience, consisting of a halo of objects I live through, is richly varied. This means, more precisely, that the study of experience properly conceived is as much as study of objects in their givenness as it is an investigation of the subject who experiences them.<sup>40</sup> Like others writing in the "Continental" tradition, Lacoste takes his methodological bearings from phenomenology. His detailed studies of experience involve, therefore, the notion that experience is pluriform, partial, and often elusive. Experience emerges in the exchange between the subjective life of the ego and the objective world of things. Should I attend, as a phenomenologist, to the manner in which God is disclosed in this field of experience, what actually becomes apparent is not first and foremost God as such but rather the change of the recipient's former ways of "seeing" how objects exist. Once I exploit my spiritual aptitude, objects may indeed point to God. Thus, as one commentator notes, the "phenomenology of 'God' turns out to be a phenomenology of the human 'sight' of God."<sup>41</sup>

Lacoste sees phenomenology as the only viable alternative to strong metaphysical paradigms. An inflated paradigm of metaphysical theology, which often trades on the Thomistic claim that God is *Ipsum esse subsistens*, may well involve an act of hubris; the logical conclusion of this style of metaphysics ends up in a "match" or correspondence between God and a supreme "thing."<sup>42</sup> How could anyone, not least a genius like Thomas Aquinas, actually come to know or have a mental notion that God is in fact manifest as an *esse subsistens*? What kind of philosophical or theological warrant does one need to have for such an "inflated" metaphysical abstraction? The fact that Thomas defines metaphysics as a search for a "first being, which is separated from matter"<sup>43</sup> appears to make his God a function of abstraction, of metaphysics in

40. Lacoste says he wants to articulate a position between subjectivism and realism. See Lacoste, *Être en danger* 324–25.

41. Claudia Welz, "God—A Phenomenon?" *Studid Theologica: Nordic Journal of Theology* 62 (2008) 4–24, especially 18, doi: 10.1080/00393380802012428.

42. Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, trans., Fathers of the English Dominican Province (New York: Benziger Brothers, 1948) I, q. 7, a. 1. See also Lacoste, *Être en danger* 4, 11, 24.

43. Aquinas's nomenclature: "*Metaphysics* simultaneously determines [how things stand] concerning being in general and concerning the first being, which is separated from matter [*Metaphysica simul determinat de ente in communi et de ente primo, quod est a materia*

its onto-theological aspect. I do not intend to challenge Lacoste's scornful depiction of Thomistic metaphysics, not because I agree with it, but because it would take us too far from our present course. Many scholars of Thomas Aquinas have defended the idea of *esse subsistens* against accusations of onto-theology.<sup>44</sup> Even Gilson himself, the principal representative of inflated Thomism, will say that analogy of being involves not perfect comprehension of God under a concept but ramifies God into an endless series of philosophical frameworks, in which the possibility of further theological conceptualization is always open. Gilson will go so far to say, in his later work, that Thomistic metaphysics depicts a divine Being who belongs to the mysterious realm of the analogical, polymorphous, and inexhaustible (*analogique, polymorphe et inépuisable*), where the God of faith resides.<sup>45</sup>

The focal point of this article lies not in a consideration of the nature of Thomistic metaphysics, but in an interrogation of the scope of metaphysics conceived in Lacoste's phenomenological framework. How high may metaphysics ascend to Being, should it start from experience? Just as the plurality and partiality of experiences count as profound mystery, how much more will concepts of God, invariably conceived as supreme Being, reflect the mystery of metaphysical speculation?

Relevant for my present task is that I see nothing implausible about the basic definition of theology Thomas endorses: it is a "speculative" discourse, because it cultivates in the mind a studied desire to interrogate rationally the fundamental nature, however mysterious and however apophatic, of divine being.<sup>46</sup> The point I want to make explicit is that Lacoste does not deny the capacity for speculation, conjecture, and extrapolation. The human condition routinely avails itself of these speculative exercises all the time. But Lacoste cautions against the assumption that such pursuits of the mind will yield total truth, clearing the way for a "God's-eye vantage," as if creaturely knowing could transcend the boundaries of experience itself. Experience, the daily trafficking among objects, provides the only legitimate point of departure for metaphysical reflection that I have at my disposal.

If experience assumes the rank of primacy, then the subjective mood or affective structures of experience, too, assume the rank of primacy. The fundamental question of metaphysics belongs to the subject's capacity to interrogate its own existence: I am the being who asks about the ground of my own being. Lacoste, like Heidegger, takes this question as an exceptional question, and perhaps one from which so many flee.<sup>47</sup>

---

*separatum*].” Thomas Aquinas, “Proemium Sancti Thomas,” in *Librum Primum Aristotelis de Generatione et Corruptione, Expositio*, in *Aristotelis Libros—De Caelo et Mundo, De Generatione et Corruptione, Meteorologicorum—Expositio*, ed. Raymondo M. Spiazzi (Taurini: Marietti, 1952) 315.

44. See, for example, Gregory Rocca, *Speaking the Incomprehensible God*; also see the illuminating essay by Rahner, “Thomas Aquinas on the Incomprehensibility of God,” *Journal of Religion* 58, supplement (1978) S107–S25.

45. Gilson, “L’être et Dieu,” in *Constantes Philosophique de l’être* (Paris: J. Vrin, 1983) 192.

46. Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* I, q. 1, a. 4.

47. Lacoste, *Être en danger* 273.

Quite independent of the question of authentic “questioning,” the question remains nonetheless one the subject brings to bear on the world of experience: Why is there something instead of nothing? One can glimpse the ground, the reason for existence, only through the prism of experience. Hubris says absolute knowing is attainable, but this kind of “grasp” of Being “appears to abstract Being from its historical reality.”<sup>48</sup> The return to experience is a return to my historical circumstance, the condition of finitude and the many objects that constitute the only network of meaning I have at my disposal.

Mood or affection shapes how I experience objects in my field of vision that make up my historical conditions. If I am anxious, the world looks very different than if I am hopeful. Augustine, in a famous account of his grief-stricken state of mind following the death of his good friend, describes how such a trauma wholly altered his conception of the world: “Everything on which I set my gaze was death. My home town became a torture to me; my father’s house a strange world of unhappiness; all that I had shared with him was without him transformed into a cruel torment.”<sup>49</sup> After I experience a “new chapter” in my life, whether it is marriage or the birth of a child, the world may take on a luminous luster of joy. Exterior factors, the objects in which I am immersed, affect how I feel about the world. But I also shape the world with my own subjective structures, and it is more typical that my mood shall constitute the existential feel of the world. The temptation for the phenomenologist is to isolate a fundamental mood or affection, from which all other moods emerge, and in fact under whose light the world is manifest. This is, to address this only incidentally, existential angst as Heidegger calls it in *Being and Time*, or enjoyment as Levinas describes it vividly in *Totality and Infinity*. Lacoste is suspicious that a single, fundamental world-disclosing mood is isolable. Lacoste insists that more often than not, I am the one responsible for endowing an event or object with a particular subjective hue that involves several moods at once. I am not an impartial spectator. For example, when I see a Kandinsky or listen to a Bach cantata, I may feel different each time I experience those objects, for my mood configures and determines, in large part, my perception of the object.<sup>50</sup> But the question of “Why is there something at all?” certainly will prompt a mood of its own kind, a philosophical inquisitiveness, which then explores the prospects of an ultimate ground.

While there may be no fundamental or basic “affection” that configures the world in a certain light, Lacoste does open up the prospect of naming two that have become indispensable for most of us: angst and peace—or the feeling of not being at home in the world versus being at home in the world. Metaphysics involves the interplay between these two moods. Because there is no primal mood, and because I am no impartial spectator, my subjective life empowers me to confront, not flee from, the fundamental question of metaphysics. The inner depth of my being, the source out of

48. Lacoste, *Être en danger* 354.

49. Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. Henry Chadwick (Oxford: Oxford University, 1991) iv, 4, 9, 57.

50. Lacoste, *Être en danger* 318–19.

which mood comes forth, equips me with the resources to address the fundamental question of metaphysics. In so doing, I realize I do not occupy neutral ground. I am brought before myself, and become a question to myself. Many affections and moods surface, but two in particular predominate: angst and peace. Once the question is addressed theologically, the mood of “being in peace” takes precedence as the chief expression of myself in relation to the world, and functions thereby as a disciplined counter-existential, a living existential corrective to the mood of angst.<sup>51</sup> The contemplative posture of faith, a spiritual vision, decides how I “see” the world of objects.

If metaphysics is inextricably bound up with the subjective experience of the soul’s existential disposition, it is natural for worship and sacraments to become metaphysical motifs, precisely because they require the existential mood of faith. If metaphysics, once again, explores experience, such as the sacraments, how may it point to (without abstracting from experience) the ground of experience, the God of Christianity?

The Eucharist, for example, permits one to enter a whole cultic scene. There is the chalice, as well as the monstrance that holds the host. The chalice, made out of silver, appears as an object; in the ritual, when the priest or the minister consecrates the elements, the chalice maintains its organic structure as a thing, its appearance as a silver cup. The wine continues to contain the properties any other alcoholic beverage will have upon consumption. The host is composed of flour, water, and other ingredients. Lacoste admits there is nothing “intrinsically religious” about a silver jug, wine, bread, and an ecclesial building. How, then, may a sacrament, which is a *res*, appear as a *sacramentum res*? How may the “inapparent” or the “invisible” appear under the form of the apparent and visible?

Faith enables me to forget, for a little while, the objectivity of the wine and the bread. Lacoste suggests that faith, as a stance or attitude, permits the recipient of grace in that event to “see” what is not visible. I “bracket” or put between parentheses the objective structure, even while I do not annul or annihilate that structure. This is the style of perception associated with theological optics, what Lacoste names the “liturgical reduction.”<sup>52</sup> In this intentional stance, the chalice is always simply a chalice. But the power of faith, as a subjective mood of peace and joy, reconstitutes the objects of bread and wine as spiritual gifts, which conceal or harbor the inapparent, the logic of incarnation, of mediation. This indeed is what faith accomplishes: the logic of “mediation” is the process by which God discloses grace through a material sign. Lacoste says the logic of mediation enjoys the privilege of preserving the mystery of things while not exhausting how real presence occurs.<sup>53</sup>

What does this “bracketing” that faith performs feel like? Lacoste will say that sacramental experience, while it does not offer immediate vision of Christ or ecstatic experience of union with God, involves a kind of temporary “rupture” or “perversion”

51. For more on the counter-existential (*contre-existential*) of peace, joy, and innocence, see Lacoste, *Être en danger* 197–211.

52. It is a principal theme of Lacoste’s *Experience and the Absolute*, but is elaborated upon in *Être en danger* 108ff.

53. Lacoste, *Être en danger* 115–19.



of my ordinary experience of the world, resulting not necessarily in discontinuity with ordinary experience. Sacramental experience is basically continuous with, and integral to, the sphere of objects, ordinary perception, and everyday sense experience. Hence the theological attitude of faith does not forbid the chalice its objective status as “metal cup.” Rather it implies only the possibility of invisible depth concealed within its parameters, even if that invisible grace may not yield to consciousness an object I can apprehend or see with my mind’s eye.<sup>54</sup> Faith, therefore, may “infirm” the objectivity of the chalice and the monstrance, or the wine and bread, by practicing with diligence the discipline of “forgetting” or “bracketing.”<sup>55</sup> The Eucharist in particular mediates the “fullness of time” eschatologically within the concrete structures of historical experience. The desire to see God does not liberate the soul from angst or *inquiétude*, but it may open up the *nœud* between angst and peace that the Eucharist offers (only as possibility) in the element of faith. Sacramental experience, a performative way “between” angst and joy, is “simultaneously historical and metahistorical.” It is a possibility that sanctions our finitude and mortality, but opens up the absolute possibility that my life may exceed the boundaries of finitude and death; my life, its spiritual depth and sacramental meaning, remains fragile, because it is sustained only in the pilgrimage of faith.<sup>56</sup>

The logic of mediation to which Lacoste attributes the power of sacramental intuition is borne of metaphysical language. Lacoste is uncomfortable with traditional metaphysical vocabulary, such as “mediation” (which he says is theoretically difficult),<sup>57</sup> theosis, participation, analogy, and so on. He opts for a new term, the *entre-deux*, or the between, whereby the spiritual life before God, lived in the world of objects, finds its place between interior prayer and exterior life with others, between angst and peace, between finitude and God, between the danger of physicalism and the possibility of the invisible.<sup>58</sup> This is that *nœud* that I am, a “place” I inhabit, or more precisely, a living amphibole that occupies a point of overlap between visible and invisible.

Intended as nothing more than a sketch here, perhaps Thomistic metaphysics would enjoy welcome within a phenomenological method so outlined. If we avoid the traditional language of *esse subsistens* or *analogia entis*, just for a moment, then may we take conceptual bearings in the *Summa* from an alternative angle of entry, one more properly christological in form? For Aquinas, against whom so many of Lacoste’s critiques are directed, will interpolate the concept of “filiation” within the most metaphysical sections of the *Summa*, the famed *Prima pars*. The “middle term” that unifies God and creatures is participation in the Son, that is, filiation. No creature shares in Sonship in a perfect manner, of course, but experience is its locus. Aquinas says, “since

---

54. Lacoste, *Être en danger* 305.

55. Lacoste, *Être en danger* 38.

56. Lacoste, *Être en danger* 306–7.

57. Lacoste, *Être en danger* 116.

58. Lacoste, *Être en danger* 150.

the Creator and the creature have not the same nature; but by way of a certain likeness, which is the more perfect the nearer we approach to the true idea of filiation.” And this likeness is borne out, in time, the more the creature assimilates the life of Christ, bearing the fruit of the love and humility of the Cross; hence “filiation is applied as it participates in the likeness of the Son.”<sup>59</sup>

Later, in the *Tertia pars*, on the sacraments, Aquinas will say that in the Eucharist the sacrament makes possible a form of experience, the communication of grace in a material sign. But how does this mediation occur? Christ himself, the *entre-deux* between creature and Creator obligates us to formulate the logic of mediation in incarnational terms. In the sacrament of grace,

The principal cause of grace is God, for whom the humanity of Christ is a conjoined instrument (like a hand) and the sacrament a separate instrument (like a stick, itself moved by the instrument joined to it, the hand). It is necessary then that the power of salvation descend from the divinity of Christ through his humanity until it reaches the sacraments.<sup>60</sup>

Christian metaphysics, inspired as much by christological moments in Aquinas as by Lacoste’s proposal of “sacramental experience,” privileges silence, humility, and hesitation, but it also cultivates the courage to speak in love, to respond to the call of love, and compensates for its poverty of language. Analogy, mediation, participation, while these terms suffer sometimes from inflationary onto-theological claims that trade on the power of abstraction, they also open out onto concrete experience, the fullest expression of which is sacramental experience.

## Conclusion: Metaphysics and Mediation

I return, then, to the article’s beginning: the conjunction of metaphysics and theology, as quest to understand the human condition, does not reveal myself as I have to be, but as I would seek to be; I avail myself of the mystery of God and employ the grammar of metaphysics to make sense of my experience of finitude in light of that mystery. While it is commonplace to say that theology is diffuse and fragmented, perhaps reconsideration of its relation to metaphysics may prompt a series of questions concerning the relationship between conventional and ultimate forms of discourse.

I have argued that metaphysics, in its historically narrow definition, is onto-theology, and that this particular understanding of Western philosophy is restrictive. Metaphysics can also represent, I suggested, a subjective horizon in which an inexhaustible search for the ground of experience may be conducted. Following from this broad definition, I considered the phenomenological analysis of ordinary experience

---

59. Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* I, q. 33, a. 3. For more on Aquinas and the naming of God, see Rocca, *Speaking the Incomprehensible God* 295ff.; also see David Burrell, “Aquinas on Naming God,” *Theological Studies* 24.2 (1963) 183–212, doi:10.1177/004056396302400201.

60. Aquinas, *Summa* Part III, Q.62, A.5.

of objects that Jean-Yves Lacoste explores; sacramental experience in particular designates a faith stance which opens up a “place between” two modes of being, namely, between the invisible and the visible, between peace and angst, between metahistory and history, but never in a manner that escapes the boundaries of lived experience.

If metaphysics is ineluctably tied to experience, and many disciplines explore experience, theology’s ownmost voice, as one that addresses the reason for existence in light of the biblical narrative, may dialogue with other disciplines that also address this question. Theology’s truth is certainly conventional and regulated by a particular tradition of reasoning (scriptures, creeds, patristic authorities, etc.) and communities of practice (the living church, liturgy, etc.). But the form of truth it seeks to realize is ultimate, about reality as such. Framed in this way, humans seem to have an underlying concern for ultimacy and often employ religious language to address the question, Why is there something instead of nothing? So how may metaphysics provide a type of “common grammar” that mediates between distinct cultural idioms? Ultimacy need not eliminate conventional practices and cultural languages that provide meaning schemes or paradigms of truth reflective of a particular grammar.

Seemingly incommensurable communities engage in dialogue often. Empirical evidence for this can be adduced by referencing the popularity of “Scriptural Reasoning,” a form of interreligious dialogue carried out among Abrahamic religions.<sup>61</sup> Many of us can differ on fundamental answers to life’s basic questions, even on questions of methodology, and yet we can still listen to arguments, consider each other’s assumptions and inferences, and so on. Metaphysics, as we have described it thus far, does not have to be the common “third” between two or three incommensurable paradigms, for that would assume there is some external vantage absolutist view, independent of any particular cultural convention. An absolute view is unattainable. Rather it seems to me that metaphysics can be seen as the overlapping terrain where each discipline or “language” considers, without exhausting, the why of existence. The picture, illustrative here, is that of an indeterminate number of floating rings, each a form of life or cultural language, on an open ocean. Some rings are closer to others, but their mutual contraction and expansion dialectically emerges in and through the waves of dispute and collaboration; passing supplies between rings occupies much of the residents on each ring, for they have to work hard to remain afloat. Hence even though I live on my ring, I am found often talking to others standing on rings on my left and my right. Sometimes I leap to a different ring if unsatisfied with the one on which I currently stand; conducive to this scenario of movement is the momentary merging of one ring with my own ring. As “messy” as this interchange is, no one is out of signaling distance, and there is individual responsibility and collective cooperation often.

The debate about metaphysical theology versus post-metaphysical theology, then, can be extended into the wider value-laden dialogue that theology, and the church in

---

61. For more on Scriptural Reasoning in this regard, see the illuminating essay, Nicholas Adams, “Making Deep Reasonings Public,” *Modern Theology* 22.3 (2006) 385–401, doi:10.1111/j.1468-0025.2006.00324.x.

particular, tries to sustain with the external world. The spiritual climate of the Western world is increasingly secular, and atheism now an unimpeachable form of life. How may two languages (or two rings) as different as Christian theology and secular reason find a point of overlap concerning their differing interpretations of the human condition?

The post-metaphysical account, to recall, objects to the very notion of overlap.<sup>62</sup> It decides, in contrast, to confine theology to a particular hermeneutical stance with a logic and integrity all its own, meaningful only to those initiated into the rationality and logic of that particular community of practice. Public dialogue, understood in these terms, with other schemes of deep reasoning appears impossible since genuine communication yields to the idea of incommensurable rationalities. The difference in underlying media between, say, the way of speaking relative to Christianity and the way of speaking relative to a secularist or a materialist cannot be bridged. Partisans of the post-metaphysical mood often say Christianity is unique, and there is no way to understand its language but from the “inside,” a position I can occupy only once I learn the rules of syntax native to Christianity.

If a conceptual rescue operation can indeed “rescue” theology from this parochialism, then metaphysical interrogation about the ground of experience may serve this purpose. I have no problem admitting that Christianity offers a unique interpretation of the existence of the world and the place of the human condition in that world. Christianity is not only historically and culturally conditioned, it is also differentiated and elucidated by the subjectivities to whom Christ appears. A deflationary metaphysics rejects totality’s economy of violence and its accompanying absolutism, but it nevertheless elicits universal claims, because such claims are open to all eventualities bound up with the search for meaning. Metaphysics does not reduce one’s faith, therefore, to a generic common denominator describable as a “metaphysical underground.” Nor does metaphysics consist of neutral territory, into which any one’s conventional language can be translated for the purpose of rational exchange of ideas in the public sphere. Metaphysics may represent that point of overlap where authentic and real unity occurs between two traditions, and specifically where they converge on the idea of a search for a ground, even while maintaining no unity eliminates the radical differences say between a Christian and a secular humanist.

Metaphysics in the broadest sense makes space for both claims relative to a community and claims embedded in universal symbols. Christian metaphysics, for example, does not refuse to listen to other voices who make truth claims about the nature

---

62. John Betz, while edging his thesis too far in the polemical direction, writes similarly: Metaphysics has “a regulative function that keeps Christian discourse (first and foremost of the incarnate *Logos*) from degenerating into mere mythology or, what amounts to the same thing, simply the ‘language game’ of this or that community . . . Without a theological metaphysics, the transcendent perspective, which metaphysics holds open, threatens to collapse into the ‘way of speaking’ of this or that ‘faith community’.” John Betz, “The Beauty of the Metaphysical Imagination,” in *Belief and Metaphysics*, ed. Peter M. Candler Jr. and Conor Cunningham (London: SCM, 2007) 41–65 at 42.

and meaning of finitude, no matter how alien the interpretative strategy may appear to the Christian. For whatever the interpretive angle, a single, guiding theme guides each paradigm, scheme, language, tradition, deep reasoning, and so on, and that theme is a search for an intelligible and meaningful ground of being that grows out of experience, a search that never suspends the limits of finite experience. For this reason, whatever its material content, metaphysics opens out endlessly onto the interplay between the many conventional stories involved in this quest; no God's-eye point of view is attainable.

If this is the case, metaphysics enjoins one to practice the virtue of listening and open-mindedness. Listening with an open mind does not require eliminating one's beliefs or meaning scheme. Indeed, it has been argued one cannot genuinely be open-minded unless one has deep convictions with which to wrestle.<sup>63</sup> Rather, listening involves simply "suspending" or "forgetting for a little while" one's conventional identity, born of the conviction that one's own existential identity, in my exchange with the other, is broadened and humbled (i.e., keeping at bay a totalizing or inflationary metaphysics).<sup>64</sup> Lacoste will advocate for this model of humility, especially from the Christian point of view; being at peace with oneself and God requires being reconciled with the other.<sup>65</sup>

From a Christian point of view, the humility of the cross refuses to grant to the Christian an absolute ground. Metaphysics, then, mediates a ground without exhausting the prospect of ever-new possibilities to be apprehended within any one particular tradition. Metaphysics is uniquely inflected, therefore, each time a tradition elucidates with critical distinction a particular grammar of metaphysical speculation. Metaphysics belongs to Christianity as much as it belongs to Buddhism, secular humanism, or Islam. Metaphysical speculation occupies terrain unique to a particular grammar because it is experience, the subjective life of the ego in its ambient world, that configures the content of metaphysical reflection. The science of the Cross, the experience of the Christian soul, enjoys metaphysical warrant precisely because the principal site of experience is the sacrament of the Eucharist, the logic of which is that the invisible grace of God is mediated in that material sign; in its concrete form, the ritual of the wine and bread yields to the power of reflective faith, the gaze that sees only in an enigma the ground of existence, the person of Christ. Reframing the debate, above all, requires that experience occupy the seat of metaphysics; the elusive God exceeds every manifestation of experience and God is understood only properly from the point of view of the creature, of the subjective mood cultivated by the soul, which is always partial and plural, which is to say: a conventional practice which mediates the ultimate.

---

63. Jason Baehr, *The Inquiring Mind: On Intellectual Virtues and Virtue Epistemology* (Oxford: Oxford University, 2011) chapter 8, "Open-Mindedness."

64. Jean-Louis Chrétien is illuminating on the nature of genuine listening. See his *Ark of Speech*, trans. Andrew Brown (New York: Routledge, 2004) 13ff.

65. Lacoste, *Être en danger* 189.

**Author Biography**

Joseph Rivera earned his PhD in systematic theology at the University of Edinburgh in Scotland and is currently a full-time lecturer in systematic theology at Dublin City University, the School of Theology, Philosophy and Music. He specializes in continental philosophy of religion, sacramental theology, theological anthropology and theological naturalism. Publications include *The Contemplative Self after Michel Henry: A Phenomenological Theology* (Notre Dame, 2015). A monograph on the concept of “world,” explored from theological, philosophical and cultural perspectives, is in progress.