

The Ambiguous Infinite: Jüngel, Marion, and the God of Descartes

Author(s): Paul DeHart

Source: *The Journal of Religion*, Vol. 82, No. 1 (Jan., 2002), pp. 75-96

Published by: [University of Chicago Press](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1205884>

Accessed: 28-10-2015 18:30 UTC

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



University of Chicago Press is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *The Journal of Religion*.

<http://www.jstor.org>

The Ambiguous Infinite: Jünger, Marion, and the God of Descartes

Paul DeHart / Vanderbilt University

I have never written about the infinite except to submit myself to it, and not to determine what it is or is not. (René Descartes)

I. INTRODUCTION

“God is not a name but a concept.” Thus writes Kierkegaard, speaking through the persona of Johannes Climacus.¹ Presumably he means, at least in part, that God is not a thing, an ostensible referent toward which one can gesture and to which a name can consequently be applied. Instead, the use of the word “God” involves not direct reference but an effort of thought, a conceptual synthesis of ideas and experiences. There are many such concepts inhabiting our speech (one usually does not say, “That’s Truth, right over there next to the window”); they require a certain amount of learning and practice of those who would use them properly. The striking, in fact the crucial, thing about the concept “God” is that the list of situations or contexts that guide its use is potentially without limit. There is no idea or experience to which God is not in some way relevant, at least if we grasp what we mean by the concept. As Charles Wood has pointed out, “An understanding of ‘God’ relates to and affects one’s understanding of everything else, one’s own self in particular.”²

The concept “God” is (potentially) infinitely relevant because God is (actually) infinitely relevant. Ironically, this unlimited divine relatedness is why Kierkegaard, speaking through yet another persona (Anti-Climacus), can also say that God “has no concept.”³ That is, God knows or relates to all particulars directly without needing the mediation of a cognitive ab-

¹ Søren Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments and Johannes Climacus*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1985), p. 41.

² Charles M. Wood, *The Formation of Christian Understanding* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1981), p. 25.

³ Søren Kierkegaard, *The Sickness unto Death*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1980), p. 121.

© 2002 by The University of Chicago. All rights reserved.
0022-4189/2002/8201-0004\$02.00

The Journal of Religion

stract, a universal. As infinitely relevant, God needs no concept. But *we* do, if we are to speak of or think about God at all. Are not the special problems associated with our use of the concept “God” a direct reflection of the fact that God relates with such unfathomable immediacy (and hence “has no concept”)? In fact, it could be argued that these problems are such that we cannot even limit ourselves to *a* concept of God. To think God is not to arrive at an adequate single concept, the quintessence of divinity; it is to master a shifting ensemble of concepts that implicate and check each other in various ways. This pattern of concepts must be constantly renegotiated, drawing on and responding to particular historical contexts of thought, speech, and action.

The dynamics of this process, and the criteria by which it can be judged, are dependent on the goal toward which a particular “thinking” of God aims, and the communities or traditions to which it is responsible. Thus, even where the definition of a concept is agreed upon, its “freight,” its meaning and implications for reflection on God, can be judged in sharply divergent ways. A most instructive example of this is provided by the differing readings offered by two contemporary theologians of one concept (infinity) as used in reference to God by one great philosopher (Descartes). Of course, much has been written of late about the “Cartesian subject” and the salutary results for theology and philosophy that occur when it is abandoned.⁴ But what of the Cartesian idea of God? I turn to the “infinite” Cartesian deity as read through the eyes of the German Lutheran theologian Eberhard Jüngel and the French Roman Catholic philosopher Jean-Luc Marion.

II. GOD IN THE EPISTEMOLOGICAL REVOLUTION: TWO READINGS

The juxtaposition of two quotations with intriguing similarities will provide a point of entry into this discussion. The first, from Jüngel, comes from his great work, *Gott als Geheimnis der Welt*, written in 1977:

Thereby, however, the being of God necessarily falls asunder. For on the one hand God, in accordance with his essence—that is, as that which is absolutely superior to me—cannot be thought of as limited to the presence of the ego. Even for Descartes, it belongs to the essence of God to be more than merely present with me. On the other hand, God’s existence can only be asserted when he is present within the horizon of my existence. Because for “Descartes being-ness

⁴ Unfortunately, as with much of the currently fashionable theological posturing with respect to the key figures of “modernity,” this too often smacks more of compulsive repetition than of actual insight into the thinker in question. For a witty if tortuous attempt to retrieve the real “Cartesian subject” from current misunderstandings, see Slavoj Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject* (London and New York: Verso, 1999).

Jüngel and Marion on Descartes

means: being represented through and for the subject,” which “I” am. Thus the following aporia emerges:

a) The existence of God is secured through me when the essence of God is represented by me.

b) In terms of his *essence* God is of course the almighty creator who exists necessarily through himself and through whom I exist (and also through whom I am *what* I am).

c) In terms of his *existence*, however, God is through me, inasmuch as even *his* existence can be understood only as a being-represented through and for the subject, which “I” am.⁵

The second quotation comes from Marion’s book, published in 1981, *Sur la théologie blanche de Descartes*.

Descartes makes no final settlement in favor either of ontic precedence or of the primacy of thought; the result is that the one and the other are put into practice alternatively, indeed conjointly, via two competing cases. As always, this paradox is nowhere more obvious than in the [case of God as] *causa sui*: God appears as an infinite essence, so much so that it is completely summed up in an *exuperans potestas* [overwhelming power]. Thus God appears as the absolute creator of beings—the ontic foundation of the *res cogitans* [human being as thinking substance] as well as of other beings. But at this very same point in the theory, God, in order to exist, or rather in order that his existence might become intelligible to the *cogitatio* [human thought], must satisfy a rational demand of the finite ego (*causa sive ratio cur existat* [a cause or reason why he exists]). The ego becomes the epistemological foundation of the *cogitatio* of God as well as of other beings. Thus the foundation is divided in two, between *cogitatio* and creation, a finite and created rationality and an incomprehensible and infinite power.⁶

Both Jüngel and Marion see a curious tension in the way Descartes tries to conceive of God, the human mind, and the interrelation of the two. Their accounts are not identical but they evidently overlap in an intriguing way. To see more clearly the similarities and differences I will deal with each in a bit more detail. This will unavoidably involve considerable haste and oversimplification in summarizing two very complex readings of Descartes, but it is necessary to lay the groundwork for what follows.

⁵ Eberhard Jüngel, *Gott als Geheimnis der Welt: Zur Begründung der Theologie des Gekreuzigten im Streit zwischen Theismus und Atheismus*, 6th ed. (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr [Paul Siebeck], 1992), p. 165; translation by Darrell L. Guder under the title *God as the Mystery of the World* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans, 1983), p. 125. For the convenience of the reader, citation of page numbers in the original will be followed in parentheses by citation of page numbers in the translation, although the latter is to be used with caution. All translations of quotations are mine unless otherwise noted. For Jüngel’s relation to Descartes, see also Paul DeHart, *Beyond the Necessary God: Trinitarian Faith and Philosophy in the Thought of Eberhard Jüngel* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1999), pp. 43–68.

⁶ Jean-Luc Marion, *Sur la théologie blanche de Descartes: Analogie, création des vérités éternelles et fondement*, 2d ed. (Paris: Quadrige/PUF, 1991), p. 451.

The Journal of Religion

To begin with Jüngel, the “aporia” he describes (not, strictly speaking, a contradiction but a baffling difficulty blocking a consistent course of thought) must be understood against the background of a traditional presupposition about conceiving God. God is metaphysically unique as one whose essence is logically inseparable from existence (somewhat crudely stated, *what* God is, God’s identity, and *that* God is, God’s mode of actuality or “esse,” to use Thomist language, mutually imply and define each other). In this unique case, to exist as God is God’s identity; existence is not a contingent fact separable in principle from essence, as it is with creatures. This insistence had been a commonplace of philosophical and theological thinking about God long before Descartes, and he accepted it without question. If God is to be conceived, it must be as one in whom essence and existence are thought together.⁷

But Descartes’s discussion of God, itself traditional in so many ways, is part of a larger argument, one of revolutionary import for the self-conception of human reason. It is well known that Descartes located the foundation for cognition and rationality in the human “ego” or self, which “clearly and distinctly” apprehends its own presence as well as its own defining activity, thinking.⁸ Heidegger, whom Jüngel closely follows in this discussion, argued that one result of this new foundation of thought is that the existence of things outside the self is strictly a function of their perception by the self, their “being present” to thought. This is neither a logical inference, nor a stipulative definition, along the lines of Berkeley’s “To be is to be perceived.” Rather, Heidegger claims that the meaning of any assertion of existence is now implicitly determined as a mode of being present (“re-presented”) with the cognizing self which makes the assertion; to say “*X* exists” henceforth means or implies that *X* is within the horizon of the self’s presence to itself.⁹

In the passage cited, Jüngel is pointing out the difficulty of maintaining the traditional assertion of the identity of God’s essence and existence once the import of this new understanding of existence is absorbed. Divine essence and divine existence can no longer be brought into a single

⁷ Jüngel, *Gott als Geheimnis*, pp. 139–41 (106–7). See, e.g., René Descartes, *Principles of Philosophy* I.14 (PW 1, pp. 197–98; AT 7A, p. 10) and *Meditations on First Philosophy*, Meditation V (PW 2, p. 46; AT 7, p. 66). All citations of Descartes are from John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, Dugald Murdoch, and Anthony Kenny, trans., *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984–91), abbreviated PW with volume number and page. This is followed by the corresponding reference to Ch. Adam and P. Tannery, eds., *Œuvres de Descartes*, rev. ed. (Paris: Vrin / C.N.R.S., 1964–76), abbreviated AT with volume number and page.

⁸ Descartes, *Meditations* VI (PW 2, p. 54; AT 7, p. 78) and Second Set of Replies (PW 2, pp. 103–5; AT 7, pp. 144–46).

⁹ Martin Heidegger, *Nietzsche*, vol. 4, *Nihilism*, ed. David Krell, trans. Frank Capuzzi (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1982), pp. 114–17.

movement of thought, so to speak; the mind assigns them to separate locations. God's essence is defined as absolutely superior and transcendent to human reason, indeed, as the creator of that reason. But if there is to be knowledge of God's existence, if that existence is to be meaningfully asserted, then the divine essence must be somehow re-presented, it must be given in some idea to that human reason and thus constructed by the human subject as an object, similar to any other existent. This is because in this new Cartesian epistemological scheme "to exist" becomes virtually identical with "to be present in the form of some attribute which affects the knowing human subject."¹⁰

Now Descartes is certainly aware that God cannot be present in the manner of ordinary objects. To be sure, God and created things (minds and material objects) have this in common: both are both characterized by a degree of ontic independence, that is, they are substances. But God's independence is absolute, that of created substances only relative, since they depend on God holding them in being.¹¹ Another way of putting this is to say that God is infinite substance. Thus the word "substance" is not used in the same sense of God and created things; we can know substances, and hence God, but the qualification "infinite" signals that the concept "substance" is not used univocally of the divine. Descartes in this way tries to salvage God for his own epistemology, bringing the divine into the representational scheme while at the same time allowing enough ambiguity in this unique case to conceal the fault line that Jüngel claims to uncover.

The fault line is still present despite this concealment; I will indicate later what happens, according to Jüngel, when this fault line began to widen. But initially the nature of the "aporia" described in the quote with which we began must be grasped as carefully as possible. God's essence is defined by Descartes (following venerable traditions) in such a way as to problematize its relation to the new role of the human subject in constituting knowledge. Existence now means objectifiable presence within the human cognitive horizon;¹² but how can the absolutely transcendent cre-

¹⁰ Descartes makes this latter point explicitly in *Principles*, I.52 (PW 1, p. 210; AT 8A, p. 25): "We cannot initially become aware of a substance merely through its being an existing thing, since this alone does not of itself have any effect on us. We can, however, easily come to know a substance by one of its attributes. . . . Thus, if we perceive the presence of some attribute, we can infer that there must also be present an existing thing or substance to which it may be attributed." Jüngel cites this passage in part in *Gott als Geheimnis*, p. 166 (125).

¹¹ Descartes, *Principles* I.51 (PW 1, p. 210; AT 8A, p. 24); *To Clerselier*, April 23, 1649 (PW 3, pp. 377–78; AT 5, pp. 355–56).

¹² That is, the possibility or impossibility of something's existence coincides precisely with the possibility or impossibility of its being clearly and distinctly perceived by a human subject. See Descartes, *Meditations* VI (PW 2, p. 50; AT 7, p. 71).

The Journal of Religion

ator appear within this horizon? Descartes's denial of the univocity of substance suggests that God's appearance in this horizon is possible but problematic, a quasi-availability qualified by infinite unavailability. To know God as God involves a claim about God's essence and a claim about God's existence that do not exactly negate each other, but that are resistant to harmonization, threatening to move off in separate directions. This puts a question mark on the traditional metaphysical claim of identity of essence and existence. In short, Descartes's traditionalist theism sits awkwardly with his revolutionary epistemology.

Turning to the Marion passage, a similar theme is discernible, although placed in a different interpretive context. Marion is making a general statement about a constitutive ambiguity in the Cartesian metaphysical system; uncovering this ambiguity is the task of the entire book on the "white theology," and continues a course of investigation begun in his earlier book on Descartes's "gray ontology."¹³ In the specific paragraph quoted, Marion points to an example of Cartesian discourse about God that furnishes a particularly revealing instance of this ambiguity: the claim that God is self-caused (*causa sui*).

Marion's argument is that a "double onto-theo-logy" characterizes Descartes's metaphysics; this gives it its ambiguous character. As with Jüngel, Heidegger provides many of the conceptual tools that Marion uses to analyze Descartes.¹⁴ In this case, Heidegger makes the claim that the entire metaphysical tradition of the West (which in his understanding arises with the ancient Greeks, culminates in Hegel, and meets its dissolution at the hands of Nietzsche) must be labeled onto-theo-logical, because every metaphysical treatment of the "being" that grounds the structures of reality has implicitly traded on two different senses of the word "being." On the one hand, being represents the general and undifferentiated power of being shared by all things that are. In the "school metaphysics" of the later seventeenth and eighteenth centuries this "being-qua-being" was eventually codified as the special concern of ontology.

Heidegger argues, however, that there is another sense of the word "being" embedded in every metaphysical scheme. Alongside being in general, such schemes have made use of the notion of a "highest being," a particular (not abstract) entity that stands at the pinnacle of the hierar-

¹³ Marion, *Sur la théologie blanche*, pp. 5–7; see Jean-Luc Marion, *Sur l'ontologie grise de Descartes: Savoir aristotélicien et science cartésienne dans les Regulae* (Paris: Vrin, 1975).

¹⁴ For what follows, see esp. Martin Heidegger, *Identität und Differenz* (Pfullingen: Neske, 1957), pp. 50 ff. For further discussion see also Jean-Luc Marion, *Sur la prisme métaphysique de Descartes* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1986), pp. 92–93. English translation of the latter by Jeffrey L. Kosky under the title *On Descartes' Metaphysical Prism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), pp. 86–87. Citations of this work will be to the original, with the corresponding pages of the English translation following in parentheses.

chy of beings and through its power grounds the being of all other beings. If being-qua-being is the abstract power of being shared by entities, then the highest being is the entity that enables this participation. (Of course, this dual structure gives rise to many confusions and ambiguities, such as the issue of which sense of being is truly foundational, but to point out these difficulties is precisely Heidegger's intention.) If ontology denotes the study of being-in-general, then theology indicates that part of metaphysics devoted to analysis of the highest being.

Metaphysical systems have variously if consistently deployed both an ontology and a theology; but Heidegger believes they have only been able to obtain a certain level of apparent consistency by trading in hidden ways on this distinction, oscillating between the meanings of being in order to account for different aspects of the "groundedness" of beings. Unable to decide where the foundation truly lies, metaphysics has needed to keep in play both interpretations of being; hence, Heidegger's claim is that onto-theo-logy is the hidden scaffolding of all Western metaphysics.¹⁵

One of Marion's purposes in his magisterial studies of Descartes is to probe the adequacy of Heidegger's conception of metaphysics as onto-theo-logy.¹⁶ Can the Cartesian metaphysical project be characterized as onto-theo-logical? His answer is only a qualified yes. For in fact, the metaphysical thought of Descartes reveals two distinct onto-theo-logies, that is, one ontology and its corresponding theology are operating in tandem with a parallel ontology and theology. This unique state of affairs arose due to the radically innovative nature of the Cartesian epistemology. In his study of the gray ontology, Marion argues that the epistemological principles first sketched out by Descartes in his *Rules for the Direction of the Mind* (ca. 1628) actually, if unconsciously, reorganize the discourse of being-qua-being in such a thoroughgoing way as to provide the hidden sketch of a general ontology. When Descartes establishes the procedures governing the knowledge and certainty of any and all existents, he is tracing an ontology in gray, so to speak.

The ontology is gray because shadowy, unacknowledged as such but nevertheless present. This is not to say that Descartes does not also have an explicit ontology, a conception of being-qua-being. He believes it to be a fundamental principle of reason that anything that exists must have a reason or cause (*causa sive ratio*) why it is, and why it is what it is. On this reading, the principle of the being of all beings is their participation in a causal order grounded in God's creative power.¹⁷ But Marion's point is

¹⁵ Marion, *Sur la prisme*, p. 93 (86).

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 7–8 (6–7).

¹⁷ Descartes, *Replies to Objections I* (PW 2, p. 78; AT 7, pp. 108–9); cf. *Replies II* (PW 2, pp. 116, 119; AT 7, pp. 165, 169).

The Journal of Religion

that Descartes's radical epistemology casts an ontological shadow, as it were; a rival set of ontological principles emerges in which the being of beings is not understood primarily in terms of their being caused, but rather in terms of their being conceived or thought by a knowing self.¹⁸

On Heidegger's reading of metaphysics, a fully fledged scheme must combine an ontology with a theology, an account of the highest principle or being that grounds the being of beings. One might suspect, then, that if Descartes's thought is truly metaphysical, the indeterminacy of being-qua-being signaled by the presence of the gray ontology might lead to ambiguities in fixing the identity of the "highest being" that rules the realm of being. It is Marion's thesis in *Sur la théologie blanche* that this is indeed the case. The indecision characterizing Cartesian ontology (i.e., between the putative ontology of being-as-caused and the "gray" ontology of being-as-thought lurking behind his epistemology) is carried over into Descartes's attempt to locate an ultimate principle determinative of beings.¹⁹

Thus the search in Descartes for a highest being, a determinative ground, a theology (or, more abstractly, a theiology, concerning that which is granted "divinity" or divine status) is stamped by the dual character of his ontology. "The foundation, and thus the theiology, remains burdened by the ambivalence which already characterizes the gray ontology."²⁰ For insofar as the being of beings is understood as a being-caused, Descartes deploys a conception of God as the highest causal power, indeed as the cause of his own being as well as of every other (*causa sui*).²¹ But within the epistemological realm where knowledge of existents is concerned, it is the ego, the knowing self that bears away the prize of divinity. For the being of beings as known is grounded in that which knows them, which represents them.

The result is a theology that cannot finally specify where the true ground of being lies: is it in God or the ego? In calling Descartes's theology "white" (i.e., blank) Marion is emphasizing this anonymity; like the king's signature on a blank document, where the bearer of the royal authority is not specified, the title of highest principle is the subject of a kind of competition between divine causality and human thought. And this indeterminacy of the highest being simply mirrors the original inde-

¹⁸ Marion, *Sur l'ontologie grise*, p. 186.

¹⁹ Marion, *Sur la théologie blanche*, pp. 450–52.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 451.

²¹ Descartes shows great care in explaining the precise meaning of this formulation, cautioning the reader that it is "not too inappropriate" to understand God as self-caused, but that a notion of efficient causality is not appropriate. See, e.g., *Replies I* (PW 2, pp. 79–80; AT 7, pp. 109–11); cf. *Replies IV* (PW 2, pp. 164–65; AT 7, p. 235), where he says God is similar only "in a sense" to an efficient cause of himself. See also *To ****, March 1642, II (PW 3, p. 213; AT 5, p. 546), where he notes that a notion of formal causality is preferable.

terminacy of being-qua-being. “The theology becomes white because the ontology remains gray.”²²

To speak of a double onto-theo-logy is one thing, but is it truly necessary to see them as “competing cases,” as the initial quotation states? Can they not be brought into harmony? Why not simply say that the onto-theo-logy ruled by the thinking ego is subordinated to or embedded within the more encompassing onto-theo-logy ruled by God’s causality? After all, Descartes assumes that God is the creator of the human ego in the first place. This should settle the precedence question once and for all. But this is to miss Marion’s point: in Descartes such a straightforward reduction proves impossible; the “doubling” of the onto-theo-logies is basic, it cannot be resolved by reducing one to the other. This is the “paradox” he is emphasizing in his discussion of God as self-caused. For the way in which Descartes tries to specify divine superiority leaves unsettled the question of whether God really is superior to human reason.

The naming of God as self-cause is the prime exhibit of this “paradox,” because it involves the claim that God transcends human rational consideration even as it subordinates God by grounding this claim in a principle of reason! As the cause of the being both of himself and of every other being, God can only be conceived as an infinite power; such a being, Descartes insists, can be apprehended in a certain way by human reason but never comprehended. But this claim is undermined by the way in which Descartes derives *causa sui* as a divine name in the first place. It is a basic demand of human reason, he says, that anything that *is* must have a reason or cause *why* it is.²³ If God exists (in the only intelligible sense of existence that Descartes’s scheme will allow), then God must have a cause, and of course the only conceivable cause of the infinite power is that power itself.²⁴

Thus, Descartes seeks to have it both ways. God hovers uneasily at the limit of reason, secure neither in his transcendence of it nor in his immanence to it. Indeed, Descartes must have it both ways. It is crucial to his entire scheme that God be an object of human knowledge. The human subject must know with utter certainty that God *is*, even if the essence of God remains incomprehensible. But then Descartes is, in effect, conceding some kind of subordination of God as object to the epistemological demands of the self-grounding human knower. God grounds this knower by creation even as this knower grounds God, so to speak, by “cogitation.”

²² Marion, *Sur la théologie blanche*, p. 451.

²³ Descartes, *Replies I* (PW 2, p. 78; AT 7, p. 108).

²⁴ Marion, *Sur la prisme*, p. 282 (267). Marion discusses (pp. 270–76 [256–61]) the extraordinary philosophical difficulties Descartes lands himself in by employing the notion of a self-cause, especially as such a notion had been explicitly rejected as incoherent by his scholastic predecessors (Anselm, Aquinas, Scotus, and, more ambiguously, Suarez).

The Journal of Religion

Enough has been said at this point to begin to see a clear convergence between the interpretations of Jüngel and Marion. Both discern at the heart of Descartes's metaphysics a disjunction, signaling a hidden struggle for precedence between a God who is infinite and absolute, ruling the realm of beings, and a human knowing subject who subordinates every claim to being and existence to its immanent cognitive procedures. Both lay particular stress on the strong metaphysical claims for God's transcendence insisted on by Descartes. Both emphasize as well the new and radical epistemological context within which Descartes attempts to situate his discourse on the divine. Somehow, he cannot quite bring the human mind and the almighty creator into a settled and proper alignment, in spite of the fact that he evidently desires to do so, and no doubt thinks that he has succeeded.

It would seem that these two interpreters are offering a common diagnosis, even if their angles of approach and terminology differ. Perhaps the best way to relate the claims made in the passages cited is to see Marion as providing a much more encompassing context, based on exhaustive research in the works of Descartes, for an insight that Jüngel had already arrived at in the course of a more general theological study. It is interesting that both authors use different ideas by the same thinker, Heidegger, to arrive at such similar conclusions. Jüngel appeals to the Heideggerian discussion of "re-presentation" as the grounding of beings through subjectivity. Marion looks instead to his hypothesis about metaphysics as "onto-theo-logy."

Both authors seem to discern the same instability hidden in the Cartesian edifice: God and the knowing self cannot find stable positions relative to one another within a single, comprehensive metaphysical scheme. But when the further question is raised of the significance of this instability for thinking about God, the differences begin to emerge between Jüngel and Marion. These differences will be seen to pivot around their distinct interpretations of the rhetoric of infinity in Descartes's theism. But first the passages cited above must be placed within the larger discussions of each author, discussions in which Descartes is given a role to play within the narrative of the historical course of Western philosophy. Although within the narrow focus of the discussion so far Jüngel and Marion seem to be discussing the same figure, he becomes two different characters when reintroduced into the two different stories they tell.

III. THE PHILOSOPHICAL LEGACY OF THE CARTESIAN GOD: TWO NARRATIVES

We begin, once again, with Jüngel. The role in his account of the notions of essence and existence and their identity in God has already been men-

tioned. The rise and dominance of these ideas form the narrative background to his perspective on Descartes's significance. The roots in the philosophical and theological tradition of this insistence on identity of essence and existence are far too complex to be entered into here. Suffice it to say that it was a claim that could be made on the basis of many interrelated considerations, including the demand for the utter simplicity of divine being (it thus cannot be a compound of essence and existence) as well as the claim that God's existence is necessary (and hence part of his very essence, not an adjunct to it). Jüngel, while not unaware of this variety, construes this and most of the other traditional metaphysical claims about divinity (necessity, simplicity, omnipresence, omniscience, etc.) as essentially variants on a common theme. All serve to guarantee God's absolute superiority by distancing God from the finite, the worldly, the human.

God's characteristics are always determined in relation to prior philosophical judgments concerning relative value and excellence among beings. What is deemed of value must be found eminently in God, while what is despised must be expunged from the divine being. The different approaches to the unity of essence and existence in God can without difficulty be seen as reflecting this tendency. Simplicity, for example, derives ultimately from the role of God as the unifying source and ground of a multiplex and fragmentary world; to take another example, the affirmation of the necessary and ubiquitous presence of God, and hence the linking of existence to the divine essence itself, is in deliberate contrast to the flux and decay associated with temporality.²⁵ Either way, there can be no separation of essence and existence in God as metaphysically defined because God's absolute superiority to the world and its human inhabitants must be maintained.

This fundamental stress on the superiority of God (including the particular ways of affirming the identity of essence and existence in God which derive from it) decisively informs Jüngel's assessment of the Cartesian difficulty discussed in the first section. The standard epistemological expression of divine superiority had long been the human inconceivability of God's essence. Descartes accepted this bit of tradition, too, as part of the inherited conceptual apparatus of theism. But, as has already been suggested, when Descartes tried to incorporate these time-honored claims (by now codified in the scholastic philosophy in which he was steeped) into his radical new epistemology he introduced a structural instability in his theistic conceptuality. In so doing he adumbrated a "disintegration" of divine being that was only to be revealed in the later de-

²⁵ For the former point: Jüngel, *Gott als Geheimnis*, pp. 139, 142 (105–6, 108). For the latter: *ibid.*, p. 136 (103).

The Journal of Religion

nouement of metaphysical theism. This narrative is, in fact, one of the central themes of Jüngel's work.

According to this story, later thinkers tried with increasing futility to bring into harmony the traditionally conceived absolute divine essence and the radically reconceived human cognitive capacity. As Heidegger argued, the Cartesian revolution made judgments of existence a function of presence to the human knower.²⁶ The unintended result was the "temporalization" of existence; "to be" in any meaningful sense was to be a spatiotemporal object in some kind of cognitive relation to the structures of human rationality, a development that triumphed with the ascendancy of Kant.²⁷

In the wake of Kant, philosophical discourse on the divine seemed to drift inexorably toward one of two different but equally self-refuting alternatives. It could salvage an absolute divine essence, but only by making it strictly unthinkable as an existent. Or else it could accept the horizon of human capacities as ultimate, embrace the flux of worldly existence, and deny completely a transcendent absolute. Either way, metaphysical theism as any kind of useful adjunct to theology was shipwrecked. The final inheritors of the theistic legacy of Descartes (Fichte, Feuerbach, Nietzsche) could only allow the traditional conception of the identity of divine essence and existence to wither away, and with it the philosophical conception of God that had become standard in Christian theology. This was quite contrary to Descartes's intentions, of course, but according to Jüngel it was a conclusion rigorously derived from the premise of his thought.²⁸

Like Jüngel, Marion also tells a story, a story involving both Descartes's relation to preceding traditions of thought as well as the legacy he bequeathed to later thinkers. But the plot and characters are rather different, and thus throw a light on the difficulty of Cartesian theism that contrasts with Jüngel's reading in interesting ways. Marion situates Descartes in a larger struggle among sixteenth- and seventeenth-century thinkers over the abilities of human rationality to comprehend the nature and mind of God. This dispute pitted more mystically inclined thinkers (Benoît de Canfeld, Pierre de Bérulle, François de Sales) who stressed the utter mystery and incomprehensibility of God against a growing group of

²⁶ "It [i.e., the principle of *cogito ergo sum*] says that I am as the one representing, that not only is *my* Being essentially determined through such representing, but that my representing, as definitive *repraesentatio*, decides about the being present of everything that is represented; that is to say, about the presence of what is meant in it; that is, about its Being as a being" (Heidegger, *Nietzsche*, p. 114).

²⁷ Jüngel, *Gott als Geheimnis*, pp. 173–74 (131).

²⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 200–203 (150–52).

thinkers associated with the new scientific worldview (Kepler, Galileo, Marin Mersenne). The latter group saw the logical and mathematical laws governing natural processes to be direct insights into the creative divine mind itself; the human mind only perceives more dimly what the divine mind perceives with perfect clarity. But the infallible necessity of these “eternal truths” is the same for both.²⁹

Descartes completely rejects this position as an infringement of divine transcendence. In a letter to Mersenne he exclaims: “Indeed to say that these truths are independent of God is to talk of him as if he were Jupiter or Saturn and to subject him to the Styx and the Fates.”³⁰ In response he makes it a basic premise of his thinking that God is the creator of the “eternal truths” that human reason perceives. The principles of logic and mathematics are just as contingent from God’s point of view as any other aspect of created reality. Marion explores the implications of this position in a variety of ways, but the important point in the present context is that this claim places crucial limitations on the way in which God’s attributes can be spoken of. In *Sur la prisme métaphysique de Descartes* (the culminating volume of that series of studies that looked first at Descartes’s “gray ontology” and then his “white theology”), Marion devotes a chapter to the incoherences forced on the Cartesian discourse of God by the demands of his epistemological method on the one hand, and, on the other, the claim that God creates the eternal truths of reason.

After a close analysis of the various formulas in the *Meditations* that Descartes uses to define God’s being and argue for God’s existence, Marion uncovers three philosophical “names” of God, basic determinants of divine being. Although they are employed more or less interchangeably by Descartes, Marion argues that they serve different purposes in his philosophical system and, in fact, do not cohere with each other. Consider that an immediate consequence of the claim that the truths of reason are contingent divine creations is the radicalization of divine transcendence. All reflection on the nature and attributes of God based on logical inference or extrapolation from worldly reflection now faces a drastic limitation. This should imply not only that God’s being is, strictly speaking, incomprehensible, but also that discourse about the divine should not be subject to the basic logical and epistemological procedures constituting Descartes’s new “method” of knowledge itself. The problem as Marion sees it is that two of the three “names” of God that perform vital functions

²⁹ Jean-Luc Marion, “The Idea of God,” in *The Cambridge History of Seventeenth-Century Philosophy*, ed. Daniel Garber and Michael Ayers (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 1:268–72.

³⁰ Descartes, *To Mersenne*, April 15, 1630 (PW 3, p. 23; AT 1, p. 145).

The Journal of Religion

in Descartes's philosophy seem to infringe on the kind of divine transcendence he is putatively committed to.³¹

The three concepts or "names" that structure Descartes's theism are God as infinite, God as the most perfect being, and God as self-cause (*causa sui*). With respect to the second of these, Marion argues that it deploys a set of perfections that turn out on closer inspection to be extrapolated characteristics of created entities; the latter are themselves comprehended and manipulated by the human reason that "clearly and distinctly" perceives them. Descartes is attempting to construct a clear concept of God in order to rescue the reality of the created order that had been put in question by the hyperbolic doubt of his method, but this construction takes place using those very resources of method and clearly perceived realities that are hypothetically in doubt.³² In a similar way, the third "name," self-cause, falls foul of Descartes's own strictures for reasons that have already been discussed. In invoking God as the self-caused cause of all things, Descartes has brought God once again into the realm dominated by rational inference and what Leibniz christened the "principle of sufficient reason." God appears to answer the summons of a basic principle of rational thought, in spite of the fact that as the one who creates eternal truth itself God should be in no way subject to such considerations.³³

Of the three "names" only infinity truly meets the demand for radical divine transcendence set up by Descartes's position on the creation of eternal truth.³⁴ The question of God as infinite will be revisited in more depth, but here it will suffice to summarize the course of theism in the post-Cartesian philosophical situation as Marion sees it. Descartes is finally unable to bring his thoughts about God into a coherent structural relationship; the three different ideas jostle against one another but are never connected or hierarchically arranged in a stable way. In his contribution to the *Cambridge History of Seventeenth-Century Philosophy*, Marion shows how ideas about God in that century can be organized according to their preference for one or the other of the Cartesian ideas about God. Some thinkers mirrored Descartes's own indecision, but the greatest figures (Malebranche, Spinoza, Leibniz, etc.) tried to give precedence either to the idea of the highest perfection or to the idea of God as self-cause. It is highly significant, though, that the third "name," the idea of God as infinite, did not seem to find a prominent echo in the philosophical situation immediately following Descartes.³⁵

³¹ Marion, *Sur la prisme*, pp. 257–92 (244–76).

³² *Ibid.*, pp. 277–78 (263–64).

³³ *Ibid.*, pp. 283–84 (269).

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 287 (271–72). See also the summary chart on p. 285 (270).

³⁵ Marion, "The Idea of God," pp. 291–92.

Jüngel and Marion on Descartes

For Descartes the naming of God as infinite marks the fact that God radically transcends the resources of human thought and language. It represents a retrieval of certain earlier emphases in theology deriving from Scotus and some mystical thinkers. But the intellectual climate was growing increasingly hostile to appeals to a mystical, radically transcendent infinity. In fact, Marion speaks of a “growing empire of metaphysical rationality” that demanded comprehensible concepts and univocal language even when dealing with the divine essence.³⁶

In the very incoherence of his “naming” of God, Descartes represents for Marion a question mark put against all earlier and later attempts to define the being or essence of God in strictly philosophical terms, that is, apart from theology. A moment’s reflection on this point will reveal a subtle difference of emphasis that informs the different “narratives” of Jüngel and Marion. In the story that Jüngel tells, Descartes appears primarily as a traditionalist when it comes to the metaphysical picture of God. The various titles for God that he uses are lifted unproblematically from the standard discourse of absolute divine superiority. Indeed, it is this very traditionalism, this faithfulness to a course of thought permeating both philosophy and theology for centuries, that makes Descartes the crucial figure he is for Jüngel. At once perfectly representative of metaphysical theism and yet also the initiator of that upheaval in the human cognitive self-image that stamps later thought as “modern,” his God is the proleptic announcement of its own philosophical death. But this usefully clears the ground for a fresh encounter of theology with philosophy because the standard metaphysical portrait of God is thereby revealed in its terrible fragility, indeed, in its utter unsuitability for use by a theology that proclaims the identity of God with a tortured and dying human being.³⁷

In contrast to this, Marion questions whether the Cartesian discourse of God can be reduced finally to metaphysics at all. Marion is aware, like Jüngel, of the traditional metaphysical provenance of the divine “names”

³⁶ Ibid., p. 293.

³⁷ Jüngel, *Gott als Geheimnis*, p. 167 (126). In light of the complexity of Jüngel’s stance toward Descartes, it is somewhat misleading for Fergus Kerr (on p. 8 of his *Theology after Wittgenstein* [Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986]) to characterize Jüngel’s perspective bluntly as “anti-Cartesian” on the grounds that he showed how the “turn to consciousness” initiated by Descartes “nearly ruined” theology. Jüngel’s basic point in the passage cited by Kerr is rather more subtle. In fact, he warns that an immediate rejection of the self-grounding of thought initiated by Descartes (in order to “save” the traditional God of theology) would be a “short-circuited” theological conclusion. To be sure, theology must rethink the premises of modernity, but the basic lesson Jüngel draws from Descartes is the inadequacy of the premodern theistic tradition he inherited. His response to the Cartesian epistemological revolution, while by no means uncritical, is quite nuanced and deserves more attention than it has received.

The Journal of Religion

that Descartes makes use of. But the way these concepts are employed by Descartes, the irreducibly pluriform character they force on his theistic language, becomes paradoxically the very marker of his radical originality. By demanding all three names and at the same time denying their coherence, Descartes bears witness to two imperatives that uneasily confronted each other in his day: the simultaneous demands that God be rationally fully intelligible and yet transcendent to human reason. In this way, Cartesian theism “attests to the fact that God cannot adequately be conceived within the limited discourse of metaphysics”; this makes it “*the* radical position on the question of God at the beginning of modern thought.”³⁸

The convergence between Jüngel and Marion on Descartes discussed earlier thus seems to give way to a divergence. The basic “*aporia*” of Cartesian theism, described so similarly by the two authors, does not by itself settle the question of Descartes’s relation to the metaphysical tradition. For Jüngel he is a spokesman for the grand tradition of the God of metaphysics. Ironically, Descartes’s very invocation of that God is in the service of establishing a revolution in the self-conception of human reason that will eventually issue in the death of the metaphysical God, a death that Jüngel believes should help theology to see the dubiousness of making “absolute superiority” the basic determinant of divine being. But for Marion, what Descartes says about God marks a turning point in philosophical theism; far from passively absorbing this tradition, he brings it into a new constellation of thought that simultaneously invokes the past and calls it radically into question.

The divergence in these two interpretations of Descartes turns on the question of divine infinity. For both thinkers it is Descartes’s utterance of an old word (“God is infinite!”) in a radically new situation that marks his unique importance. For Jüngel the infinity of God in Descartes perfectly suits its function within metaphysics. For Marion that infinity demonstrates how the concept of God is not reducible to its function as capstone of a metaphysical system. In fact, his “incoherent” concept of God served to open up, even explode metaphysics from within.³⁹ How can the identical concept indicate for one the culmination of metaphysical theism, for the other its (implicit) rejection? The ambiguity of divine infinity must be brought to light.

³⁸ Marion, “The Idea of God,” p. 278.

³⁹ See Marion, *Sur la théologie blanche*, p. 443, where he claims that incorporating the “incomprehensible idea” of the infinite within metaphysics forestalled the linguistic and conceptual closure of a univocal concept of God, thus “opening up” metaphysics to transcendence.

IV. THE INFINITE GOD: REINSCRIBING METAPHYSICS OR MARKING ITS LIMIT?

It is telling that one will not find in Jüngel's discussion of Descartes any specific attention devoted to the description of God as "infinite"; he takes up this term in passing as simply one more expression of the metaphysical way of defining the divine essence. Even these glancing references, however, suffice to show the connotations this word has for Jüngel. The "metaphysical concept of God" shared by "the entire Western tradition" is that of the "perfect and infinite being, tolerating absolutely no limitation."⁴⁰ His discussions of Hegel and Nietzsche suggest a certain sympathy for their critiques of the traditional infinite as a fixed opposition to the finite, and to the human in particular.⁴¹ Shaped by this strain of thought, Jüngel tends to construe Descartes's usage in light of the "bad infinite," that infinite which is, as Nietzsche says, "hostile to humanity" (*menschenfeindlich*). He suggests that the driving force in conceiving the infinite (at least in the premodern metaphysical tradition inherited by Descartes) was the negative association of finitude with the deficient and transitory.⁴²

Jüngel thus treats infinity as an adjunct to the concept of absolute metaphysical superiority and evaluates Descartes's use of the term accordingly.⁴³ It is all the more striking, therefore, that Marion, in the course of a much more extensive examination of Descartes, perceives in his invocation of infinity the key to his transcendence of the metaphysical framework of thought. When Descartes labels something infinite he signals that

⁴⁰ Jüngel, *Gott als Geheimnis*, p. 186 (140).

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 195–96 (147), see also pp. 96–99 (72–75).

⁴² *Ibid.*, pp. 275–76 (203): "The idea of God taken over from the old metaphysics does not tolerate the finitude of thought."

⁴³ There is a parallel to this in the way Jüngel reads Anselm's definition of God. In the only citation by Marion of Jüngel's work of which I am aware, the former criticizes the latter (among other thinkers) for too hastily interpreting Anselm's celebrated "that than which nothing greater can be thought" as equivalent to a "most perfect being" (*ens perfectissimum*), a phrase that does not appear in Anselm. The distinction is important to Marion because he wishes to insist that Anselm's determination suggests an "open" juxtaposition of qualities intensified to their maximum, not a rigorously or methodically (i.e., metaphysically) deduced and definable category of perfection. It is possible that in this case, as with that of the infinite, Marion has remained more sensitive to nuances in the conceptual usage that Jüngel elides in his "grand narrative" of the metaphysical tradition. The citation in question is at Marion, *Sur la prisme*, p. 268 (254). Marion has developed his "nonmetaphysical" interpretation of Anselm further in "Is the Ontological Argument Ontological? The Argument According to Anselm and Its Metaphysical Interpretation According to Kant," *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 30, no. 2 (1992): 201–18. A different version of the latter appears as chap. 7 of Jean-Luc Marion, *Cartesian Questions: Method and Metaphysics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), pp. 139–60.

The Journal of Religion

it is finally “indeterminable by concept.”⁴⁴ It cannot be conceptually comprehended. Indeed, that which is infinite is known and represented precisely as incomprehensible.⁴⁵ Marion argues that naming God as infinite follows strictly from the “inaugural rupture” that marks Cartesian thought from its beginning: the claim first made in the *Rules* that God creates the eternal truths. As infinite, God is not brought into the circle of finite representations and causes and, moreover, is “unreachable through the method [and] incomprehensible to objective science.”⁴⁶

Properly understood, the naming of God as infinite by Descartes deftly shifts the concept of the divine being outside the proper sphere of metaphysics, strictly defined. Marion has labored to show how precisely Cartesian metaphysics conforms to the Heideggerian definition of metaphysics as “onto-theo-logy.” As was seen, there are in fact two distinct onto-theologies operative in Descartes. Of the three divine names in Descartes, two are closely connected to the two onto-theologies: the “highest perfection” functions to mark the divinity in the cogitative onto-theo-logy, while “self-caused” characterizes God in the causal onto-theo-logy. But Marion argues that the third figure of the divine, God as infinite, has no constitutive role to play in either of these components of Descartes’s metaphysical scheme; accordingly, it “does not depend on the Cartesian constitution of metaphysics” at all.⁴⁷

For this reason Marion can claim that the infinite should be considered less a metaphysical concept of God than an echo of the tradition of the “divine names.”⁴⁸ The infinity of God marks in Descartes a key differentiation between the creator and created substances.⁴⁹ Among the Cartesian designations of the divine, infinity has a certain primacy, at once informing the more properly metaphysical concepts and transcending them.⁵⁰ Etymological appearances notwithstanding, infinity for Descartes is not a purely negative determination; it does not indicate the merely “indefi-

⁴⁴ Jean-Luc Marion, *God without Being*, trans. Thomas A. Carlson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), p. 23.

⁴⁵ Marion, *Sur la prisme*, pp. 262–63 (250); cf. Descartes, *Meditations* III (PW 2, p. 32; AT 7, p. 46).

⁴⁶ Marion, “The Idea of God,” p. 276.

⁴⁷ Marion, *Sur la prisme*, p. 288 (273).

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 291 (275). The reference to the “divine names” is meant to recall those trends within the traditions of dogmatic theology, especially following Pseudo-Dionysius, which situated utterances about God within a discourse of revelation and the *analogia fidei*, a procedure that was increasingly excluded from early modern philosophical discussions about God due to the decline of the doctrine of analogy and the rise of a putatively self-grounded, rational conceptuality of the divine.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 238 (226); cf. Descartes, *Meditations* III (PW 2, p. 31; AT 7, p. 45).

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 287 (272); see also p. 240 (228).

nite,” nor is it reducible to an expression of merely human cognitive limits with no positive content.⁵¹

Both Jüngel and Marion agree in effect that the use of the idea of infinity by Descartes allows him to “protect” the divine, as it were, from the pretensions of philosophy to comprehend the divine essence. But as Jüngel sees it, the end of this maneuver is merely to hide the rift Descartes had opened up between God’s essence and existence. Infinity becomes an expression of epistemological “false modesty” concerning God’s infinitely superior essence; it allows Descartes to obscure the incommensurability of that essence with the finite human reason asserting its existence.⁵² It “covers over” the aporia at the heart of Cartesian theism, the basic indecision with respect to the relation of the transcendence of God to the cognitive mastery of the ego. The concept of God’s being is caught in this struggle and disintegrated in the process.

However, for Marion the infinity of God serves to remove God from the site of this struggle, insuring that God’s being cannot be reduced to its role in competing onto-theo-logical schemes. Ultimately Marion values the infinite in Descartes as the guarantor of a divine transcendence that cannot finally be defined metaphysically. But Jüngel can see in the infinite only another instance of just such a metaphysically defined transcendence. Their disagreement (if that is not too crude a word to use) cannot be adjudicated on the basis of definitions of “infinity” itself. They evidently agree on the basic meaning and function of infinity (denying all limitation of God and hence removing God’s essence from the finitizing *mise-en-scène* of the human intellect). But whereas Jüngel sees this as perfectly replicating the basic dubiousness (from a theological standpoint) of metaphysical theism, Marion celebrates it as a potential “opening” of metaphysical reason toward theology. Any attempt to trace further the roots of these different readings of the infinite quickly leads into the larger question of the relations between philosophy and theology.

V. CONCLUSION: SUBMITTING TO THE INFINITE

How does thought honor the divine? How does it properly “submit” to the infinite? The introduction to this essay spoke of the different contexts, traditions, and goals that determine the success or failure of thought and speech about God. What is at work in the divergent readings of Descartes we have been exploring is a clash of intellectual “styles” associated with

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 306 (290). For Descartes’s definition of the difference between the infinite and the indefinite, see *Principles of Philosophy* I.27 (PW 1, p. 202; AT 8A, p. 15).

⁵² Jüngel, *Gott als Geheimnis*, p. 165 (125).

The Journal of Religion

the different orientations of Christian doctrinal theology and philosophy. The historical traffic in concepts between these two traditions is so complicated and intimate that a hard distinction is unwarranted, but this much can be suggested. Jüngel the theologian is committed to a mode of reflection on the divine in which one tries to start with concentrated attention to the saving, grounding event presupposed by the community of faith; only then and on that basis does one work “outward,” shaping broader generalizations about God and world. Marion the philosopher tries to follow the internal logic of philosophical reflection to that point where its limits or aporias indicate the threshold of a possible divine revelation (the actuality of which, however, remains beyond strictly philosophical assertion).⁵³

Jüngel’s suspicion of the Cartesian infinite lies in his conviction that Christian theology can fashion adequate concepts of God only when it allows its thinking to begin with and be guided at every point by the “givenness” of God’s being in the event of Jesus Christ.⁵⁴ In the service of this project, of course, theology is necessarily and constantly “experimenting with the rhetoric of its uncommitted environment,”⁵⁵ relying particularly on conceptual borrowings from philosophy, bending them to its own purposes without evacuating them of the precision of meaning that makes them useful in the first place. But history illustrates the risks of an insufficiently critical handling of these borrowings; theology has continually imported usefully rigorous conceptions of the divine at the cost of burdening itself with dangerously abstract notions of divine transcendence and superiority.

The Cartesian infinite thus becomes another indication that the philosophical God as classically conceived, the “highest being” that dutifully undertakes its important metaphysical functions, cannot perform its cru-

⁵³ Compare Jean-Luc Marion, “Metaphysics and Phenomenology: A Relief for Theology,” *Critical Inquiry* 20 (Summer 1994): 590: “Between phenomenology and theology, the border passes between revelation as possibility and revelation as historicity.” It should be pointed out that this interpretation of the differences between Jüngel and Marion is by no means exhaustive. Another fruitful avenue for exploring their differences might involve a comparison of Protestant and Roman Catholic theological appropriations of philosophy. Not to fall into easy caricatures, can one see here Marion’s “Catholic” willingness to call the philosophical tradition to the aid of theology versus Jüngel’s more dialectically suspicious, “Lutheran” relating of the two?

⁵⁴ Thus Jüngel faithfully upholds Barth’s dictum that, at least where God is concerned, the Christian theologian must begin from the *actuality* of the divine among us (i.e., in revelation) and only then move to define the corresponding *possibility* in the divine being. Nor should it be forgotten that the phrase “event of Jesus Christ” in Jüngel’s usage is a shorthand expression that also includes the pneumatological and ecclesial dimensions. What is really at stake in the phrase is Jesus Christ present through God’s Spirit in the faithful community. In other words, as with Barth, the strong “Christological concentration” should not obscure the basically trinitarian assumptions of Jüngel’s thought.

⁵⁵ Rowan Williams, *On Christian Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2000), p. xiv.

cial theological role: living and dying humanly. As Jüngel memorably says, the cross could only collapse under the weight of this God.⁵⁶ Against that fetishization of philosophical concepts within theology that historically eventuated in a putatively “rational” *deus unus* eclipsing and finally supplanting a “revealed” *deus trinus*, he argues that thought submits to the infinite *theologically* when it reconceives the infinite within the stance of faith in the crucified. The result is no longer the alien infinite of overwhelming power but the love without limit historically uttered in the word made flesh.

But how does thought submit to the infinite *philosophically*? Descartes speaks of the proper disposition of thought toward the divine infinite (as opposed to the merely “indefinite”) as a submission or even a “surrender.”⁵⁷ Just as one can never “see” the ocean (i.e., as a whole) but can indeed hardly miss the water at close hand, so the finite mind does not even try to “take in” the divine essence in its integral infinity but rather submits to an ever-deepening inspection or contemplation of the individual divine perfections clearly and distinctly perceived. The result can be a kind of cognitive joy, a “natural” love of God.⁵⁸ He is, however, careful to deny any salvific merit to this love in itself; in fact, the same divine infinity that is the object of this rational eros is also invoked as reason’s limit, eluding its drive to comprehension. Infinity, as it were, “reveals” to philosophical reason that there is more to God than reason or philosophy can grasp; thus securing doctrines “such as the mystery of the Incarnation or of the Trinity” from rational dismissal.⁵⁹ Marion’s more charitable attitude toward the Cartesian infinite might be seen to develop imaginatively this line of thinking.

What makes Descartes the great thinker he is for Marion is that he acknowledges the failure of rational comprehension of the divine even as he refuses simply to abandon the drive to comprehend (in the manner of that “orthodox” Pyrrhonism that embraced skepticism and reveled in the confusions of reason in order to show the necessity of revelation). For the

⁵⁶ Jüngel, *Gott als Geheimnis*, p. 163 (123).

⁵⁷ Descartes, *To Mersenne*, January 28, 1641 (PW 3, p. 172; AT 3, p. 293); *Replies I* (PW 2, pp. 81–82; AT 7, p. 114). The former is the source of the epigraph at the beginning of this essay. The use of the image of the ocean in the latter citation (and the similar example of viewing a mountain, *To [Mersenne]*, May 27, 1630 [PW 3, p. 25; AT 1, p. 152]) almost suggests a kind of “overload” of the cognitive apparatus. This use of natural images as symbolic of properly cognitive judgments is reminiscent of Kant’s famous discussion of the sublime in the *Critique of Judgement* (Book II, sect. 23). For a fascinating theological development of this idea of “overload” as the basis for a phenomenological understanding of revelatory events, see Jean-Luc Marion, “The Saturated Phenomenon,” *Philosophy Today* 40 (Spring 1996): 103–24.

⁵⁸ Descartes, *To Chanut*, February 1, 1647 (PW 3, pp. 309–10; AT 4, pp. 607–9).

⁵⁹ Descartes, *Principles* I.24–25 (PW 1, p. 201; AT 8A, p. 14).

The Journal of Religion

failure of philosophy adequately to define the divine essence can only be shown philosophically by the very attempt to do so. Only by thinking metaphysics to its limit could Descartes show (in philosophical terms) what it would mean for the divine to transcend that limit. Thus the infinite can signify not only the hubris of reason, but its humility as well. Naming the divine as infinite is an attempt to find the conceptual resources within philosophy to gesture toward that which eludes its grasp. This endeavor to conceive God within philosophy as the “outside” of philosophy does not curb the drive to comprehend, which is the *élan* of reason; it speaks of God as that which meets reason at the limit of its comprehension.

Of course philosophy can always refuse what transcends its cognitive horizon, seeing only the empty or the meaningless where a Christian philosopher like Marion expects the elusive freedom of the divine. In other words, the ambiguity of the infinite persists. Marion’s “charitable” philosophical reading is at the outset implicitly informed by a theological interest. Against a reading like Jüngel’s he sees that the transcendence implied by the Cartesian infinite need not be the negation of the immanence of incarnation but rather its ground of possibility. But no more than Descartes himself can he decide this using purely philosophical resources. In the end, he and Jüngel are united in their belief that the ambiguity of the infinite can only be resolved when it attests itself, when thought learns that the infinite is not a concept but a name.