From God to Man and Back Again (Twice)

This essay is about the paradox of Jesus' incarnation, and what it suggests about some ways in which humans might intersect with the transcendent God. I want to trace two trajectories -- the first from God to humans, the second from humans back to God. Where to start (whether from humans or from God) is the classic chicken and egg conundrum that has kept theology on the opposite side of the fence from philosophy and science. I will start as a follower of Jesus -- not from the point of a human-centric phenomenology, but from God as revealed in Biblical scripture. Beginning with God 'beyond Being' I will proceed to God's goodness, then to the Being his goodness gives, and finally to human beings who exist in given Being. Next I will proceed backwards from human beings toward God. In this reverse direction, we will surprisingly encounter God without having to transcend the horizon of our own human-being-ness, and I will consider some of the implications of this surprise encounter. Finally, I will start again from human beings and re-consider how I might proceed toward God via the vehicle of art.

In these three journeys, I will traverse some of the same ground as Dionysius (aka Pseudo-Dionysius, Denys, the Areopagite), Meister Eckhart, Heidegger, Jean-Luc Marion, Thomas Merton, A.W. Tozer, Eugene Peterson, Orthodox iconographers, and other theologians, philosophers, and artists. I won't always take up their agendas, but I'll try to contextualize their agendas in relation to my trajectories.

Why Start from God?

The Christian religion does not think God starting from the causa sui*... but indeed starting from God alone, grasped to the extent that he... reveals himself.* (Marion GWB 36)

In starting with God rather than humans, this essay will necessarily be more theological than philosophical in its concerns and presuppositions. The journey between God and humans is particularly affected by the point from which one begins to think it. No one was more aware of this than Heidegger, who rigorously began thinking Being from the originary perspective of *Dasein* (human-being-ness, literally 'there being')

rather than from scripture (although Heidegger's own particular Dasein was steeped in scripture). Heidegger is rightly suspicious of any theology that merely behaves as one of the ontological sciences grounded in Dasein. "Theology is searching for a more original interpretation of man's being toward God, prescribed by the meaning of faith and remaining within it. Theology is slowly beginning to understand Luther's insight that its system of dogma rests on a 'foundation' that does not stem from a questioning in which faith is primary and whose conceptual apparatus is not only insufficient for the range of problems in theology but rather covers them up and distorts them" (51).

To begin by 'believing' in scripture is not necessarily to avoid an interpretive hermeneutics skewed by a certain kind of historical being in the world. Nevertheless, my goal as a follower of Jesus is to be formed by scripture rather than to conform it to my preconceptions (cf: Romans 12:2). This requires a hermeneutics of faith, humility, obedience, and intimacy. By beginning my journey with God rather than humans, I'm assuming a number of things: 1. If God is any God worthy of himself, then what I think about him as one of his created beings is a lot less important than what he says about himself. 2. If God is any God worthy of himself, he's well able to communicate to humans revelation about himself in a way that, although not "adequate" according to the philosophical concept of perfect *adequatio*, is adequate enough for his intended purposes. 3. His major intended purpose is not that I expand the horizon of Dasein or create a new way of being in the world, but that I have a relationship with him (which just so happens to expand the horizon of my human-being-ness). 4. The Bible is God's revelation of himself to humans. These assumptions (particularly the last one) are based on faith.

Martin Luther defines faith not as "some more or less modified type of knowing. Rather, faith is an appropriation of revelation" (Westphal 14). In taking the Bible as my starting point, I'm following A.W. Tozer who (following St. Anselm) proposes, "We shall not seek to understand in order that we may believe, but to believe in order to understand" (59). Theology and philosophy are not perpetually at odds, they are simply at odds on the point of which gets first dibs at contextualizing the other. According to Jean-Luc Marion, "Theology… has to do with the fact of faith in the Crucified,… the relation of the believer to the Crucified" (GWB 65). Theology is not unaware of philosophy or opposed to it per se, it just doesn't feel obliged to perpetually play by its

rules. In many instances of theological thought, philosophical thought is simply irrelevant. Conversely, according to Heidegger, "The deity can come into philosophy only insofar as philosophy, of its own accord and by its own nature, requires and determines that and how the deity enters into it" (GWB 65). Such requirements and determinations strip God of his divine whim, reducing him to something other than a God worthy of himself. Paul writes, "Where is the wise man? Where is the scholar? Where is the philosopher of this age? Has not God made foolish [distracted] the wisdom of the world?... Jews demand miraculous signs and Greeks look for wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles" (*New International Version*, I Cor. 1:20, 22-23). Referencing this passage, Heidegger himself writes, "For the original Christian faith, philosophy is foolishness... Will Christian theology make up its mind to take seriously the word of the apostles and thus also the conception of philosophy as foolishness" (GWB 62)?

Heidegger seems to suggest a kind of separation of church (theology) and state (philosophy), not to protect philosophy from theology, but to protect theology from philosophy. But if Jesus' incarnation and resurrection are indeed historical events, then this radicalizes the very meta-philosophy Heidegger seeks to practice. To take just one example, the horizon of Dasein is delimited by time and death, but if humans live forever, this radicalizes Heidegger's explication of Dasein. If theology (faithfully practiced) has radical implications for phenomenology, then phenomenology (rigorously practiced) prepares the way for a more radical theology. To put it poetically, phenomenology may lead to the proper and very threshold of God (a threshold that metaphysics fails to uncover); but it nevertheless must wait outside as faith crosses the threshold (carried by its Beloved).

Thus Marion, wearing his philosopher's hat in *Being Given*, can't phenomenologically think beyond givenness to the giver himself without violating the rigor of phenomenological thought. He has to put on his theologian's hat and write *God Without Being* before he's able to properly think God. And it is as a theologian that Marion asserts, "God can give himself to be thought without idolatry only starting from himself alone" (GWB 49). It is ultimately faith's indifference to philosophy that allows it to even begin to properly approach a God worthy of himself. Tozer writes, "To admit

that there is One who lies beyond us, who exists outside of all our categories, who will not be dismissed with a name, who will not appear before the bar of our reason, nor submit to our curious inquiries; this requires a great deal of humility, more than most of us possess, so we save face by thinking God down to our level, or at least down to where we can manage Him. Yet how He eludes us! For He is everywhere while nowhere, for 'where' has to do with matter and space, and God is independent of both. He is unaffected by time or motion, is wholly self-dependent, and owes nothing to the worlds His hands have made" (26-27).

This essay attempts to think God beyond Being (although, importantly, not to encounter him 'there'), beginning from God. In order to do this, I must necessarily begin with Biblical revelation and my faith therein.

God Beyond Being

A brief (and unavoidably 'awkward and inelegant' [Heidegger 86]) explanation of my understanding of 'Being' is in order. By 'Being,' I mean a kind of universal being-in-the-world beyond the horizon of Dasein (human-being-ness). It includes everything encountered by Dasein in Dasein (from rocks to plants to cows to other humans, including the incarnate Jesus). 'Being' also includes every 'thing' encountered by God in the universe prior to humans being in the universe. 'Being' does not include the 'no-things' not encountered by God (until such time as he calls them into being). 'Being' includes God in the universe when he chooses to be in the universe, and it does not include God when he chooses not to be in the universe.

Here I will use "God *beyond* Being" rather than Marion's more cryptic "God *without* Being" because I want to focus on God's relationship to Being rather than prove his independence from Being. Of course, Marion is not saying anything as simple as 'God doesn't exist.' "God is, exists, and that is the least of things" (GWB xix). Marion is simply approaching God's Being apophatically, 'unsaying' what has been kataphatically said about it. In doing this, Marion echoes Dionysius who echoes scripture itself. Paul writes that God "gives life to the dead and calls things that are not as though they were" (Romans 4:17). The same way that theology is indifferent to philosophy, God himself is indifferent to Being. "In the beginning… God said, 'Let there be light,' and

there was light" (Genesis 1:1, 3). When God "calls things that are not as though they were," it's more than a case of his merely considering them differently and giving voice to his alternative consideration. The call of God actually brings 'no-things' into things. Any God who can *ex nihilo* translate non-beings into beings is privy to the 'world' of non-Being.

The gospel of John describes the creation event even more rigorously: "Through [the Word/Jesus] all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made" (1:3). The author of Hebrews further explains, "By faith we understand that the universe was formed at God's command, so that what is seen was not made out of what was visible" (11:3). These passages describe a God who precedes Being, from whom Being itself proceeds. As Dionysius observes (apophatically calling God 'it'), "It is and it is as no other being is. Cause of all existence, and therefore itself transcending existence, it alone could give an authoritative account of what it really is" (50). And elsewhere, "He has every shape and structure, and yet is formless and beautyless, for in his incomprehensible priority and transcendence he contains the sources, mean terms, and ends of all things and undefiledly enlightens Being for them in one undifferentiated cause." (101).

Addressing the temporality of Being and God's independence of it, John writes, "'I am the Alpha and the Omega,' says the Lord God, 'who is, and who was, and who is to come, the almighty'" (Revelation 1:8). Dionysius further explicates God's relation to time: "He is the reality beneath time and the eternity behind being. He is the time within which things happen. He is being for whatever is. He is coming-to-be amid whatever happens. From him who is come eternity, essence, and being, come time, genesis, and becoming. He is the being immanent in and underlying the things which are, however they are. For God is not some kind of being. No. But in a way that is simple and indefinable he gathers into himself and anticipates every existence" (98).

A.W. Tozer (unable himself to think God without Being, nevertheless) illustrates the distinction between God and created beings thusly: "The caterpillar and the archangel, though far removed from each other in the scale of created things, are nevertheless one in that they are alike created. They both belong in the category of that-which-is-not-God and are separated from God by infinitude itself" (70). Penultimately,

and tellingly, Heidegger writes, “If I were yet to write a theology -- to which I sometimes feel inclined -- then the word *Being* would not occur in it. Faith does not need the thought of Being” (GWB 61). Elsewhere he elaborates, “Being can never be thought as the ground and essence of God, but that nevertheless the experience of God and of his manifestedness, to the extent that the latter can indeed meet man, flashes in the dimensions of Being, which in no way signifies that Being might be regarded as a possible predication for God.” (GWB 60-61). Here Heidegger recognizes that God is free from the ground of Being, and yet (potentially) “flashes in the dimension of Being.”

These observations give rise to a fundamental question: In what sense (if any) does a relationship with God allow humans to expand the horizon of Dasein? In “The Origin of the Work of Art,” Heidegger suggests that art allows the artist to transcend her own Dasein and thus potentially transform it. Might a relationship with God afford the worshipper similar possibilities?

Against the Idea that Being Is God’s Primary Attribute

Not content merely to show that God is beyond Being, Marion wants to further show that Being is not even God’s primary attribute. The first question that arises is, ‘Why would anyone assume that Being is God’s primary attribute?’ Or, according to Marion’s more precise formulation, “Does [God's] relation to Being determine him as radically as the relation to his Being defines all other beings” (GWB xx)? Marion’s question implicitly answers mine. If we begin thinking God from within Dasein (ourselves grounded in Being), it is easy to conclude that Being is also God’s foundational attribute. The first gift we are given from God is Dasein, so we think God must intrinsically be [note the inescapable ‘be’] related and indebted to Being. As Dionysius observes, “God as originator of everything through the first of all his gifts is praised as 'He who is'” (99). But just because Dasein is God’s first gift to us and thus the first gift for which we praise him, that doesn’t necessarily make his own Being his primary attribute. My father may make me a beautiful, warm, colorful quilt and give it to me at birth, but that doesn’t necessarily make him a full-time quilter.

Although Augustine doesn’t make the mistake of grounding God in Being, Marion accuses him of (subtly) making Being God’s primary attribute. Augustine offers

Exodus 3:14 as an argument for the primacy of God's Being. At the burning bush, Moses asks God his name so that Moses will be able tell the Hebrew slaves in Egypt the name of the God who authorized him to emancipate them. God replies, "אהיה" אשר אהיה (*ehyeh asher ehyeh*) (Exodus 3:14). Étienne Gilson describes this phrase as "the only formula that says absolutely nothing and that says absolutely everything" (GWB 73). When translated "I am that I am," it seems like God is giving his proper name as 'I Am.' This has been taken to indicate that God's primary attribute is his 'is-ness,' his Being. Tozer subscribes to this translation, but interprets it instead as a "positive assertion of selfhood" and an "unqualified declaration of independent being" (29). Martin Buber translates Hebrews 3:14 as, "I shall be there." In other words, God tells Moses and the Hebrew slaves, "You do not need to conjure Me, but you cannot conjure Me either" (Westphal 26). Both of these interpretations (properly considering the context of Moses' question) suggest that God is not so much defining himself as he is choosing not to define himself. Marion translates Exodus 3:14 as, "I am the one that I want to be" (45). Again, the implication is that God is pre-existent, self-causing, and doesn't feel obliged to give a philosophical account of himself to one of his created beings. According to these readings, Exodus 3:14 seems an ironic proof text for the primacy of the attribute of God's Being.

Goodness Gives Being

The second question that arises is, 'If Being isn't God's primary attribute, what is his primary attribute?' This is actually the wrong question to ask, because it seeks to plumb the unrevealed depths of God. According to Tozer, "In the awful abyss of the divine Being [and I would add, 'non-Being'] may lie attributes of which we know nothing and which can have no meaning for us... There may be, and I believe surely are, other aspects of God's essential being which He has not revealed even to His ransomed and Spirit-illuminated children. These hidden facets of God's nature concern His relation to none but Himself... There is no reason for us to try to discover what has not been revealed" (46).

The more pertinent question for us, as created beings, is, 'What is the attribute behind God's gift of Being?' The answer (according to Dionysius, Eckhart, and Marion)

is 'goodness.' Not goodness in a moral sense (a la "Beyond *Good* and Evil"), but goodness in the sense of benevolence or providence – the goodness of someone who is so overflowing with love that he is compelled to give gifts (like Scrooge on Christmas morning after his nocturnal visitations). Tozer tenderly describes God's goodness as "that which disposes Him to be kind, cordial, benevolent, and full of good will toward men. He is tenderhearted and of quick sympathy, and His unfailing attitude toward all moral beings is open, frank, and friendly. By His nature He is inclined to bestow blessedness and He takes holy pleasure in the happiness of His people" (82). Such benevolence is by definition self-initiated and unmerited. "The cause of His goodness is in Himself; the recipients of His goodness are all His beneficiaries without merit and without recompense" (Tozer 83). Eckhart notes, "It is peculiar to [God's] Goodness that It must surge forth wherever It may be. In this way our whole life and being consists in God giving himself wholly to us and making himself known to us" (MES 35). Here even the Scrooge analogy falls short, because Scrooge's heart was the heart of a created being thankfully returning a gift (of revelation) which had been given him. Whereas God's goodness isn't returning anything. It is the originary gift that initiates every other good return.

Dionysius in particular recognized and signaled God's goodness (and its counterpart, 'beauty') as the origin of Being. The first kataphatic name he examines in *The Divine Names* is 'good.' He calls it "the most important name… which shows forth all the procession of God" (69). He argues that every other divine name is simply a particular variation of 'good': "The first name tells of the universal Providence of the one God, while the other names reveal general or specific ways in which he acts providentially" (97). Dionysius is even "so bold as to claim that nonbeing also shares in the Beautiful and the Good, because nonbeing, when applied transcendently to God in the sense of a denial of all things, is itself beautiful and good" (77).

Metaphysical philosophy misses God's goodness precisely when it concerns itself with the ontological project of knowing the object, without recognizing the inter-personal, divine relationship that the 'object' invites. "From the point of view of the understanding apprehending an object, the *ens* [entity] becomes first. From the point of

view of the Requisite that gives itself without limit, goodness remains first" (Marion GWB 81).

The revelation of our journey from God (beyond Being) to humans (within Dasein) is that: a. All Being proceeds from God's goodness; b. Being is shot through with God's goodness ("This essential Good, by the very fact of its existence, extends goodness into all things" [Dionysius 71]); and c. Being is perpetually sustained by God's goodness ("Out of its goodness it keeps [all things] going" [Dionysius 51]). As Paul writes of Jesus, "By [the Son] all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things were created by him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together" (Colossians 1:16-17).

From Humans to God: The Return Trip

[God] is, as it were, beguiled by goodness, by love, and by yearning and is enticed away from his transcendent dwelling place and comes to abide within all things, and he does so by virtue of his supernatural and ecstatic capacity to remain, nevertheless, within himself. (Dionysius 82)

The name of Jesus reminds us that God did more than create human beings; he became one. Such is the mind-blowing claim of the Christian incarnation, and it holds the key to the way in which humans return to God. We don't transcend Being; such is not our lot. Instead, we meet God in Dasein in the person of Jesus, who himself became Dasein. The incarnation riddles Dasein in both senses -- it shoots Dasein through and through with the hyper-saturated goodness of God, and in so doing, it baffles Dasein. The incarnation turns Dasein inside out. Dasein is no longer situated in Being between God on one side and rocks on the other. Jesus didn't merely come into universal Being as a vague spiritual cloud; he put on our human-being-ness and became particularly, historically human. The mystery of the trinity unites Jesus with the Father and the Holy Spirit. The mystery of the incarnation unites Jesus with Dasein. By entering into Dasein, God (ungrounded in Being, the giver of Dasein) ruptures Dasein's horizon and opens it up to a more universal horizon of Being. The incarnation makes evident the primary

function of Dasein: Dasein is given not in and of itself, but as a prerequisite to our relationship with God. It is the condition wherein we are invited to encounter God.

Assuming 'I Am' is indeed the literal proper name of Moses' God (a name which orthodox Jews dare not utter with vowels included, lest they speak God's proper name and be destroyed by the gaze of his full attention), God gives a much more particular proper name in 'Jesus of Nazareth.' According to Matthew, God speaks to Joseph in a dream and says, "[Mary] will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins" (1:21). (Jesus is Greek for Joshua, which means, "The Lord saves.") Suddenly we are given God not in a burning bush speaking of his own self-existence, but as a human whose name means 'savior.' According to Eugene Peterson, "God reveals himself most completely in a named person: Jesus" (53).

John writes of Jesus, "The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us… No one has ever seen God, but God the One and Only, who is at the Father's side, has made him known" (John 1:14, 18). Peterson paraphrases this passage in order to highlight its immediacy and fabulous import: "The Word became flesh and blood, and moved into the neighborhood… No one has ever seen God, not so much as a glimpse. This one-of-a-kind God-expression, who exists at the very heart of the Father, has made him plain as day" (*The Message*). Later in this same gospel, John records the following exchange between Jesus and his disciples: "'If you really knew me, you would know my Father as well. From now on, you do know him and have seen him.' Philip said, 'Lord, show us the Father and that will be enough for us.' Jesus answered: 'Don't you know me, Philip, even after I have been among you such a long time? Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, "Show us the Father"?'" (14:7-9). Elsewhere Paul calls Jesus "the image [*eikon*] of the invisible God" (Colossians 1:15, cf: 2 Corinthians 4:4). And the author of Hebrews calls Jesus "the exact representation of [God's] being" (1:3). Without attempting to meticulously exegete each of these passages, scripture seems to claim that Jesus is (at the very least) a functionally adequate representation of God for humans. The good news is, we don't have to transcend Dasein to encounter him. Indeed, Dionysius says, "He came into our human nature, he who totally transcends the natural order of the world" (52). According to Henri Nouwen (in a wonderful phrase

which highlights the radical paradox of the incarnation), we see in Jesus "the lovely human face of God" (51).

Why did Jesus come into Dasein? The goodness behind God's gift of Being gives us a clue. According to Marion, "God loves before being. He only is as he embodies himself -- in order to love more closely that which and those who, themselves, have first to be" (xx).

Creation as the Time and Place to Believe

Jesus didn't come simply to bridge the gap between Dasein and the transcendent God. He actually brings the transcendent God with him and infuses Dasein with the divine. According to the Seventh Oecumenical Council (of 784 CE), "The indefinable word of the Father made Himself definable, having taken flesh... and having refashioned the soiled image to its former estate, has suffused it with Divine beauty" (Ouspensky 31). In opposition to a gnosticism that attempts to transcend the stuff of Being, Eugene Peterson argues that, "Jesus is our access to creation as the time and place to believe. Jesus immerses us in everything material, from the water pots at the Cana wedding to Lazarus's stinking corpse at Bethany. Things, stuff, bodies are holy" (108). Jesus super-charges Dasein with God's glory. He invites us to re-consider things not ontologically, *qua* themselves, but in terms of how they relate us to the goodness of God. According to Peterson, "[John] presents Jesus' signs not to prove or parade Jesus as superior to or exempt from the creation, but to give us a look *into* the creation instead of just *at* it, to show us how Jesus who created all these things and holds them all together still (Col. 1:15-20) continues to work in the same stuff of creation" (92).

Jesus doesn't just honor and sanctify material objects, he honors and sanctifies the limitations of time and space inherent to universal Being. "Never, impatient with the limitations of time, did Jesus slip through some time-warp and bypass the waiting. Never, chafing under the limitations of place, did Jesus replace the local with some generalized and ethereal spiritual 'presence.' Anything and everything in creation was an occasion for the glory, the entire creation manifesting the bright presence of God, even in, *especially* in, the most unlikely times and places; the line between supernatural and natural constantly was blurred. Very God in the utterly ordinary" (Peterson 107).

Consequently, we are given a precedence for how to take the return trip back to God. To remix C.S. Lewis' phraseology, we ascend "higher up" by going "deeper in." Peterson suggests, "If we are going to live… to the glory of God, we cannot do it abstractly or in general. We have to do it under the particularizing conditions in which God works, namely, time and place, here and now" (84).

Humans Can't Transcend Being

The incarnation expands the horizon of Dasein, yet Christians and pagans alike still find themselves within the horizon of Being. One reason gnosticism and metaphysical philosophy are dead-ends is that humans simply can't transcend Being. In this I find myself agreeing with Heidegger: "The experience of God and of his manifestedness… flashes in the dimensions of Being" (GWB 60-61); except I would replace 'flashes' with 'plays.' We wait in Being for God to reveal himself to us in Being. My faith in a historical Genesis cosmology and my understanding of Pauline eschatology lead me to this conclusion.

When God created the world and humans along with it, he never intended humans to die. Death is the result of human sin (Genesis 3:18, 22-23). In other words, God never meant for there to be any 'heaven' other than Eden. Eden was God's original, ideal, eternal locus for his interaction with humans. Genesis 3:8-9 records this heartbreaking account: "Then the man and his wife heard the sound of the LORD God as *he was walking* in the garden in the cool of the day, and they hid from the LORD God among the trees of the garden. But the LORD God called to the man, 'Where are you?'" [italics mine]. God enters into Being in order to enjoy an evening walk with Adam and Eve. He calls out to them as if he is accustomed to their fellowship, as if such walks were part of their shared, daily life. Here in this (literally) Edenic, paradisal, pre-fallen setting, God customarily enters into created Being and walks among created human beings. They don't ascend to him. They don't transcend Being into the realm of non-Being which he alone inhabits (the impossibility of speaking 'non-being' as 'inhabitable' notwithstanding). Adam and Eve wait in Being as created human beings for God to enter into Being and call their names.

I Corinthians 15:35-57 admittedly describes a heaven that is qualitatively different than Eden: “The first man [Adam] was of the dust of the earth, the second man [Jesus] from heaven… And just as we have borne the likeness of the earthly man, so shall we bear the likeness of the man from heaven” (I Cor. 15:47, 49). Yet earlier in this same passage, Paul says natural bodies differ from spiritual bodies as seeds of wheat differ from stalks of wheat (I Cor. 15:36-44) -- an admittedly radical difference, but not the kind of difference that separates Being from non-Being. Entire books have been dedicated to delineating what I Corinthians 15 might mean (Caroline Walker Bynum’s *The Resurrection of the Body*, for instance), and I won’t attempt to definitively parse it here. My hunch is that our resurrected spiritual bodies will be qualitatively different, but not so different that they transcend Being.

I am not arguing against the existence of a spirit realm (such would be Biblically unorthodox). On the contrary, I believe in a spirit realm that, although invisible, is as natural a part of Dasein as matter/energy. Spirit is invisible, but immanent rather than transcendent. Indeed, Thomas Merton defends contemplative prayer by saying, “If we pray 'in the Spirit' we are certainly not running away from life, negating visible reality in order to 'see God.' For ' the spirit of the Lord has filled the whole earth'” (112, cf: Numbers 14:21, Isaiah 6:3).

What of Paul’s famous statement, “When perfection comes, the imperfect disappears… Now we see but a poor reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known” (I Cor. 13:10, 12)? I’m guessing the “imperfection” Paul is addressing has more to do with the fallenness of our post-fall Dasein than with our universal Beingness. Indeed, God’s gift of Being is a good gift emanating from his abundant goodness. It hardly seems like an “imperfection.” Later in his second epistle to the Corinthians, Paul writes, “And we, who with unveiled faces all reflect the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit” (2 Cor. 3:18). Paul seems to describe a gradual transformation that has already begun with the indwelling of the Holy Spirit in the believer this side of heaven, one which will be brought to completion in heaven. Indeed, Jesus refers to an aspect of the “kingdom of God/heaven” which has begun now (cf: Matthew 11:13, Luke 11:20, 17:20-21). Paul

shows a similar eschatological understanding of this immanent aspect of God's kingdom (Romans 14:7, I Cor. 4:19-21). If "being transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory" describes a gradual overcoming of our fallenness, well and good. But if it describes a gradual overcoming of our Beingness, how exactly does that work this side of heaven? Do our spirits flash in and out of Being depending on our current state of holiness? Are our spirits 30% non-being on one day, and then 40% non-being the next day, until we finally escape Being altogether? I doubt this is the kind of ever-increasing glory that Paul is describing.

What about the ecstatic, seemingly transcendent experiences described in Ezekiel 1, Isaiah 6, II Corinthians 12:1-5, and Revelation. I'm guessing these are experiences of extremely saturated phenomena (to use Marion's terminology), where beings with physical bodies are exposed to extremely intense spiritual revelations, and are thus overwhelmed and confounded. These revelations don't take place beyond Being; they simply overwhelm human beings within Dasein. Paul is unable to distinguish whether his vision of paradise happened in or out of his body. He heard "inexpressible things. Things that man is not permitted to tell" (II Cor. 12:4). Ezekiel describes: "Upon the likeness of the throne was the likeness as the appearance of a man above upon it." (*King James Version*, 1:26). He definitely saw something, and vividly. But the closest he can come to a description of it is twice removed from what he actually saw: "the *likeness* of the *appearance* of a man" (cf: Tozer 7). In all of these instances, humans haltingly describe something that overwhelmed their senses, but was still somehow experienced via their senses. These experiences seem to have filled up and exceeded the capacity of their senses, but I don't think these humans transcended Being (although undoubtedly the horizon of their human-being-ness was expanded).

The implications that God encounters us within the horizon of Being *even in heaven* are radical:

1. Earthly existence becomes connected with heavenly existence. We will be utterly changed, but we will continue on within Being. My earthly birth date will still be my heavenly birth date, throughout eternity.

2. Being is sanctified. Being is not the source of my woes. It's not something I'm meant to overcome or transcend. It's the place in which God intends me to dwell. It

perpetually declares God's goodness and beauty. I may be *stuck* in Being (along with every 'thing' else except for God), but (according to Gerard Manley Hopkins) Christ nevertheless plays in ten thousand places right here in Being. Why would I want to *be* anywhere else? Glossing Heidegger's Christian-inspired response to Platonism, Merold Westphal writes, "Embodiment, and thus embeddedness, is good because it is part of God's creation. It is a sign of our finitude, but it is not evil; and every attempt to flee that finitude is a self-defeating, Luciferian hybris" (55).

3. I am humbled. There are some aspects of God that I will simply never share or comprehend, even in heaven. Moses writes, "The secret things belong to the LORD our God" (Deut. 29:29) and David concurs, "My heart is not proud, O LORD,/ my eyes are not haughty; / I do not concern myself with great matters / or things too wonderful for me." (Psalm 131:1-2). These passages suggest the development of a hermeneutics of humility. Part of the Eastern Orthodox Kantakion states, "God became man in order that we should become God" (Ouspensky 31). I disagree. Jesus' incarnation leads me back to the heart of God, and his life in me transforms me into the likeness of God, but I will never become God.

4. I am meant to encounter God, not removed in some idealized, metaphysical, (and ultimately) fictitious realm, but here in Dasein (matter/energy, spirit, and all). John encountered God leaning into Jesus' breast at the last supper (John 21:20). Adam and Eve encountered God walking in the garden in the cool of the day. Meister Eckhart says, "God *becomes* as phenomena express him" (ME 225). Eckhart describes Paul's pursuit of God as a pursuit beyond ideological idolatry (the orthodox Judaism of his day) and into the phenomenological revelation of God himself (struck blind on the road to Damascus): "St. Paul took leave of god for God's sake and gave up all that he might get from god, as well as all he might give -- together with every idea of god. In parting with these, he parted with god for God's sake and yet God remained to him as God is in his own nature -- not as he is conceived by anyone to be -- nor yet as something yet to be achieved -- but more as an 'is-ness,' as God really is" (ME 204). In dialogue with Plato's cave analogy, Merold Westphal muses, "What if revelation occurs, not when we are lifted out of the cave, but precisely when God kenotically enters our world and speaks to us under the conditions of our encavement" (174)?

Some Tactics of Return

My challenge, then, is to actually encounter God here in Being, to develop 'tactics of return.' Simply comprehending how all this works is not the same as encountering him. The pagan who encounters the immanent goodness of God in creation and misattributes its source is still better off than the Christian who ideologically attributes the goodness of creation to Jesus, yet never phenomenologically encounters such goodness.

1. Abandon the Telescope and Break Out the Flare Gun. This tactic is based on the humble realization that we don't find God but are found by him. We prepare a place for him in our hearts and wait patiently and obediently for him to visit. True, Jesus says, "The kingdom of heaven has been forcefully advancing, and forceful men lay hold of it" (Matthew 11:12), but there is a kind of forceful insistence that only obedient yieldedness can affect. True, God says, "You will seek me and find me," but the caveat is, "when you seek me with all your heart." (Jeremiah 29:13). This is not an onto-theological, metaphysical safari where God as object is captured, pinned down, and categorized. It is more like a fervent longing of the heart that waits patiently to be found by God. I want to conform to God's idea of what I should be like rather than force him to conform to my idea of what he should be like. Eckhart describes the impossibility of the aims of the metaphysical project in light of this kind of humble conformity: "The principal requirement is that one shall get beyond phenomenal nature and in this process he begins soon to be weary. Then he lags behind with his little wisdom, a little man... But when my nature is conformed to God's Being, so that I am wisdom itself, then only am I a wise man" (ME 216).

This is what I mean by, 'Break out the flare gun.' In obedience, faith, and humility, I send up a signal that alerts God to my earnest desire to be found by him. And then I wait patiently to be found. According to Merton, "We know [God] in so far as we become aware of ourselves as known through and through by him. We *possess* him in proportion as we realize ourselves to be possessed by him in the inmost depths of our being" (83). We see ourselves being seen by what Marion characterizes as the iconic gaze, the gaze of God. According to Bruce Ellis Benson, "Levinas reminds us that to bear witness to the Infinite is to be "reduced to the 'here I am.'" I no longer claim an

identity for myself; instead an identity is bestowed upon me" (240). We cannot call ourselves out. But we can turn our hearts toward God and wait humbly for him to give our calling.

2. Recognize Everyday Dasein as Sacred. If I'm going to encounter God in Dasein, then I better embrace everyday Dasein and not try to bypass it on the way to some transcendental mountaintop experience. Merton so passionately and eloquently rails against this temptation that I'm compelled to quote him at length: "A cleavage has appeared, dividing the 'inner life' from the rest of one's existence. In this case, the supposed 'inner life' may actually be nothing but a brave and absurd attempt to evade reality altogether. Under the pretext that what is 'within' is in fact real, spiritual, supernatural, etc., one cultivates neglect and contempt for the 'external' as worldly, sensual, material and opposed to grace. This is bad theology and bad asceticism. In fact it is bad in every respect, because instead of accepting reality as it is, we reject it in order to explore some perfect realm of abstract ideals which in fact has no reality at all. Very often the inertia and repugnance which characterize the so-called 'spiritual life' of many Christians could perhaps be cured by a simple respect for the concrete realities of every-day life, for nature, for the body, for one's work, one's friends, one's surroundings, etc. A false supernaturalism which imagines that 'the supernatural' is a kind of Platonic realm of abstract essences totally apart from and opposed to the concrete world of nature, offers no real support to a genuine life of meditation and prayer. Meditation has no point and no reality unless it is firmly rooted in *life*." (38-39).

Eugene Peterson characterizes the Platonic trap as explicitly gnostic: "Against the life of the ordinary, an embrace of family and work, cooking and sewing, helping the poor and healing the sick -- all the foolish, weak, low, and despised 'in the world' honored by St. Paul (1 Cor. 1:27-28) -- the gnostic claims a special status among the elite that exempts him or her from the sacred ordinary" (62). Finally, Meister Eckhart warns, "If you imagine that you are going to get more out of God by means of religious offices and devotions, in sweet retreats and solitary orisons, than you might by the fireplace or in the stable, then you might just as well think you could seize God and wrap a mantle around his head and stick him under the table!" (ME 127) If I am too 'spiritual' to honor my wife and rear my children with love and attention, then I am hardly spiritual at all.

3. Return the Gift. On our initial journey from God to humans, we observed that God's goodness gives, permeates, and sustains Dasein. Returning the gift is a way of recognizing God's goodness, and thankfully loving him in response to his gift of Dasein. In his sermon on Mars Hill, Paul taught that God "gives all men life and breath and everything else… so that men would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from each one of us" (Acts 17:25-27). Marion interprets this passage to mean that God's gift of universal Being is not a thing in and of itself, but rather a means by which we might enter into a relationship with him. Gifts are a vehicle through which we can return love. If we recognize them as such, we understand creation properly, and our response is to return praise to God, to thank him, to celebrate his gifts, and in so doing to establish a personal loving relationship with him.

God doesn't require us to return these gifts (Acts 17:25 begins with the reminder that, "He is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything"). These gifts are more like invitations to enter into a relationship with God. Marion reads Jesus' parable of the prodigal son (Luke 15:11-32) as a study in how such gift response works. In demanding his inheritance, the younger son fails to recognize this inheritance as a vehicle for ongoing fellowship with his father. Instead, he only sees the thing itself (*ousia*). He wants the 'thing' that is coming to him, apart from any obligation to return the gift. The older brother makes the same mistake, complaining about how things aren't fair when the younger son returns. He too mistakes his inheritance as a mere thing. The father's response to the older son reveals a proper perspective on things themselves: "My son… you are always with me, and everything I have is yours" (Luke 15:31) (cf: Marion GWB 99-101).

Things are not mere objects to be possessed in and of themselves. They serve as a kind of relational nexus. They are gifts from God that, properly recognized as such, invite a response which supercedes the mere material value of the things themselves. "In the apprehension of goodness... the reversal of denomination into praise becomes inevitable" (Marion GWB 76). The proper response is not one of merely saying or asserting, but one of doing (playing and enjoying). Marion even understands linguistic praise as a form of 'doing' in response to the gift. (One assumes he even considers his own theological writings as a form of 'praise.') Eckhart recognizes this ability of love to

connect us to God in ways that knowing cannot: "We can love God in a direct way in this life, but we can have no direct knowledge of him whilst we are on this earth" (MES 57). Westphal too echoes Marion's emphasis on praise over assertion: "We have a higher goal than making accurate assertions about God... Praise is the language in which love welcomes the decentering presence of the Divine Other" (270).

Returning the gift can take any number of forms. For instance, Dionysius wishes "to sing a hymn of praise for the being-making procession of the absolute divine Source of being into the total domain of being" (96). Compare his response to Heidegger's critique of the *causa sui* of philosophy: "Man can neither pray nor sacrifice to this God. Before the *causa sui*, man can neither fall to his knees in awe nor can he play music and dance before this god" (GWB 35). One distinction, then, between the god of metaphysics and the God of scripture is the worship that the latter invites. Worship is the hallmark that something relational is going on beyond mere ontological saying. It is one thing to assert, 'God is beautiful.' It is an entirely different think to tell God, 'You are beautiful.' In both sentence constructions, the verb ('is/are') still links the subject to the predicate; but when the subject of the sentence changes from third person ('God' -- an object to the speaker) to second person ('You' – a friend of the speaker), the nature of the linking verb radically changes. The speaker is no longer a theologian/philosopher/scientist making an assertion about the nature of an object in the world. The speaker is now an active participant in a real-time dialogue with another living person in the world. The act of saying becomes an event of praise.

In addition to worship and praise, basic enjoyment is a proper response to the gift. Paul writes that God "richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment" (1 Tim. 6:17). Fittingly, the first answer of the Westminster Catechism of the Presbyterian Church states: "Man's chief and highest end is to glorify God, and fully to enjoy him forever." On the relationship of thanksgiving to enjoyment, Eckhart observes, "Thanksgiving is nothing else but, as it were, a well-wishing for and a pleasure in all Goodness" (MES 35).

Praising, thanking, playing, loving, making, enjoying, celebrating are all intertwined in the return of the gift. "To return the gift, to play redundantly the unthinkable donation, this is not said, but done. Love is not spoken, in the end, it is

made. Only then can discourse be reborn, but as enjoyment, a jubilation, a praise" (Marion GWB 107).

If God's goodness gives universal Being, then every 'thing' in the world has at its core the same universal function – to invite every 'being' in the world to return thanks to God. This suggests a way in which the horizon of each person's individual Dasein may be expanded to a more universal horizon of Being. A cow may mean 'milk' in my particular world, 'beef' in your particular world, and 'lawnmower' in someone else's particular world; but in everyone's world, a cow always at least means 'God is good. Praise him.'

From Humans to God Via Art

[Art is] a calculated trap for meditation. (Denis de Rougement [Merton 84])

Having made the return trip from Humans to God, I will attempt the same trip, this time explicitly using my own art practice as a vehicle of return. In this return trip I will hypothesize a devotional practice of aporia. Denis de Rougement calls art "a calculated trap for meditation." I hope to set such a trap, not via Catholic means of mimesis or Eastern Orthodox means of symbol, but by a practice of phenomenological immersion, using matter as a devotional vehicle.

The Ladder of Being

Dionysius proposes what I've come to understand as a ladder of Being. "The intelligent and rational long for [God] by way of knowledge, the lower strata by way of perception, the remainder by way of the stirrings of being alive and in whatever fashion befits their condition" (54). He says that "Being in itself" is more revered than either Life or Wisdom, since they both proceed from Being (99). Eckhart alludes to this ladder, and also honors "Being in itself" as higher: "If we reach down into Being pure and simple, as it really is, we should find that Being ranks higher than life or knowledge" (ME 171). Similarly, "The more precious anything is, the more general it is. Senses I have in common with the animals, life in common with the trees, but Being, still more innate, I have in common with every creature" (ME 184). And elsewhere, "Every creature is on

its way to the highest perfection. In all, there is a movement from life toward Being" (ME 225).

Based on these passages, my own conceptual ladder (or pyramid) of Being looks something like this: First, out of his goodness, God gives Being. Within Being, at the bottom of its ladder is everything (from rocks on up). Higher up is 'Being in itself + life' (from plants on up). Higher yet is 'being in itself + life + senses' (from animals on up). Highest of all is 'being in itself + life + senses + the image of God' (humans). Humans understand their human-being-ness holistically, and not as a composite of discrete components. Nevertheless, this schema of progressive Being suggests a useful approach to making apophatic art.

Traditions of Catholic contemplative prayer (St. John of the Cross' *Ascent to Mt. Carmel* and *Dark Night of the Soul*, the anonymously authored *Cloud of Unknowing*, Thomas Merton's *Contemplative Prayer*) seem to pursue an Eckhartian descent into Being-In-Itself as a way of connecting with the transcendent God. Since God gives Being-In-Itself first, and since his goodness is manifested throughout all Being, one way to return to God is to embrace one's own 'mere Being' and simply *be* in the presence of God. We never transcend the ladder of Being, but we may put ourselves in a contemplative posture wherein we are more likely to be found by God within Being.

By way of clarification, I don't think ascent up the ladder of Being inherently bad. On the contrary, I believe a humble soul can be encountered by God while playing all along the ladder. Psalm 150 exhorts musicians to praise God on every possible instrument (loud, soft, jarring, dulcet, and everything between). It is this thankful return of the gift that leads one to the heart of God, not the particular locus on the ladder of Being from whence it originates. Jesus plainly states that the most important commandment is, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength" (Mark 12:30). In other words, 'Return to God at all points up and down the ladder of Being.' Eckhart himself advises, "We should endeavor to find God in all things, be they natural or spiritual" (MES 59).

Likewise, there are particular pitfalls all along the ladder that can separate one from the heart of God. Thought can quickly become ideological idolatry whereby we put God in an intellectual box of our own construction. The senses can quickly lead to the

classic form of idolatry, the worship of creatures made with human hands rather than the creator who gives all things. Even descent into mere Being can lead to a kind of ego-centric, pantheistic head trip where we are more interested in our own spirituality than in being encountered by God. Humility, diligence, wisdom, and prayer are required at all rungs of the ladder. Thomas Merton offers a final warning in the spirit of St. John of the Cross: "The use of image and concept can become very dangerous in a climate of egocentricity and false mysticism" (87).

An Apophatic Art

I hypothesize an art practice that begins on the sensory rung of the ladder of Being (where all but the most disembodied conceptual art must begin). Rather than ascend mimetically or symbolically toward the top of the ladder (as most church art does), I want to descend phenomenologically toward the bottom of the ladder as a way of apophatic "unsaying," a way of balancing out all the kataphatic Christian art that has been made over the last two thousand years. Apophasis is negation and kataphasis is affirmation. Since God is beyond all we can affirm about him, in order to more accurately describe him, we must balance our affirmations with reverent negations. Bruce Ellis Benson explains, "One affirms something but denies it, because to affirm it too strongly would be heretical and to deny it completely would also be heretical" (153). One of the many example of this kind of language in scripture occurs in Ephesians 3:19, where Paul prays that the Ephesians would "have power… to know [the love of Christ] that surpasses all knowledge."

Dionysius, the godfather of apophatic/kataphatic thinking, describes its function as follows: "God is therefore known in all things and as distinct from all things. He is known through knowledge and through unknowing. Of him there is conception, reason, understanding, touch, perception, opinion, imagination, name, and many other things. On the other hand he cannot be understood, words cannot contain him, and no name can lay hold of him. He is not one of the things that are and he cannot be known in any of them. He is all things in all things and he is no thing among things. He is known to all from all things and he is known to no one from anything. This is the sort of language we must use about God" (108-109). Note that negation never takes primacy (for then it would turn

into a kind of affirmation), nor does it 'cancel out' the affirmative. Instead, negation and affirmation work hand as we try to reverently speak about God. "Negation and affirmation bear upon the same attributes, only envisaged from two points of view. Instead of neutralizing one another, they reinforce one another with a properly unthinkable tension" (Marion ID 148). This contiguous process of affirmation and negation has been called "negative theology" (after a phrase from Dionysius' *The Divine Names*), although Marion rightly points out that, "Dionysius uses nothing that might be translated as 'negative theology.' If he speaks of 'negative theologies,' in the plural, he does not separate them from the 'affirmative theologies' with which they maintain the relation described here" (ID 145). Protestant theologians, surprised by the novelty of negation, have improperly labeled this way of thinking 'apophatic,' when it is best understood as 'apophatic/kataphatic.' Dionysius further reminds us that God is necessarily beyond even this way of thinking: "The cause of all [God] is considerably prior to this, beyond privations, beyond every denial, beyond every assertion" (136). In other words even the kataphatic knowledge gained by the apophatic/kataphatic way of saying must itself be apophatically unsaid. A.W. Tozer even implies that the apophatic/kataphatic way of saying and knowing might be applied to everything, not just God: "Any real explanation of even the simplest phenomenon in nature lies hidden in obscurity and can no more be explained than can the mystery of the Godhead" (17).

In choosing to develop an apophatic art practice, I am by no means denying the appropriateness and efficacy of symbolic forms of kataphatic church art. I am simply recognizing their overabundance in contemporary visual religious art, and am making a move to complement them in order to more accurately, holistically approach God through art. When Orthodox iconographer Leonid Ouspensky writes, "[Symbolism] is essentially inseparable from Church art, because the spiritual reality it represents cannot be transmitted otherwise than through symbols" (27), he is understandably speaking from within a valid and well established historical tradition of icon painting; but I wholeheartedly disagree with his assertion. There are other artistic ways to "represent spiritual reality" besides symbolism, even within the Orthodox tradition. For example, the incense in an Orthodox service, in addition to symbolically representing the presence

of God, also has a sensory effect that moves the congregation down the ladder toward a more undifferentiated state of Being.

Ouspensky admits that iconography (and theology) are ultimately bound to fail, because they attempt to express things that transcend our finitude and fallenness. Yet in their failure, they succeed by demarcating the horizon of human finitude and suggesting where God may encounter us (48-49). If symbolic iconography and theology properly fail by reaching the upper limits of the ladder of Being and having to stop, I want to make art that properly fails by reaching the bottom limits of the ladder of Being and having to stop. Dionysius (at his most neo-Platonic) longingly muses, "For this would really be to see and to know: to praise the Transcendent One in a transcending way, namely through the denial of all being" (138). Such a vision of praise beyond Being seems less like a desirable goal and more like a distracting, perpetually unattainable mirage. My lot is simply to play in phenomenological givenness, to return God's gift of it, and to wait in it until I am found here by him.

Phenomenological Immersion

True 'mystical transcendence' is antithetical to immateriality. The apophatic way is actually rooted in phenomenological stuff. Thomas Merton warns, "The doctrine of mystical 'unknowing,' by which we ascend to the knowledge of God 'as unseen' without 'form or figure' beyond all images and indeed all concepts, must not be misunderstood as the mere turning away from the ideas of material things to ideas of the immaterial. The mystical knowledge of God... is not a knowledge of immaterial and invisible essences as distinct from the visible and material" (84).

With my art practice, I mean to enter into an overwhelming, confusing, confounding apophatic experience in which I encounter the goodness of the God who gives Being. I mean to explore phenomena in order to head down the ladder of Being into a more undifferentiated state of mere Being. I hope to do this by using sound and light to foreground the behavior of the synesthetic systems I'm 'playing' so that the focus is less on the compositional aesthetics and more on the event experience. And I mean to purposefully place my physical body in the midst of such aporia, to be changed and to change.

Matter As Devotional Vehicle

I want to incorporate my art practice into my contemplative life, to use matter as a devotional vehicle. I see matter as an ally – it wants to celebrate the goodness of God as much as I, and we each just need a little boost from the other. We can mutually benefit each other in our shared, ready-to-hand function of praise. (Brother Thing and Sister Gift, to remix St. Francis.)

My first ally is my body -- not in a Chris Burden way, but in a Pauline way: "In view of God's mercy,… offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God—this is your reasonable act of worship" (Romans 12:1-2). I want to put my body in the middle of these performances, creating a synesthetic aporia for me, as a way of apophatically celebrating the gift of mere Being and so returning it to God. The incarnate Jesus is my model. According to Peterson, "Everything Jesus does, he does with his hands deep in the soil and flesh of creation" (92).

In using matter to help me praise God, I also loose matter itself to praise God. "The creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God." (Romans 8:21). Jesus said, "If [my disciples] keep quiet, the stones will cry out" (Luke 19:40). Perhaps both disciples and stones can cry out together. Eckhart makes this strange statement: "[Every creature] reach[es] up to my understanding as if to get understanding through me. I alone prepare creatures to return to God" (ME 225). It is as if humans, in our ability to traverse down the ladder of Being into mere Being, somehow ennoble rocks; just as the transcendent God who became man and entered into Dasein ennobles humans. Merton supports such an idea: "Even the material[s] which enter into… works of art regain a certain dignity in their own right, since they are no longer rejected in favor of other 'immaterial' objects which are considered to be superior, as if they were capable of making us 'see' God more perfectly" (84).

In this final return from humans to God via art, I wind up immersed in phenomena, baffled and confused by the aporia of Being that my practice has released, joining with God's creature of light and his creature sound to return his gift of goodness. May God find me here.

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