Self, Alterity, Discourse, Praxis:
A Phenomenological Approach to the Concept of Religious Community in the Work of Ricœur, Levinas, and Marion

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Introduction: A Postmodern Assault? Establishing the Context

In his book *Dieu Sans L’Étre*,¹ French philosopher and theologian Jean-Luc Marion frees “God” from quotation marks. The traditional conceptual or ontological notion Marion refers to as “God” is the symbol of the Divine limited to the vocabulary of Being. He then distinguishes this “God” from G⊗d, his designation for the Divine understood apart from the constraints of Heidegger’s onto-theological system in which Being is conceived of in terms of contingent beings belonging to particular historical context. According to traditional metaphysical philosophy, God has been conceived of as “that which serves as the ground for being, as distinct from being but nonetheless trapped in a metaphysical schema which is ‘bigger’ than God, a schema which is all-encompassing, which employs God as part of dualistic formatting of experience.”²

In the present age of “postmodern” assaults, God is rendered obsolete against the backdrop of modern optimism and subsequent nihilism. Viewed through the lens of philosophical movements such as existentialism, structuralism, and post-structuralism—as they have evolved in twentieth-century France—God as a transcendent reality is considered impossible and universal truth is deemed an obsolete construct given the current trend of rejecting metanarratives. The question becomes: is it still possible to have a meaningful discourse about God, and if so, how and where is that discourse enacted? How does thought about God proceed in the wake of such an assault?³

³ This analysis of religious discourse and community will be limited to a consideration of God as understood in the Judeo-Christian tradition.
While *theology* is a matter of faith, Heideggerian *onto-theology* necessarily results in atheism because it endeavors to understand the Divine within *Dasein*⁴ and finds itself unable to do so. Theology is based on faith, and the object of faith must remain unrealized. “Being and God are not identical and I would never attempt to think of the essence of God by means of Being. [. . .] Faith does not need the thought of Being. When faith has recourse to this thought, it is no longer faith.”⁵ The distinction between God and Being inaugurated by Heidegger will be extended and developed by the philosophers under consideration here—Paul Ricoeur, Emmanuel Levinas, and Jean-Luc Marion. In the Judeo-Christian tradition, God has been referred to as the Highest Being, the First Cause, and the Causa Sui; however, in an attempt to respect that which transcends finite human reason the pendulum has swung too far. A completely self-reliant God is unrelated to us except for the fact that we know that God is the cause of God’s own Being. We have reduced God to conceptual proofs, claiming either existence or non-existence. God has been relegated to the status of just another object of finite human understanding.

Unaided by the vocabulary of onto-theology and stripped of a metaphysical foundation, what is it that allows us to continue a meaningful religious discourse? I aim to show that the concept of community, which emerges through a rigorous phenomenological approach, is one way discourse can proceed against a seemingly hostile contemporary philosophical climate that otherwise appears to render action

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⁴ Heidegger’s *Sein*, translated as Being, is not an essence that exists a-temporally but rather an event or process. If we could say that Being existed it would be relegated to the level of just another being, instead, Being is the mode of existence of beings and *Dasein* is the being through which Being comes to be known. Resisting attempts to objectivize or subjectivize it, Being functions as a verb and can move through language being reduced to it. [Martin Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit*, 17th ed (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer, 1993) / *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1962).]

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arbitrary. This notion of community will be based upon an extensive investigation of four key elements—self, alterity, discourse, and praxis—and will draw upon the work of the contemporary philosophers Paul Ricoeur, Emmanuel Levinas, and Jean-Luc Marion.

Traditional theological systems have relied heavily on metaphysics in constituting a view of the nature and attributes of God. This view, however, proves problematic, not least of all due to the limitations it places on God. “The advent of something like ‘God’ in philosophy therefore arises less from God himself than from metaphysics, as destinal figure of the thought of Being. ‘God’ is determined starting from and to the profit of that of which metaphysics is capable, that which it can admit and support.”

Understood by the Judeo-Christian tradition as Prime mover, Efficient Cause, or Necessary Being, the idea of God is trapped within metaphysical constraints and is contingent upon the truth of foundational metaphysical assumptions. Attempts to prove God’s existence are in and of themselves negations of God’s true character. “The aim is no longer to compel belief in God, a god whose existence must be proved is far from godly and any such attempts lead to blasphemy.” Herein lies the need for other approaches that aim to understand God in non-metaphysical categories, such as the one proposed by Jean-Luc Marion. In their search, philosophers and theologians alike have “generally exhibited tendencies

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5 Heidegger as quoted in Marion, God Without Being, 61.
6 Marion, God Without Being, 34.
7 Metaphysics is a term that is frequently overgeneralized—without detailing the historical development of the term I believe it would be helpful to establish a working definition for this paper. Metaphysics, briefly, is a duality of being which is posited based on the distinction between being in general and prime Being, the latter of which is then taken to refer to “God” or the Divine as Ultimate Being. For an interesting discussion of metaphysics and the indebtedness of traditional theology to metaphysical philosophy, as well as an overview of Marion’s place and approach, see Scott David Foutz, “Postmetaphysic Theology, A Case Study: Jean-Luc Marion” Quodlibet Journal: 1 (1999).
8 Foutz 3.
toward phenomenology and ethics as alternative paradigms,” both of which will factor into the subsequent analysis.

It is clear to anyone working on material from the second half of the twentieth century that the term postmodern is frequently misused. Having been subjected to academic carelessness and convenient appropriation, the word postmodern could potentially refer to a whole host of ideas that may or may not be specifically implicated in my work. From the outset I want state exactly why I have chosen to employ the term and what I understand it to mean. Albeit nuanced and complex, postmodern remains the best term to describe the philosophical backdrop for this study provided that a working definition is established. 10

The word postmodernity is often used to describe the *event* of the postmodern. Graham Ward distinguishes between postmodernism—a critical view of the philosophy of modernity—and postmodernity—the word used to describe a cultural phenomenon in developed nations during the seventies and eighties, a period concept. 11 The terms are often treated as interchangeable, but the difference becomes crucial when examining postmodern elements in contemporary society and thought even though the era known as

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9 Foutz 2.

10 This paper does not purport to be a comprehensive examination of postmodern thought or postmodernity, simply a framework against which the rest of my work will be carried out. I am aware of the danger of allowing postmodernism to become a new sort of ground for theology, albeit an post-metaphysical “ground”—allowing my work to proceed in this fashion would be hypocritical. If postmodernity has overtaken or nullified modernity then it becomes preferable, however, this teleological preferencing of the new over the old, the current over the passé, is misleading and should be recognized as such. An anti-foundation is still a foundation. Following Drucilla Cornell, I use the word as an allegory to represent the limit to the principles of modernity. Postmodern represents the recognized failure of modern views—not their actual failing but the representation of their failure, hence the allegory. [Drucilla Cornell, *The Philosophy of the Limit* (New York: Routledge, Chapman, and Hill, Inc., 1992). See introduction: “What is postmodernity anyway?”]

postmodernity may well be over. It is not my intention to set up a false dualism between modernism and postmodernism; this would be misleading:

The bogus dichotomies of the absolute versus the relative, the universal versus the particular, the necessary versus the contingent, and the ahistorical versus the historical need to be recognized for what they are—namely conceptual constructs of a theoretical position-taking that are no longer compelling, options bereft of practical consequences for an understanding of ourselves and our world.\textsuperscript{12}

Instead, I propose that recognizing the limits of traditional ways of thinking, specifically metaphysical and onto-theological, and understanding the current philosophical backdrop will aid in our exploration of alternative discourses being developed. In the contemporary climate God is dead, as is value, absolute truth, and any reading of reality that has been informed by religious faith. But suppose that Nietzsche, in proclaiming God’s death, really only “killed” the idols of metaphysics. One of the tenets of postmodernism under consideration here is the attempted overcoming of metaphysics, defined as the correlation of being and reasoning. Thus, the recognition of this idolatry creates a new space for thought about God outside the constraints of ontology. Marion states that to \begin{quote}
[r]each a nonidolatrous thought of God, which alone releases “God” from his quotation marks by disengaging his apprehension from the conditions posed by onto-theology, one would have to manage to think God outside of metaphysics insofar as metaphysics infallibly leads, by way of blasphemy (proof) to the twilight of the idols (conceptual atheism).\textsuperscript{13}
\end{quote}

This reading of Nietzsche’s infamous ‘God is dead’ allows an escape from nihilism—were he just to state that God does not exist, Nietzsche would be making an onto-theological claim, rather, by declaring God dead the foundation for metaphysics is eliminated. However, this does not automatically grant us a liberated existence. “In

\begin{small}
\textsuperscript{12} Calvin O.Schrag, \textit{The Self After Postmodernity} (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), p.108.  \\
\textsuperscript{13} Marion, \textit{God Without Being} 37.  
\end{small}
dismantling the concept of God as a metaphysical aberration Nietzsche prepared the way
for a similar fate befalling the concept of man.” 14 The death of God establishes a new
secular religion but one without transcendence. This new world supposedly without
constraints soon imposes its own limitations. Without the duality meant to preserve both
humanity and God, there is no more exterior, everything is reduced to human terms.

Marion responds optimistically to this void because he sees it as a realm of
potentiality for thought about “God without Being” to advance. He states: “[. . .] the
collapse entails, even more essentially than a ruin, the clearing of a new space, free for an
eventual apprehension, other than idolatrous, of God.” 15 There is no foundation or origin
that cannot be traced back to man-made structures of reality. Meaning and truth are no
longer grounded on any given system of being or metaphysical essence, but must be
rethought in terms of intersubjectivity and as a product of textual perspective. Heidegger
and Nietzsche bring us to the same point—if theology is to continue to be possible then
language needs to surpass the constraints of metaphysics. Through the work of
Emmanuel Levinas we will consider the possibility to once again come into relationship
with the Other, while both preserving both self and maintaining the absolute alterity of
the Other. God, the infinite, the hidden, can only be encountered through participation or
experience, never constituted conceptually. While I do find this “clearing” of traditional
metaphysics a convincing and promising initiative,16 I want to avoid the tendency toward
postmodern kitsch—sympathizing with the “chirpy nihilists who blithely claim to be at

15 Ibid., 38.
16 See also David Detmer’s essay “Ricoeur on atheism: a critique,” Lewis Edwin Hahn, ed, *The
Philosophy of Paul Ricoeur* The Library of Living Philosophers. Vol. 22. (Chicago and La Salle, IL: Open
Court, 1995), pp. 477-93.
home in the wasteland.”  

The consideration of community will provide grounding, preventing us from simply paying philosophical lip service to contemporary trends.

The point of origin for this work is the convergence of two of my recent preoccupations: the so-called postmodern context and the apparently irreconcilable idea of religious community. I consider myself the product of two very different and equally influential cultures—the faith-based Protestant community in which I was raised and the self-proclaimed atheistic relativism of current academia. This marked division set me off searching for a path towards reconciliation between these two co-existing systems, which led to each being broken down and then rebuilt taking into consideration the influence of the other. Overall, contrary to initial skepticism, I have found this deconstruction/reconstruction process extremely promising. Dismantling previous beliefs in a search for Reality has quieted the angst. Instead of feeling pressured to justify my notion of religious community for fear of its collapse, the idea of community as I understand it now, having been influenced by contemporary philosophy, takes on a new shape as a continually self-constituting space. Modernity, necessitating the justification of religious thought, gives birth to postmodernity in which the nihilism of modern atheism no longer makes sense. “Religion and philosophy are different, not as opposites but as polar approaches to Transcendence.” The move is made from a concept of God to an experience of God, and what more plausible context for such an experience than a community?

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18 Incidentally, Ricoeur experienced similar tension: “As for the unsettledness, I tend to relate it to the clash within me between my Protestant upbringing and my intellectual formation [. . .]” Paul Ricoeur, “Intellectual Autobiography,” Hahn, 5.
Speaking theoretically about community has emerged through my study of postmodern philosophy as the best way to continue a discourse on faith, but it is not my Archimidian point. I am working towards a concept, not from one. I refuse to approach the ideas of Paul Ricœur, Emmanuel Levinas, and Jean-Luc Marion with a set definition of what I understand community to be, thereby falling into the trap of looking for elements in their work that correspond with my prefabricated definition. A top-down approach would start with a definition of community and then proceed to highlight the elements that matched the definition. My approach, however, will proceed from ground level and work upwards, taking the predominant ideas in the works of each philosopher. This will allow a shared space to emerge which I believe consists of the fundamental elements that constitute that which I will then label a theoretical religious community.\textsuperscript{20}

Methodologically speaking, I have chosen to treat each philosopher separately, acknowledging the coherence of each system and its uniqueness in relation to the other two, while still noting the “shared space”—i.e., the overlapping, inter-relatedness, and progression of ideas. I use the word community only as the closest approximation for what I see emerging and developing at the intersection points between the three, as well as the “final product”, that is, what I believe becomes apparent when their respective ideas are considered together. The space of overlap between Ricœur, Levinas, and

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{itemize}
\item[\textsuperscript{19}]{William Desmond, “Philosophies of Religion: Marcel, Jaspers, Levinas,” Parkinson and Shanker, 155.}
\item[\textsuperscript{20}]{The philosophers under consideration rarely employ the term “community” or discuss the idea in their works: this presents two possible problems that I want to address: first, perhaps I am manipulating the material and secondly, if the idea of community is as important as I have stated, is it not presumptuous to infer that Ricœur, Levinas, and Marion do not recognize its centrality and comment on it themselves. I counter these objections with the following remarks: the material is not being manipulated, merely selected, and I have indicated that my paper is not comprehensive but rather an examination of four recurring themes. I do consider the notion of community the way of rendering these themes intelligible and continuing a meaningful religious discourse. The relative silence of the three philosophers on the issue does not result from the fact that they have not considered this possibility so much as it is such an}
\end{itemize}
\end{footnotesize}
Marion will be subdivided into four major themes to be examined: the concept of subjectivity or the self, the relationship with alterity, discourse, and praxis.

A. Selection of the Three Philosophers:

*Paul Ricoeur, Emmanuel Levinas, Jean-Luc Marion*

Before explaining the four fundamental elements I have identified, a word on my selection of philosophers. Believing that a religious discourse could be continued in the context of postmodernism, though not without significant modification, I began to consider material on hermeneutics and new ways of thinking and or speaking about God. When I discovered phenomenology I found a vocabulary for describing the nature of religious phenomena which I realized would be helpful were I to try to develop alternate way of thinking about discourse. Ricœur, Levinas, and Marion soon surfaced as the most recurrent names in contemporary French religious phenomenology, those whom I consider the most pertinent to current philosophical debates about the nature of God and whose ideas are conducive to religious thought (i.e. addressing questions concerning who we are, how God is understood, how we interpret sacred texts, etc.). I am interested in their ideas as works-in-progress. I will show how, when considered together, the ideas in their works lend themselves to a concept of religious community that is in flux and self-constituting, as well as the way that the works of each are developed and reworked by the other two. It seems natural to consider Ricoeur, Levinas, and Marion together because of underlying truth that it is implied and accepted tacitly. I am to show that the repeated themes have no sense understood apart from each other or apart from a space of enactment—it is this space I label community.
the dialogue between the three men.\textsuperscript{21} I am also interested in these three scholars because of their participation in their respective religious communities: Ricoeur belongs the Protestant tradition, Levinas is Jewish, and Marion identifies himself as a Roman Catholic. There is certain merit awarded their writing due to the correspondence between belief and action. The fact that each belongs to a different religious tradition allows for a broader investigation of the idea of community.

Once having selected three philosophers that continue the discourse in the context of postmodernity, the question then becomes how this is carried out. What are the key themes or focal points in their work? It is not always readily apparent how certain ideas fit into the overall scheme—for instance, Ricœur does not develop his notion of phenomenological hermeneutics necessarily for the purpose of biblical application, however, that is one possibility.\textsuperscript{22} My goal is to take the key concepts and themes that converge in the writings of Ricœur, Levinas, and Marion, and then see what emerges as this so-called “shared space”. One major difficulty has been choosing material to consider, and in no way does this study purport to be comprehensive. Each of the three scholars has written extensively, and I will rely heavily on bibliographic material to direct the reader for continued investigation of their ideas.\textsuperscript{23} This study should rightly be called a comparison of texts, and rather than a study of the philosophers themselves or even of their comparative ideas because those characterizations give a false impression of

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{21} e.g., Paul Ricœur, \textit{Autrement. Lecture d'Autrement qu'être ou au-delà de l'essence d'Emmanuel Levinas} (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1997); Jean Luc Marion, \textit{Emmanuel Levinas: Autrement que savoir}, (Paris: Éditions Osiris, 1988).
\item \textsuperscript{22} e.g., Weon Hyo Lee, \textit{Interpretation de la Bible selon la démarche de Paul Ricoeur}, (Maitrise, L’Institut Catholique de Paris, 1994).
\item \textsuperscript{23} See extended bibliographies included for each philosopher
\end{itemize}
comprehensiveness. I will be drawing primarily upon Ricœur’s *Oneself as Another*, 24 Levinas’s *Totality and Infinity* 25 and *Otherwise than Being*, 26 (alongside some discussion of his “religious” texts *Of God Who comes to Mind* 27 and *Difficult Freedom* 28) and Marion’s *The Idol and Distance* 29 and *God Without Being*.

B. Identification of Four Recurrent Elements: Self, Alterity, Discourse, Praxis

The principle themes and key ideas are organized in four broad categories which then, I will argue, lend themselves to the construction of a theoretical community. The idea of community emerges because the elements cannot exist apart from each other (they would not make sense), nor can they exist independently of the idea of community (they would have no grounding). They are both contingent and causal, each element is constituted by and necessitates the other elements. There is a constant referral of each element back to the other three, creating a complex web as opposed to a pyramidal progression.

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The first of the four elements finding frequent consideration in the works of Ricœur,30 Levinas, and Marion is the notion of the self and/or subjectivity. In the wake of the postmodern assault on the self, what can be salvaged? A rethinking of the notion of identity is in order following the emphasis on deconstructing the subject. The modern vocabulary for describing identity is no longer applicable. Following Calvin Schrag, I would argue that there is no longer a singular or easily distinguishable caricature of the self, instead, multiple profiles exist and the way we acquire knowledge about this self is through apprehension of a particular story.31

It is clear that the word ‘self’ will not do, because that is just the notion that the critique of metaphysics has most effectively delimited. The ‘self’ is something which we define in terms of its self-identity. Yet what seems to characterize ‘us’ above all is non-identity, difference, our power or, better, our vulnerability to spin off into the abyss. The self is precisely not that which breaks under the strain, gives way to the pull of the flux, which is constantly being divested of its illusions, tormented by the unconscious, constantly being tricked by its history and its language. If we have learned anything in the last one hundred years of European thought, it is that the self is anything but what it pretends to be. And even to speak, as does Ricœur, of a ‘wounded cogito’ is to employ a euphemism which tries to contain and minimize the damage. The ‘self’ is much more a place of disruption, irruption, solicitation. 32

Entering into postmodern thought calls for the reconstruction of the idea of subjectivity and also that of interaction—as we will see, the notion of the self is never constituted apart from considerations of what lies outside the self, be it human or divine. At the end of our examination of the three scholars it will become apparent that the context of community will allow us to rethink both of these aspects, first independently and then in relation to each other. The origin of meaning is no longer considered to be

30 "The question of the subject appears in its right dimension as a thematic center" (referring to Ricœur’s Oneself As Another) Domenico Jervolino, “The Depth and Breadth of Paul Ricœur’s Philosophy,” Hahn. p.535.
31 Schrag, The Self After Postmodernity.
the conscious reflecting subject but rather encounters that are mediated by culture. There is a blatant rejection of the metaphysical desire for absolute transparence of the subject and instead the self is understood contextually. The presence of a subject to itself is indirect and mediated, contingent upon participation in the cultural realm.

The battered Cartesian cogito is reclaimed after having entered into a relationship with the Other. Consideration of the self prefigures the other elements we will consider (such as discourse and praxis) that hinge upon this re-articulated subjectivity:

In effect, the ‘question of the subject’ means that the subject is called into question. The subject called into question is the cogito at its broadest and most dynamic, a plural, finite subjectivity, actuating itself as striving and as a desire for being, which is not behind us or beneath us as some sort of metaphysical substratum, but is rather a task for our praxis and our hope for the future. Thus understood, the ‘question of the subject’ implies a relationship with its ‘other,’ i.e. with that which calls it into question and transforms its pure reflection, ever exposed to the risk of narcissism and metaphysical arrogance, into a questioning which generates ‘meaning’ in the course of its searching.  

Ricoeur articulates his idea of identity as a balance between subjectivism and humanism; for Marion and Levinas the self is constituted by the call and response to the Other.

The second of the four elements I identify as key themes in the work of Ricoeur, Levinas, and Marion is that of the relationship with alterity. I have chosen the word alterity because it seems the most comprehensive—alterity is that which is completely other, irreducible to the self, strange; including all possible variations of “otherness”. The French distinction is helpful to bear in mind: otherness can either be l’autre (simply the vague term for the other), l’Autre (a term often referring to the Divine Other) or l’autrui (the specifically human other). This element first takes shape as the

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33 Jervolino 536.
phenomenological problem of solipsism—how do we know what exists apart from the self? Heidegger grounds us as beings-in-the-world, in relation with others. Prior to Heidegger, the nihilism of modern atheism left us without the capacity to relate to any exterior or transcendence. God had always been understood ontologically, hence the difficulty of finding a way to think of God that is outside the boundaries of ontology.

The enlightenment view that reason had usurped the place of religion rendered the “real” world knowable. The world, no longer incomprehensible, ceased to be an-other world. This allowed Nietzsche to proclaim the death of God and humanity God’s assassins. A rethinking of alterity is in order, both as human and divine, in ways that do not reduce either to an object of the subject’s experience or constitution. In this section on alterity, all three philosophers will extend the ideas set out in the discussion on the self. The dialectic between self and alterity is what constitutes identity in Ricœur’s work. According to Levinas, the principal failure of Western philosophy has been its inability to maintain the otherness of the other, continually dissolving it and absorbing it into the realm of the Same, thus constituting a return to the self. Levinas has been called a philosopher of alterity, constantly working to preserve otherness through a relationship he calls the face-to-face.

The third element under consideration is discourse, understood here in the narrow sense of that which is specifically linguistic, i.e., referring primarily to texts and interpretation. “It is within this economy of discourse that the self is called into being, and it is called into being as the who that is speaking and listening, writing, and reading, discursing in a variety of situations and modalities of discourse.” 34 The self emerges

34 Schrag, The Self After Postmodernity, 17.
from communicative practices, necessarily involving the Other, telling stories as a form of self-constitution. “Language does not just reflect human being but actually makes humans be, brings about human existence as communal understanding and self-understanding.”  

The role language plays should not be underestimated—how much of what is “real” do we constitute in an effort to explain? The modern view of language was that texts contained meaning that could be extracted using logical reasoning—the “truths” of any text were independent of its context; they were thought to be pre-linguistic. The idea that words correspond to an idea or an object is a tenet of modern thinking. All meaning became contextualized and there was no longer any truth apart from what was constituted within the system of signifier and signified. Linguistic signs relate internally to the system, and placing a sign in a new context will alter its semantic value. It is the overall language structure that makes possible the meaningfulness of any particular word within that structure. We see again the interrelated nature of the four elements: questions of discourse are inseparable from notions of subjectivity.

Structuralism characterized the subject as the intersection of linguistic, mythological or ideological forces which leave little space for individual agency and responsibility. Post-structuralist thinkers moved away from the rigid schemes and scientific claims of the structuralists, but maintained the view of the subject as an outdated humanist illusion to be demystified. Rather than the self-conscious, self-possessed source of insight and values, the subject was to be regarded as decentred and elusive, possibly no more than an effect of language or the residue of still-unliquidated and pernicious metaphysical thinking.

The fourth element that surfaces frequently in the works at hand is what I will broadly label praxis, though it takes on various forms. The word praxis was deliberately

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36 See the work of Swiss linguist Ferdinand De Saussure (1857-1913)
selected, as the root of the word *action*, but also encompassing connotations such as *practice* and *performance*. “The term praxis, which has been in the philosophical vocabulary since the time of the Greeks, is particularly helpful for articulating the communal character of human existence.”  

Action has more of an individualistic sense whereas praxis foreshadows the emergence of community. Praxis designates a sphere of human action contrasted with theory.  

While the notion of discourse is often seen as emphasizing history and tradition (i.e. the reason Biblical or Talmudic texts are seen as credible is because they have withstood the test of time, the texts represent ideas that are grounded in a historical tradition and this is what gives them weight), the notion of praxis is completely future-oriented. It is a call to action. In this element we will see how each of the three philosophers has a different “site” for this action. For Ricœur the action is speech, reiterating his emphasis on language and interpretation; for Levinas it is the ethical relationship; and for Marion it is the Eucharist, the meeting of immanence and transcendence, that translates into a call to action.  

The move is made from a concept of God to an experience of God. Having been informed by the rethinking of the self, alterity, and discourse, praxis gives us a site or a concrete space for action. “An account of the self in action is destined to gravitate into an account of the self in community.”  

It acts as cohesion and impetus, readily lending itself to an understanding of postmodern community as a way to continue religious thought and expression. “The world of action represents the highest sphere of human

38 Schrag, *The Self After Postmodernity*, 76.  
39 The word praxis has Aristotelian roots but the definition has been modified in various ways since antiquity; for further development see Calvin Schrag, *Communicative Praxis and the Space of Subjectivity* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), pp.18-20.
engagement, especially when it emerges in joint co-operative undertakings and in discussion. It is only in the life of action, as opposed to the life of abstract thought, that humans become fully authentic.”

Without this fourth element we would stay in the realm of theory, lacking the grounding that I believe is clearly demonstrated in the philosophies of Ricœur, Levinas, and Marion.

C. The Phenomenological Approach

I have entitled my work “A Phenomenological Approach to the Concept of Religious Community” for two primary reasons: 1) I see my own approach and responsibility towards the material as phenomenological, involving a suspension of personal beliefs and a description of the elements that surface; and 2) It is clear that each of the three philosophers under consideration have a distinct relationship with phenomenology and their work fits into the category of what can be called phenomenological. Phenomenology provides an alternative way of understanding reality, language, and human interaction. “It is with justifiable right that the phenomenologist accuses empiricism of a naïveté regarding human experience.”

In order to eliminate any ambiguity about the title of my thesis, I must specify that I am not considering each of the three philosophers’ phenomenological approach to community, (i.e. three different approaches toward the same end,) but rather the way their ideas (in the context of phenomenological methodology) converge and the idea of community is that which

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40 Schrag, *The Self After Postmodernity*, 76.
41 Hannah Arendt as quoted in Morgan 312.
emerges. I believe phenomenology offers insights and presents a more apt vocabulary for dealing with the possibility of contemporary religious discourse.

Broadly, phenomenology can be defined as the study dedicated to describing the structures of experience as they present themselves to consciousness, or the study of the structures of consciousness that enable consciousness to refer to objects outside itself. “Phenomenology must carefully describe things as they appear to consciousness. In other words, the way problems, things, and events are approached must involve taking their manner of appearance to consciousness into consideration.” 43 Supposedly rejecting the subject/object distinction, “[p]henomenology claimed instead to offer a holistic approach to the relation between objectivity and consciousness” 44 The relationship with the object takes places within the subject so that the “objective world” is really a constituted object of subjectivity.

Phenomenology can be understood as both a method and a general movement. While I acknowledge this dual purpose or definition, I am not studying the three philosophers as phenomenologists, simply how they undertake a phenomenological approach, and in some cases, how they find such an approach to be limited. Phenomenology is a practice rather than a system, a different way of doing philosophy. “…[P]henomenology’s first step is to seek to avoid all misconstructions and impositions placed on experience in advance [. . .] Explanations are not to be imposed before the phenomena have been understood from within.” 45 In Edmund Husserl, the founder of contemporary phenomenology, we see foreshadowing of several of the elements found in the subsequent work of Ricoeur, Levinas, and Marion, namely constitution of the self and

43 Ibid., 6.
44 Morgan 13.
encounter with alterity. “Husserl came to believe that since the self-constitution of the ego is the source of all constitution, then all phenomenology really coincided with the phenomenology of the self-constitution of the ego. Connected with the focus on the ego necessarily comes the problem of the experience of other egos, of alter egos, the experience of the ‘foreign’, the ‘strange’, the ‘other’ (*Fremderfahrung*) in general.”

The phenomenological method as proposed by Husserl entails performing what he calls the Epoche: when presuppositions are suspended or bracketed the pure phenomena can surface. One of Husserl’s key words is ‘givenness’ (*Gegebenheit*), which expresses his belief that all experience has a person, a ‘to whom’ it is directed. We will take up again the idea of givenness with Marion, whose constitution of the subject as recipient underlies his philosophy of *donation*. The application of the phenomenological method involves naming objects (also including concepts, not limited to material objects), noting the relationships between these objects, and then describing processes—the method I am proposing in this study.

“…Paul Ricœur has justly remarked that phenomenology is the story of the deviations from Husserl; the history of phenomenology is the history of Husserlian heresies.” The first of many dissenters was Martin Heidegger, whose ideas have had substantial influence upon subsequent phenomenologists, including Ricœur, Levinas, and Marion. His phenomenology was primarily an investigation of the meaning of Being and its mode of presentation. Herein lies the major difference between Husserl and

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45 Morgan 4.
46 Morgan 175.
47 Morgan 11.
Heidegger: 50 “Husserlian phenomenology did not dispute the possibility of our gaining a ‘view from nowhere’, understood as the aperspectival, theoretical, ‘objective’ understanding of things.” 51 Heidegger abandoned ‘consciousness’ and ‘intentionality’ altogether in developing his notion of Being-in-the-world (In-der-Welt-sein), 52 claiming that “all description involves interpretation, indeed that description was only a derivative form of interpretation. Husserl’s project of pure description, then, becomes impossible if description is not situated inside a radically historicised hermeneutics.” 53

Heidegger disagreed fundamentally with Husserl, believing it impossible to reduce one’s understanding of the world into personal experience. For Heidegger, the theoretical relation to the world is always derivative from a more immediate lived experience. Against Husserl’s “pure” intentionality, Heidegger says that objects are intended against a background and never purely given to us. He sees us as being thrown into the world, which is actually a much deeper intentionality because it is based on experience, instead of mere thought about objects.

Heidegger rejected traditional metaphysical approaches to the question of Being as having misunderstood the nature of beings by understanding them as ‘things’, as what is simply there, as occurrent, as ‘reality’, as present at hand. Traditional metaphysics, which thought is was simply describing things as they are, does not realise that it is constructed on the basis of a certain assumed attitude towards the world, which in fact is not fundamental, but belongs to a distorted way of experience due to the way humans are drawn into everyday existing. 54

50 Even though it has become more or less standard to oppose pure transcendental phenomenology to hermeneutic phenomenology (i.e., Husserl versus Heidegger), this dichotomy may be misleading and we should not overlook the possible hermeneutic quality of Husserl’s work. See John Caputo’s treatment in Radical Hermeneutics: Repetition, Deconstruction, and the Hermeneutic Project (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987) Chap. 2 “Repetition and Constitution: Husserl’s Proto Hermeneutics.”
51 Morgan 12.
52 Ibid.
53 Ibid., 20.
54 Morgan 197.
With Heidegger’s *Sein und Zeit* (1927) phenomenology took a decidedly hermeneutical shift. The thread of hermeneutics, or interpretation of texts, runs through the work of Ricœur, Levinas, and Marion. What does this shift entail?

Phenomenology became hermeneutical when it argued that every form of human awareness is interpretive, when it was not content to regard interpretation as just one specific form of awareness directed to one particular range of objects—for instance, texts. If all the intentions of our perception and imagination are already marked through and through by language, and moreover, the phenomenologist him- or herself can no longer claim an intuitive access to mental life, but is always interpreting it, then we are in hermeneutics.\(^{55}\)

One possible objection to this emphasis on understanding and meaning as functions of interpretation is the hermeneutical circle—the way we presume or presuppose something in light of what we already know. Far from being a vicious circle, “[f]or Heidegger this circle is not a contingent feature of understanding, but is essential to human being as being-in-the-world.”\(^{56}\) Understanding is not simply sensory input, but rather the way we relate, react, interpret, and express. This is the point of fusion between phenomenology and hermeneutics: “Heidegger favors a new ‘fundamental ontology’, an enquiry into the manner in which the structures of Being are revealed through the structures of human existence, an enquiry, furthermore, which could only be carried out through phenomenology, now transformed into hermeneutical phenomenology, since the phenomena of existence always require interpretation, and hermeneutics is the art of interpretation.”\(^{57}\) This is one of the primary concepts that surfaces in Ricœur’s philosophy, underlying what I see as the importance of the community as the space for interpreting texts as meaningful.

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\(^{56}\) Morgan 277.
Some phenomenologists argue that a phenomenology of religion is an invalid pursuit given the apparent contradiction in terms—phenomenology being the study of what is immanent and religion the experience of the transcendent. There is also the familiar charge that there is no religious reality other than the faith of the believer. How does one address these claims? I believe that examining methods used by religious phenomenologists can be helpful, understanding, however, that I am not purporting to do a phenomenology of religion nor classify Ricoeur, Levinas, and Marion as religious phenomenologists. In a broad sense, phenomenology is the study of phenomena, and thus religious phenomenology the study of religious phenomena, with a specific method of inquiry into religious expression and experience. The phenomenological approach is descriptive and detailed, where reductionism is avoided and truth questions are bracketed (so as not to trivialize the phenomena and ignore the complex nature of human experience or impose false values), and the essence of phenomena explored. There is a distinction to be made between the truth of religion and the truth about religion. The first category of truth should be bracketed while the second lends itself to description, which

57 Ibid., 197
58 Here we might encounter the further objection against not only religious phenomena, but phenomena in general: if intentionality means that all mental acts have objects and that consciousness is consciousness of something, then are not phenomena also constituted by consciousness? Can the mind ever know anything outside itself? The idea that all mental acts have an object they are directed towards does not certify the existence of independent objects—that which is intended by consciousness is also constituted by it. Husserl’s Zu den Sachen selbst (“Back to the things themselves”) works against itself: “Phenomenology aims to study the encounters between consciousness and the world, but it also suggests that the world is only ever encountered as already constituted by and within consciousness. The encounter promised by intentionality may be precisely what the theory of intentionality precludes: consciousness can never meet anything truly alien to itself because the external world is a product of its own activity” (Davis 19). Stated otherwise, if the only foundation for knowledge is the existence of the ego or cogito (Descartes), then all paths leading to so-called other selves are problematic. This is also referred to as solipsism, the idea that other selves do not necessarily exist because they are always constituted. This criticism largely applies to the work of Husserl. Apodictic knowledge (that which is certain, beyond doubt) is unfounded because of the notion of intentionality. According to Husserl, he solves this problem with his notion of bracketing: apodictic certainty can be achieved if everything doubtful is bracketed. This bracketing includes the
lies well inside the boundaries of a phenomenological project. Such an approach suits the paradoxical nature of religion and religious inquiries: “Phenomenology accordingly is a practice of making something manifest that is in one way already manifest, and yet that is in another way still concealed, in need of further manifestation through a logos.”  

Secondly, the question may be posed: in order to understand the notion of religious community, why not take a theological approach, as opposed to an arguably more difficult and ambiguous philosophical one? There are multiple responses but all tied into the fundamental difference between the respective function of each discipline—a phenomenological approach describes possibility whereas a theological one describes a supposed actuality. Phenomenology is dedicated to precise description, never justification. The question why, doubtless an integral part of examining the constitution of any community, will not be directly addressed. I am not interested in peoples’ motivation for joining a particular community, or dealing with the differences between specific instances of community. I aim to describe key elements, aided by the tools provided by phenomenology, that can then be adapted to constitute particular instances of community. “Theology, then, would always be particular and concrete—the theology of this particular believing community. A phenomenology of religion, however, brackets such participation and is able to range across religious communities.”  

My aim here is not a denial of participation but a temporary suspension of it in order to allow for the openness to the idea of community on a theoretical level.

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existence of both other selves and of an external world—in this way a transcendental Ego is revealed which remains the first apodictic truth upon which all others are based.

59 Nicholson 305.

60 Smith 27.
Phenomenology brings forward the *what* and *how*; it seeks to describe the key elements and define the relationships at work. This approach highlights community, as seen by the three contemporary philosophers I have selected, as essentially an understanding of relationships, emerging from the four fundamental elements previously described. Phenomenology is a way of grounding our theoretical community and we will understand it as the doctrine of lived experience. The idea of community, I will argue, is what emerges when a phenomenological approach is taken. A theological approach, on the other hand, would presuppose this outcome. Theology can start from the notion of community and then deconstruct it, top to bottom, while phenomenology works from the ground up. Phenomenology presents the possibility of a “saturated” phenomenon (to use Marion’s term), of a presence known solely through revelation, yet makes no actual claims on such an occurrence. Theology, on the other hand, while it may to a certain extent employ phenomenological methods, always refers to the relationship between faith and a historical actuality. In dealing with phenomenology we are necessarily leaving questions of faith on the periphery.
An investigation of subjectivity is one of the focal points of Ricœur’s work, especially in *Oneself as Another*, but as we will see it is inextricably linked to his constitution of the other and his development of phenomenological hermeneutics. If there are no longer any reference points outside subjectivity, as the postmodern argument goes, the self is contingent upon textual meaning; hence the function of interpretation. Ricœur’s approach to subjectivity is thoroughly phenomenological “in that it seeks to clarify through reflective analysis that which is immediately and indubitably given to consciousness: the fact of the subject’s own existence.”

*Oneself as Another* is composed of studies which deal with the question ‘who’ in relation to the problematic of the self. Briefly, Ricœur divides his work into the following considerations: *who is speaking?* (philosophy of language), *who is acting?* (philosophy of action), *who is recounting about himself or herself?* (question of personal identity) and *who is the moral subject of imputation?* (the ethical and moral determination of action). The book includes nine studies exploring the various levels of human action in three basic dimensions: linguistics, narration, and ethics. This is Ricœur’s three-part formula—describe, narrate, prescribe—which he believes forms a cohesive whole (i.e., there is no radical rupture between description and prescription, between act and worth). The role of the self is paradoxical as both the foundation and the end product—the concept of the self precedes our ability to describe, narrate, or prescribe, yet it is also constituted in these three activities.

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62 Madison 75.
63 Ibid., 16-18.
I.A. Reclaiming Identity as Selfhood

Attempting to move beyond the objectivism/subjectivism debate, Ricœur, drawing extensively on phenomenological thought, attempts to “ground” the idea of the self in a post-metaphysical hermeneutic.

One of the core features of Ricœur’s hermeneutics has been his ongoing attempt to articulate a notion of ‘the subject’ which would be free from all forms of modern subjectivism. Unlike other forms of postmodern thought, hermeneutics has strenuously resisted the current, and very fashionable, anti-humanist calls for the abolition of ‘the subject’ (the ‘end of “man”’). The notion of the subject, hermeneutics insists, is not to be abandoned—but it must indeed be stripped of all its modernist, metaphysical accretions. This continued allegiance on the part of hermeneutics to the notion of the subject testifies to its rootedness in the phenomenological tradition inaugurated by Edmund Husserl. ⁶⁴

It is evident that in Ricœur’s work the four elements I have outlined (self, alterity, discourse, praxis) are all fluid categories. They flow in and out of each other and considered separately each is hopelessly incomplete. For example, Ricœur writes that “[t]he autonomy of the self will appear then to be tightly bound up with solicitude for one’s neighbor and with justice for each individual.” ⁶⁵ This phrase demonstrates the way that the elements are intricately linked and interdependent—the self is itself constituted and is an agent of constituting simultaneously. Ricœur’s hermeneutics deconstructs and then reconstructs identity. It would be false to say that in this section I will only be treating Ricœur’s view of the self—such a task is impossible. However, I will attempt to isolate his remarks with the intended purpose of circling back around at the end to show the interrelatedness of all four elements and thus the coherence of Ricœur’s philosophy as it appears in Oneself as Another and other selected texts.

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⁶⁴ Madison 297.
⁶⁵ Ricœur, Oneself as Another, 18.
Ricœur begins *Oneself as Another* with a discussion of Cartesian and Nietzschean philosophy, of the extremes between the “exalted subject” and the “humiliated subject”  and wonders what there is “left to say about this free-floating ‘I’” 67. He calls for a complete rethinking of the self, one that takes philosophy beyond the alternatives of cogito and anti-cogito. What Ricœur calls the ‘hermeneutics of the self’ is distinct from traditional philosophies of the cogito—“To say *self* is not to say ‘I’. The ‘I’ is posited—or deposed. The *self* is implied reflexively in the operations, the analysis of which precedes the return toward the self.”

Identity can be understood in two distinct ways, which Ricœur refers to as idem identity and ipse identity. Idem is identity as *sameness* whereas ipse is identity as *selfhood*.  Idem identity is both quantitative and qualitative, yet does not provide an answer to the crucial question “Who am I?” The answer is found in ipse-identity, characterized by the awareness that preserving, strengthening, and revising our identity.  

In *Oneself as Another*, Ricœur declares his hypothesis—that the intervention of narrative identity will eventually allow for the distinction between the two. This narration intervenes “in the conceptual constitution of personal identity in the manner of a specific mediator between the pole of character, where idem and ipse tend to coincide, and the pole of self-maintenance, where selfhood frees itself from sameness.” 72 This notion of selfhood will eventually serve as our base for understanding the concept of community but not before the relation between self and alterity has been established. Without the

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66 Ibid., 16.  
67 Ibid., 6.  
68 Ibid.  
69 Ibid., 18.  
70 Ibid., 16.
work of “otherness” it would be possible (but erroneous) to exalt the self as an origin in and of itself.

Ricœur again attacks the traditional grounding of the self in metaphysics by emphasizing the constitutive importance of the other: “What Ricœur has worked to articulate is a renewed, transformed and, above all, decentred notion of the subject, i.e., one which views subjectivity not as a metaphysical ‘origin’ of meaning but as the result (‘effect’) of its transformative encounter with the ‘other’.” Le us follow the natural progression of Ricœur’s thought into a discussion of alterity.

I.B. The Constitutive Work of the Other

David Vessey looks at Ricœur’s Oneself as Another as contributing to our understanding of alterity as intersubjectivity. How do we account for the centrality of the work of otherness in constituting selfhood and what does Ricœur mean by the term “otherness”? Ricœur calls alterity the site of the play between phenomenological and ontological discourse. He states: “the main virtue of such a dialectic is that it keeps the self from occupying the place of foundation. This prohibition is perfectly suited to the ultimate structure of a self that will neither be exalted, as in the philosophies of the cogito, nor be humiliated, as in the philosophies of the anti-cogito.” It is important to see otherness as fundamental in constituting the self, not something that embellishes or enhances it at a later point, or simply that which prevents the phenomenological problem

72 Ricœur, Oneself as Another, 118-9.
73 Madison 314.
74 Vessey 1.
of solipsism: “[. . .] otherness is not added on to selfhood from outside, as though to prevent its solipsistic drift.” 77 Alterity occupies such an important place that the self is incomprehensible without the Other:

the Other is not only the counterpart of the Same but belongs to the intimate constitution of its sense. Indeed, on the properly phenomenological level, the multiple ways in which the other than self affects the understanding of the self by itself marks precisely, the difference between the ego that posits itself and the self that recognizes itself only though these very affections.78

In our discussion of Emmanuel Levinas we will see the predominate way the Other factors into (indeed, determines) his philosophy. Instead of distinguishing between “self” and “I” (ipse/idem), Levinas sees ontology as lying within totality, and otherness becomes the equivalent of radical exteriority. The Same signifies totalization and separation, so the exteriority of the Other can no longer be expressed in language of relation. The Other absolves itself from relation in the same movement by which the Infinite draws from Totality.79  

Ricœur’s portrait of Levinas is much more despairing and nihilistic than the one Levinas himself would sketch. He is critical of the Levinasian Other, but how does Ricœur himself define the term? At the end of his discussion in Oneself as Another, Ricœur remains vague when considering the possibility of a more precise definition of who this “other” is:

Perhaps the philosopher as philosopher has to admit that one does not know and cannot say whether this Other, the source of the injunction, is another person whom I can look in the face or who can stare at me, or my ancestors for whom there is no representation, to so great an extent does my debt to them constitute

75 Levinas wants to be rid of the ontological discourse altogether as he defines it in sole pursuit of phenomenology as that which will allow the reconfiguration of traditional ways of doing philosophy
76 Ricœur. Oneself as Another, 318.
77 Ibid., 317.
78 Ibid., 329.
79 Ricoeur’s critique of Levinas can be found in Oneself as Another 335-55.
my very self, or God—living God, absent God—or an empty place. With this aporia of the Other, philosophical discourse comes to an end.\textsuperscript{80}

Even with these acknowledged ambiguities in his work, Ricœur nonetheless opens up a space for religious thought to proceed. The end of philosophical discourse as it has been known in the past (i.e. founded on metaphysics) leaves Ricœur to establish a new discourse, one developed phenomenologically, to get past the aporia. Philosophical discourse is blocked but meaningful encounters with alterity can still take place given the appropriate context—that of community.

I.C. Development of a Phenomenological Hermeneutic

Discourse is treated extensively in Ricœur’s philosophy and takes on various shapes, however, I will limit my discussion here to his treatment of written discourse, defined as text, and treat spoken discourse in the subsequent section on praxis. First will be an inquiry into what Ricœur means by ‘text’ and an examination of Ricœurian hermeneutics, (the art of interpretation,) culminating in his phenomenological hermeneutics. Why Ricoeur’s emphasis on interpretation? The method of hermeneutics implies going beyond the immanent context of a work to its reference, i.e., what it means. It is also the culmination of the dialectics that have just been examined. Hermeneutics is the site of interrelated problematics—the determination of selfhood by way of its contrast with sameness, and the determination of selfhood by way of its dialectic with otherness.\textsuperscript{81}

\textsuperscript{80} Ibid., 355.  
\textsuperscript{81} Ibid., 297.
The text can be considered the central object in Ricœur’s hermeneutics, defined broadly as “any discourse fixed by writing” \(^{82}\) It might seem that written discourse is simply transcribed speech, or speech “once removed”, stripped of its immediacy.

But this definition does not mean that a text is nothing but a fixation of spoken words or of words that might as well have been spoken. The text stands in another relation to discourse than does the spoken word; writing is parallel to speech, but what characterizes it is its ability to preserve discourse and to turn it into an archive for both the individual and the common memory. \(^{83}\)

Thus both the spoken word and text have a function and significance, and both will play an essential part in the development of the notion of community.

I have chosen to elaborate this point here because it strikes me as a way of interpreting texts (the implications for specifically biblical texts are obvious) in a way that does not lead to relativism or nihilism. In order to follow the development of Ricœur’s hermeneutics, we must first examine the notion of the text.

Ricœur calls texts “the greatest enigma that the hermeneutic status of the phenomenology of religion poses for us.” \(^{84}\) Texts are products with particular cultural origins and, most importantly, with implications for human relationships and actions. Texts are not groundless or static, they are born and the birth and mediation of a text takes place temporally within a community and has a direction or goal. If we were to stay within the limits of a text then there would be no criteria for choosing among conflicting interpretations, hence, the so-called postmodern relativism which pits various understandings against each other by giving them all “equal” status. However, if texts


\(^{83}\) Ibid.
are understood culturally, and even more specifically as belonging to a community, then they are grounded and take on a new level of significance. The text can be distanced from its original context and emancipated from its author, thereby assuming a life of its own. This autonomy frees the text (now “alive”) to be continually reinterpreted. In this sense the text is living, being constantly re-actualized, re-interpreted, and re-contextualized. In this process the reader, as part of a community, plays the central role, initiating an appropriation of the text.

Inseparable from his discussion of texts is Ricœur’s notion of hermeneutics, the way texts are understood. “[H]ermeneutics designates the art of textual interpretation, as instanced in biblical exegesis and classical philology.” 85 Ricœur’s discussion of discourse necessitates the first two elements considered, the self and alterity. Subjectivity, as defined by Ricœur, is completely intertwined with his concept of text—confronting a text is a form of self-understanding and self-transformation, hence its pivotal place in Ricœur’s philosophy. Encountering a text is a challenge, representing that which is “other”. We understand this new horizon by relating it to our own—expanding and renewing ourselves through this contact with alterity by means of text. Knowledge is not representation, as was the case in modernity, but transformation. Ricœur believes that we are interpreting beings, incapable of existing without interpreting signs. We interpret in a particular fashion based on the culture and tradition to which we belong. This art of interpretation of texts is known as hermeneutics and is essential when

85 Madison 290.
posing questions related to subjectivity. “Every hermeneutics […] is explicitly or implicitly self-understanding.”

Ricœur moves from a concern with interpreting symbols and deciphering their hidden meaning (due to the contingency of symbols on a particular cultural context) toward a more linguistic and systematic approach that emphasizes written texts. His most recent work culminates in the development of phenomenological hermeneutics, a term with Heideggerian origin.

At this point we are confronted with the problematic hermeneutic circle: the whole is interpreted in light of the various parts and vice versa. For instance, religions founded on the word of God, the Logos, are not accessible apart from considering texts thought to be holy, and those texts are considered holy based on their divine inspiration. There is another circle present as well—that of the community acknowledging the scriptures as its foundation and therefore preserving the holy as such. The relationship is mutual—the Logos and confessing community each constitute and are constituted by the other. What appears to be a “fusion of horizons” (to borrow a term from Hans Georg Gadamer), however, is not a true fusion: we do not coincide with the ideas of another person but rather discover their view. Their ideas are rendered intelligible and we develop what Ricœur calls a “hermeneutical consciousness”.

Our horizons are constantly shifting based on encounters between self and other. Truth is dynamic rather than static.

This [fusion of horizons] is a dialectical concept which results from the refection of two alternatives: objectivism, whereby the objectification of the other is

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87 Ibid., 317.
88 Ibid., 306.
premised on the forgetting of oneself; and absolute knowledge, according to which universal history can be articulated within a single horizon. We exist neither in closed horizons, nor within an horizon that is unique. No horizon is closed, since it is possible to place oneself in another point of view and another culture [. . .] But no horizon is unique, since the tension between the other and oneself is unsurpassable.\textsuperscript{89}

Here emerges Ricœurs most distinct contribution to the field of hermeneutics and his expertise as a leading phenomenologist—what is called phenomenological hermeneutics.

The question of method here is how is hermeneutics still a phenomenology. [Ricœur] says that hermeneutical phenomenology is a reflexive philosophy that remains within the fundamental inspiration of Husserl’s phenomenology. . . . Ricœur has rejected Husserl’s attempt to establish a self-foundational philosophy. He rejects a Cartesian—or Husserlian—attempt to found knowledge and the self on immediate and transparent consciousness. The most fundamental truth, the \textit{cogito}, is as empty as it is certain. The self can only be understood by the ‘detour’ through works, actions, literature, and institutions. All self-understanding requires a hermeneutic of texts and text-like structures.\textsuperscript{90}

Why is a specifically phenomenological approach so important? Phenomenology has evolved from considering language a superfluous layer imposed on “pure” lived experiences towards a willingness to take into account the verbal expressions that have given form to those experiences. The difficulty that Ricœur tries to address is the cultural and historical element added onto the linguistic meditation. “Both phenomenology and hermeneutics are committed to an understanding of the self and both are reflexive methods that start in the middle of things, with both the world and our intersubjective experiences as givens”\textsuperscript{91}

Ricœur, in his extensive and prolific career, shifts from a focus on Husserlian phenomenology to a concern with symbols and language, which eventually develops into

\textsuperscript{89} Ricœur, \textit{Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences}, 75.
\textsuperscript{91} Ibid.
his notion of phenomenological hermeneutics, as a way of moving completely beyond both objectivism and relativism. Humans by nature are relational beings (hence the fault with a purely “objective” approach) yet philosophy without some sort of grounding would be useless (thus the importance of phenomenology in Ricœur’s thought). Unlike other forms of what could be considered postmodern thought, phenomenological hermeneutics embraces the postmodern rejection of Enlightenment values but also seeks to reconstruct those values in a way as to escape foundationalism without preaching complete cultural, intellectual, or spiritual relativism.

For Ricœur, phenomenological hermeneutics is the explanation of symbolic systems that bring humanity into contact with reality. At first glance the notion appears to be contradictory—hermeneutics designates meditation or reflection while phenomenology deals with immanence. Ricœur, however, does not see these two in conflict. According to the method of phenomenology, that which eventually appears first has to be discovered—involving a process. The task of “bracketing” is to make an object or concept appear, and this task can be classified as hermeneutical.

Ricœur files complaint against structuralism, where the “individual capacity of thinking and being creative tends to be denied in favour of the power of codes. To understand man is to understand the structures that constitute his language, the networks of myths and texts that constitute his culture, the social structures that constitute his society.” 92 By rejecting this philosophy Ricœur reclaims the notion of man as subject. Structuralist philosophy is simply “transcendentalism without a subject.” 93 Are not the relations between humans and language and between language and the world more

significant than the nature of the language structure itself? Language is primarily communication, a way of giving meaning to the world one inhabits. In place of this structural approach, Ricœur posits a fundamentally phenomenological one, where the immanence of language meets the transcendence of speech. “The presuppositions are those of phenomenology: language expresses the meaning of the world and of being; the subject is the bearer of this meaning. Man is the one who, by means of language, gives sense to his world.” Discourse is not a fixed and finite system but rather creation and innovation. “Discourse is the event in which language takes on a temporal aspect.” Language itself is an a-temporal possibility that becomes an actuality through discourse. Community is the place where discourse finds expression.

I.D. Speech as Act: Interlocution and Narration

“La problemática del actuar humano, representa así un eje fundamental de su pensamiento. Cómo caracterizar al hombre que actúa, que decide, que toma iniciativas y se hace responsables de ellas? En dónde se enraiza esta capacidad que tiene el hombre de obrar libre y responsablemente? Qué es, en definitive, el actuar humano? Estas preguntas no cesan de acompañar la investigación de Ricœur a lo largo de todo su obra.”

We see here how the elements are all interwoven—the event (praxis, acting out) of discourse implies necessarily a self and an-other. In an anonymous a-temporal system

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94 Van Leeuwen 76.
95 Ibid.
96 This is not to say that Ricœur offers a simple juxtaposition, “the openness of language to the lived world of experience to the closed state of the universe of signs in structural linguistics” (*The Conflict of Interpretations* 251). It is obviously through linguistics that the phenomenological-hermeneutic approach is possible.
97 Van Leeuwen 77.
98 “The problematic of human action represents a fundamental axis of Ricœur’s thought. How do we characterize the man who acts, who decides, who takes initiative and is responsible? And where does this capacity of man to act freely and responsibly take root? What is human action definitely? These questions do not cease to accompany Ricœur’s investigation throughout his work.” Eduardo Casarotti, “La
the question ‘who is speaking?’ is irrelevant because language has no subject, there is no “I” unless there is a discourse. 99 Ricœur distinguishes action from event--action is not something that happens, but how we say what we do. Praxis, taking the form of speech, is an event understood as the production of meaning. The fact that we say our actions renders them meaningful. 100 Ricœur’s self is a self that speaks, and speech is the action that renders the rest of human existence intelligible. In the consideration of speech acts—broken down into the subcategories of interlocution and narration—we will see how all the elements we have examined in Ricoeur’s philosophy are bound together. He says that “[a]ction and agent belong to the same conceptual schema, containing notions such as circumstances, intentions, motives, deliberations, voluntary or involuntary motions, passiveness, constraints, intended or unintended results, and so on.” 101 His theory of language denies the dichotomy present in structuralism between parole and langue, speech acts and language as a system of signs. Speaking, as a creative act, is simultaneously self-discovery and self-constitution. This act, however, is not creation ex nihlo, it takes place against the background of language embedded in history. The self enters into discourse by speaking, through narration. This translates into an action that enters into time and space.

First speech action: interlocution; defined as spoken language occurring between two or more people. Ricœur describes the “complex situation of interlocution”:

Facing the speaker in the first person is a listener in the second person to whom the former addresses himself or herself—this fact belongs to the situation of interlocution. So, there is not illocution without allocution and, by implication,

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99 Van Leeuwen 78.
101 Ricœur, Oneself as Another, 51.
without someone to whom the message addressed. The utterance that is reflected in the sense of the statement is therefore straightaway a bipolar phenomenon: it implies simultaneously an ‘I’: that speaks to a ‘you’ to whom the former addresses itself. ‘I affirm that’ equals ‘I declare to you that’; ‘I promise that’ equals ‘I promise you that.’ In short, utterance equals interlocution.  

Language is made up of references, which are the bond between discourse and world. The world, or site of praxis, is always topic or subject of discourse. Language can be seen as the event while the speakers are the actors contained in a specific context. Ricœur demonstrates the integration of interpretation into process of signification. Presence of the other is required for interlocution and the whole process is thus placed in a communicative setting. Language, orally in the form of speech, is the method of communication—note the proximity of the words communication and community. Language in the context of community functions as the link between human understanding and reality. This is not to say that everything can be reduced to language, nor does it negate the possibility of non-linguistic experience, it simply affirms the way humans act and interact and thereby both constitute and understand reality. “There is no world without a self who finds itself in it and acts in it; there is no self without a world that is practicable in some fashion.”  

The second subset of spoken language we will examine is narration, because it is within the framework of narrative theory that the selfhood/sameness and selfhood/other dialectics reach their fullest development. Narration closes the gap between idem and ipse identity. Ricœur places narration in between description and prescription as that which connects them, serving as the link to that which is normative.  

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102 Ibid., 43-44.  
103 Ibid., 58.  
104 It could be argued that this with this normative element Ricoeur strays from pure phenomenology’s emphasis on description.
By placing narrative theory at the crossroads of the theory of action and moral theory, we have made narration serve as a natural transition between description and prescription [. . .] The actions refigured by narrative fictions are complex ones, rich in anticipations of an ethical nature. Telling a story, we observed, is deploying an imaginary pace for thought experiments in which moral judgment operates in hypothetical mode.” Selves in their complexity becomes woven together in a web of perspectives, the dissolution of self-identity gives way to a definition of the self as both receiver and giver of action.  

What would the notion of praxis look like in Ricœur’s thought once it moved from the hypothetical to the actual? His philosophy is vague but nonetheless has a distinct orientation towards the future and possibility. Human existence is not limited to the present actuality, there is a “‘surplus of being’ to human existence, and this surplus is nothing other than possibility.”  

As humans, we have the possibility, indeed capability, (and Levinas will argue responsibility) to direct our own existence. Ricœur’s hermeneutics is based on religious and biblical history; it is an exploration of capacities “which make the human being a being of the future, namely the bearer of unfulfilled promise.”

Ricœur sees the notion of praxis as key to his work in Oneself as Another, stating, “one could say that these studies together have as their thematic unity human action and that the notion of action acquires, over the course of the studies, an ever-increasing extension and concreteness.” Here the discussion loops back around to recapture ideas stated in the three previous sub-sections. The importance of speech acts has just been demonstrated, and it is these speech acts that constitute agents of action and allow the

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105 Ricœur, *Oneself as Another*, 170.
107 Ricœur, “Reply to Don Ihde.” Hahn, 73.
108 Ricœur, *Oneself as Another* 19.
agent of action be designated as the one who is acting. “The questions ‘Who is speaking?’ and ‘Who is acting’ appear to be closely interconnected.” 109

It is evident that Ricœur’s philosophy of narrative identity is contingent upon individuals living in a community made up of interwoven stories.

We are subjects in others’ stories, others are subjects in our stories; others are authors of our stories, we are authors of others’ stories. Our narratives are essentially interwoven with other narratives. We are characters in other narratives [. . .] Through our discussions and interactions with others we facilitate the articulation and direction or their narratives, and they ours. All this to say that our identity is never simply our own. It is embedded with relations with others and we do not have ultimate control over the nature of these relationships much less the nature of our identity. 110

Long gone is the tradition of Enlightenment thinking affirming the capacity of each individual to constitute identity given recourse to reason. While Ricœur’s philosophy cannot properly be called post-metaphysical, he is nevertheless interested in fundamentally re-thinking ontology. “Ricœur’s wager for meaningfulness is itself fully warranted when it is extricated from all metaphysical contexts, as indeed it is when it is grounded in the hermeneutical implications of human action and narrative discourse.” 111

112 The meaning of being is too often confused with meaning-as-being. Past ontologies have lost the authority needed to act as a base for Ricœur’s hermeneutics, he sees the new meaning of being (i.e. a new ontology) as “act and potentiality”. 113 This rejection of traditional ontologies is a thread running through the work of Ricœur, Levinas, and Marion. Eventually we come to understand that it is praxis that allows us to interpret the world as meaningful, and the origin of praxis is in a communally interpreted text.

109 Ibid., 17.
110 Vessey 1.
111 Schrag, The Self After Postmodernity, 88.
112 Ricœur himself resists applying the term post-metaphysical to his work, believing the terms “metaphysics” and “onto-theology” are too often treated as interchangeable terms.
From Ricœur’s work that we have briefly examined here, we can ascertain his relationship to the idea of religious community. His philosophy, while resting on the notion of the solitary self, finds fullness in his hermeneutics of language and belief. “Setting up a self through the mediation of the Scriptures and the application of oneself of the multiple figures of naming God happens at the level of our most fundamental capacity for action. It is the homo capax, capable man, who is interpellated and restored.” 114 Essentially Ricœur’s philosophy is one calling for action, a praxis (practice) that is rendered meaningful against the background of religious community.

Even as a self-proclaimed Protestant Ricœur’s position concerning personal faith is difficult to determine from his work, and in no way does he claim to be a theologian. “Though it is evident that Ricœur views himself in the vanguard of a renaissance of the sacred, he is more concerned with elaborating the condition for the possibility of revelation and redemption rather than with proclaiming their historical achievement. [. . .] Ricœur is perhaps best viewed as an apologist for the intelligibility of the Christian kerygma.” 115 In the introduction to Oneself as Another, Ricœur tells us about certain final chapters that were part of the original series of lectures 116 (upon which the book was based) but were not included in the final print version. The focus of these chapters was Ricœur’s biblical hermeneutics. He chose to exclude them for several reasons (which Ricœur himself calls “debatable and perhaps even regrettable”117), primarily because he wanted to pursue “an autonomous, philosophical discourse” 118 and avoid the dogmatism

113 Ricœur, Oneself as Another. 20.
114 Ricœur, Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences, 146.
115 Vanhoozer 284.
117 Oneself as Another 24.
118 Ibid.
often associated with theological hermeneutics. In bracketing his personal convictions, Ricoeur nevertheless acknowledges that this omission does not mean that he is uninterested in the problematic of the self as it relates to biblical hermeneutics. *Oneself as Another* is characteristic of Ricœur’s work at large: “It will be observed that this asceticism of the argument, which marks, I believe, all my philosophical work, leads to a type of philosophy from which the actual mention of God is absent and in which the question of God, as a philosophical question, itself remains in a suspension that could be called agnostic.” 119 120 The fact that he does not fully extend his thought to its implications for religious concerns is both a strength and a shortcoming in Ricœur’s work. Nevertheless, I believe that his philosophy tacitly necessitates the idea of religious community as the space where the elements under consideration become thinkable and take on shape. The self, possessing identity understood as ipse, having been constituted by its encounter with alterity, interprets texts and gives meaning to the world by being grounded temporally and culturally. The community is not an arbitrary grounding but the space where the self interacts with and is constituted by these elements (the Other, discourse, narration)—apart from an understanding of community these interactions would remain senseless.

119 Ibid.
II. EMMANUEL LEVINAS

“...I was strongly attracted to the prophetic fervor of Levinas, to his biblical call for justice, to this remarkable phenomenon of a philosopher-cum-prophet, of a distinctly prophetic voice, raised up among the postmoderns. Levinas seemed to me a kind of modern-day (or post-modern-day) Amos, albeit of a rather more Parisian sort.”  

Emmanuel Levinas has had an enormous influence in contemporary French philosophy and is credited with introducing phenomenology into France. He produced an impressive body of work during his forty-year career, and the number of secondary sources concerning his work is continually increasing as a tribute to his impact. Lithuanian by birth, in 1928 Levinas went to Freiburg to study phenomenology under Husserl and later Heidegger and maintained precarious relationships with both men, eventually distancing himself from Heidegger during WWII given the latter’s affiliation with Nazism. In 1940 Levinas became prisoner of war and was sent to a forced labor camp, while his parents, brothers, and many relatives were all killed in Nazi-related genocide in the Ukraine.

During the fifties Levinas began to develop his philosophy of ethics arising in part from what he considered the ethically neutral ontological tradition. His work was little known prior to the publication of Totalité et Infini in 1961. The main thrust of the work is the relationship between the self and Other, establishing Levinas as a phenomenologist of alterity. In his 1974 publication Autrement qu’Être Levinas elaborates these ideas and

121 Captuo, Demythologizing Heidegger, p3
122 See attached extended bibliography on Levinas
123 Surprisingly, given his impact upon continental philosophy, Levinas has not had as much influence in analytic circles as one might expect. This frequent omission is caused by several features of his writing: “...Because of its dense style and apparent abandonment of rational argument and justification in favour of repetitive incantations and quasi-religious absolutist pronouncements, Levinas’s work is largely ignored among analytic philosophers. One is tempted to say that, rather than revealing things in the
declares his intention to overcome ontology. Levinas has also written extensively on Talmudic interpretation, however, he has been intentional about establishing himself as a philosopher by using a separate publisher for his religious writings. Two of his so-called religious works will appear in the following discussion—*Of God Who Comes to Mind* and *Difficult Freedom*.

Levinas’s preoccupation with the possibility of an encounter with the Other is evident throughout his work. Drawing extensively on the work of Heidegger, Levinas immediately attempts to refute the charge that objects intended by the consciousness are also constituted by it. According to Husserl, the object is always an intentional object, because the mode of access to the object partially forms the object itself. Levinas would say that intentionality does not entirely replicate that which is already possessed by consciousness because consciousness is part of the world and the subject-object duality denies the sovereignty or independence of either. Levinas’s definition of intentionality is modified to include this idea of a process as continual interchange which he will define as a relationship to alterity that denies the hegemony of the same. He charges Husserl with a flawed understanding of consciousness, as revealed through phenomenological reduction and appearing to stand apart from time and experience. Nevertheless, Levinas comments, “Despite everything, what I am doing is phenomenology, even if there is no reduction according to the rules set by Husserl, even if the whole Husserlian method is not respected” 124

Given his discrepancies with Husserl, why does Levinas choose to employ the phenomenological method and vocabulary? For Levinas, phenomenology triumphs over
other philosophies because allows what is distinctly human to emerge. “Levinas credits Husserl with reawakening philosophy to the possibility of being able to describe concrete, lived human life, without reducing it to a series of inner psychic experiences (as with the Cartesian way of viewing consciousness).” Levinas follows Heidegger in seeing the traditional concept of God as too dependant upon the realm of being, he is interested in getting past God as an ontological characterization and phenomenology allows such a pursuit. The notion of God runs through Levinas’s work but should not be confused with the notion of the existence of God, which would remain entirely within the category of metaphysics. “For Levinas, that which challenges the sphere of totality may be understood as ‘transcendence’, the ‘other’, and ‘the infinite’; and Levinas may be seen as trying to open up phenomenology to describe this transcendent dimension of human experience.” Levinas begins from Heidegger’s existential philosophy of being-in-the-world as opposed to Husserl’s transcendental idealism. Knowledge does not unfold in isolation or neutrality but rather from an existential grounding in lived experience.

II.A. “Defense of Subjectivity”

In Totality and Infinity Levinas demonstrates the key role subjectivity plays in his philosophy, it is fundamental to his subsequent development of alterity for which he is best known and thus a logical place to begin the discussion. In the introduction, Levinas states: “This book then does present itself as a defense of subjectivity, but it will apprehend the subjectivity not at the level of its purely egoist protestation against infinity,

124 Levinas, Of God Who Comes to Mind, 140.
125 Morgan 328.
126 Morgan 329.
nor in its anguish before death, but as founded in the idea of infinity.”  

Subjectivity understood in Levinas’s terms is not self-reflexive or egotistical. Infinity is the idea we have of God, clearly distinguished from totality, which would be a misrepresentation. He does not want to stay trapped in Descartes’ circle of immanence (the mind that locks thought in itself), nor he does not want to deny integrity to the subject. He accomplishes this task by grounding the idea of subjectivity in infinity. “Me voici” (here I am) is the statement that precedes self-consciousness. “[H]ow does this pre-originary self express itself? As someone, experienced as an Ego (Moi) but on a level prior to (i.e. beneath and beyond) any awareness of itself as self and expressed only by articulating the total exposure of the self-signifying sign to the Other in saying ‘me voici,’ that is ‘vois-moi ici,’ ‘see me here,’ ‘here I am.’”

Can Levinas’s concept of the self and subjectivity be called post-metaphysical? The Cartesian subject seizes itself as subject by reference to the non-self. Likewise, an encounter with the infinite is utterly resistant to the solipsism of the transcendental Ego. In this way Descartes discovers a relation with a total alterity irreducible to interiority and his infinite God becomes the basis for the Other in Levinas’s thought. “I do not get an answer to the question, Who am I? by regarding myself but by responding to somebody and by distinguishing myself from the Other in responding to him. I do not proceed from myself, but rather I return to myself by a retrograde movement that Levinas calls recurrence.”

If the relationship with alterity is constitutive of subjectivity, how is it conceived? Levinas works to free subjectivity from ontological constraints, thus the title of his work *Otherwise than Being*.

Subjectivity is not ontologically elucidated by showing how the movement of Being issues in its constitution as an entity—or by showing how it constitutes itself as a term and a commencement by an ecstatic flight from Being. Levinas opposes the ontological philosophy which accounts for subjectivity as a locus or moment engendered by the inner movement of Being for its own exhibition. He intends to show subjectivity as the locus where alterity makes contact, a locus finally created by this movement of alterity. As support of alterity, subjectivity’s final meaning is not to be a subsistent entity or moment of Being.  

To what extent can Levinas’ idea of self be linked to his Jewish roots? There appears to be a certain privileged sense of having been chosen, which then gives action meaning (this idea will be developed in the next section as it relates to human interaction, i.e., self and other in a reciprocal relationship). Levinas’ writing focuses on the correlative themes of freedom and responsibility—starting with the individual but necessarily implicating a relationship with the Other.

The self is unique and free, asserting its freedom to answer the call that appoints it as unique: “[. . .] someone constitutes him- or herself as ‘subject’ by assuming responsibility, by being responsible.”  

Responsibility is the consummation of the self and a prerequisite for freedom, yet paradoxically the self is contingent upon both responsibility and freedom simultaneously. “The coinciding of freedom and responsibility constitutes the I.”  

130 Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, xxii.  
131 Waldenfels 40.  
infinity. The base for a Jewish concept of community is the individual, responsible to God and Other, possessing infinite freedom within this responsibility.

The discussion of alterity is so central to Levinas’s philosophy that it becomes impossible to delve too deeply into a discussion of the self without implying something about the relationship to the Other. Levinas interprets subjectivity as subjection to the other, not as a concept that exists independently. “The other means that which cannot be objectified, the sphere of subjectivity, although not understood in the spirit of mastery, but rather as founded on openness to the other.”  

The self is understood as constituted by alterity, therefore we will move to a discussion of the second element.

II.B. The Levinasian Other: Face and Trace

Levinas indicts totalistic thinking for having reduced alterity to something provisionally separate from the Same or the self but ultimately reconcilable with it. Systems of power, rooted in totality, have served the ontological domination of history by labeling certain ideas as “true” based on how well they can be situated within an already familiar system of references. “Totalité et infini proposes a revolution, not only in phenomenology, but with regard the entire history of European philosophy. [. . . ] Western thought and practice are ruled by a desire for totalization; an attempt is made to reduce the universe to an originary and ultimate unity by way of panoramic overviews and dialectical syntheses.”

According to Levinas, ontological thinking is actually atheistic at its core—by denying the existence of anything outside itself there is no room for transcendence and

133 Morgan 342.
theology finds itself in the place of having to justify its position through philosophical discourse. It becomes a pawn of the rational reasoning that claims absolute authority over meaning and significance. However, Levinas does not advocate mysticism or a simple naïve faith, he sees these as reaffirming the ontological view by placing God once again within the category of being. “God is an object of knowledge revealed to the subject, experienced as a presence. The alleged transcendence of God thereby turns out to be a kind of immanence: God is ultimately understood as part of our own world.”

What exactly is meant by the term Other in the Levinasian sense? In this subsection we will look at the way the Other refers to a person, another human, (le prochain, neighbor, autrui) then to God (the Infinite or Divine).

The other is not merely an alter-ego, not an object to be categorized and made a part of my world. Levinas strives to preserve the Other: once familiar, the Other has lost its distinguishing quality, that of strangeness. The danger for Levinas lies in transforming the Other into a reflection of the Same and violating its alterity—i.e., allowing the Other to become an object of knowledge or experience. How then does Levinas discuss the Other without familiarizing it and thus robbing it of its otherness? In phenomenological terms, traditional philosophy has imposed concepts and systems of constraint upon the other, Levinas even accuses Husserl of supressing the “otherness” of phenomena. “Emmanuel Levinas’s phenomenology is closely attentive to the way in which other human beings inhabit the horizons of my experience and present themselves as a demand to me, a call on me to get outside the sphere of my own preoccupations.”

For Levinas, the Other lies absolutely beyond comprehension and should be preserved in all its

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135 Davis 96.
136 Morgan 5.
irreducible strangeness. The otherness of the Other is manifested in the face of another human. We belong to communities that function according to reciprocal needs, but in order for the concept of community to exist we first have to escape the horizon of the personal ego. Consideration for the other is not about subjective needs and desires—the face of the Other (i.e. the other facing me) interrupts and brings people into ethical relationships.

Levinas acknowledges that there is a desire for the otherness of the other, yet as such this desire can never be satisfied because once otherness is possessed it is lost. Something must first present this otherness to consciousness in order to prevent it from being assimilated and reduced to the Same. Levinas localizes the appearance of this otherness in the face-to-face situation. The face of the Other resists my power to assimilate the Other into my knowledge and realm of experience. This encounter with the Other through the face-to-face is also the birthplace of responsibility and ethics. The possibility of an encounter with Other (which exists prior to our recognition of it) puts my power and freedom into question and makes me responsible.

Perhaps here we find something particularly Jewish about Levinas’s thinking—he interprets the meaning of each and every experience in light of the ethical relation between people, in appealing to our personal responsibility in which each individual is unique and chosen. The Divine is manifested through my neighbor.¹³⁷ Levinas prefers le prochain to the more abstract Autrui—the neighbor is close, a real person in my proximity rather than a philosophical abstraction.¹³⁸ The idea of freedom being subject

to the exteriority of the Other, our neighbor, is a main idea of Hebraic tradition; moral freedom must be constantly oriented by exteriority of other.

Levinas says that language is the way we coexist with the other while keeping otherness intact. I make my world available in words to the other as the expression of a desire that transcends myself. “To speak, at the same time as knowing the Other, is making oneself known to him. The Other is not only known, he is greeted [salué]. He is not only named, but also invoked. To put it in grammatical terms, the Other does not appear in the nominative, but in the vocative.”  

This is an important distinction for Levinas: I can either appropriate the Other or through language give myself to the Other. The manifestation of the face (a living presence or expression) is discourse, and “[Discourse] is the production of meaning” The revealer and the revealed coincide in the face and discourse is how we relate to that which transcends us. The Other remains absolute in the discursive relation, not reduced to the realm of the same.

In Levinas’s philosophy the face of the other is the origin of language and meaning. The other is presented through the act of speaking: me voici (here I am). This statement foreshadows our discussion of discourse in Levinas, and then reciprocally the notion of praxis—the response to the face is morality, responsibility is necessitated by the call. “The face is present in its refusal to be contained. In this sense it cannot be comprehended, that is, encompassed. It is neither seen nor touched—for in visual or tactile sensation the identity of the I envelops the alterity of the object, which becomes precisely a content.” 

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139 Levinas, Difficult Freedom, 7.
140 Levinas, Totality and Infinity, 66.
141 Ibid.
142 Ibid. 194.
Responsibility is a form of recognition and also constitutive of subjectivity, it is the way one expresses oneself to the other. This notion is incomprehensible without the face as the expression and experience of alterity. Levinas’s “…ethical philosophy of responsibility grounded in phenomenology of the face (or quasi-phenomenology: for a face is not so much a mode of appearing of the other as a ‘trace’ where alterity passes)…” 143 In his discussion of the trace Levinas passes from an understanding of alterity as another person to alterity as God, the Divine, to which he gives the name illeity (illéité).

The trace is the most complete and accurate way the divine can be comprehended. Levinas uses the word illeity to express the remote otherness of God—the logical question that follows is: How do we speak of illeity without reducing God to our own familiar, ontologically-bound terms? Of God who Comes to Mind sets out as an investigation into understanding “God” as a meaningful word. God is not an essence, substance, or Being, (each of these terms belongs to the obsolete vocabulary of ontology), rather God is that which is radically exterior. Levinas is not willing to speak of God in terms of negative theology because even that would permit the indirect characterization of what God is and thereby falls short due to its dependence on the language of immanence and ontology. God is transcendence encountered at core of subjectivity, recognized by the trace.

The trace is what we know of God, that which God leaves behind in the world. It is not a sign pointing to a signified or a remainder of that which was originally present and is now gone. Levinas distinguishes between the terms a-Dieu, dieu, and adieu. He

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143 Levinas, Otherwise than Being, xxi.
uses the term “a-Dieu” where the “a” suggests a movement, instead of dieu to avoid implication that God can be considered a noun referring to a substance with separate existence. The adieu suggests a farewell to God as ontological category; God as area of sense not commanded by consciousness.144 It is important to note that “autrement qu’être” (otherwise than being)—the title of Levinas’s text—is not equal to être autrement (being otherwise). This distinction is crucial if the danger of turning the other-than-Being into simply another Being (albeit a different one) is to be avoided.

The Other as Divine and Infinite is transcendent, interrupting the ego. Transcendence is not that which transports us to another place or time but rather a commandment: transcend yourselves and remain in the here and now. The community is the place where we have transcendent encounters with the Other—where alterity in both the human and divine sense is preserved and we are called to be responsible. Levinas’s philosophy is a phenomenology (or transphenomenology) of the modes in which the Other is revealed; in some ways his thinking passes the limits of phenomenology—alterity cannot be conceived of either as a phenomenon or as a being. Levinas’s move beyond ontology is evident—the contact between the Ego and the Other is incomprehensible within an ontological framework. Levinas is critical of Heidegger’s phenomenology because he believes it still brings the Other back into Dasein.145 146

144 Davis 98.
145 Ibid.
146 One possible critique of Levinas is that he tries to develop non-ontological language to express the beyond of Being but uses the very same language to overcome it
II.C. The Saying and the Said

I have divided the section on discourse as it appears in Levinas’s work into two parts—primarily his distinction between the *Saying* and the *Said*, with some analysis of his treatment of texts and Talmudic writings in particular.

In *Otherwise than Being*, Levinas distinguishes between *le Dire* (the Saying) and *le Dit* (the Said). He accuses traditional philosophy of only being concerned with the Said, without recognizing the underlying significance of the Saying. When philosophers concentrate only on what is said they overlook the essential exposure to the Other—without this exposure meaning would not exist. Every utterance is a situation or structure or event which includes an exposure to the Other as a speaker or receiver of discourse. The Saying does not equal that which is said but refers to the action of giving myself to another in discourse, of interacting with the Other. Language, far from being a mere representation of reality, is a way of presenting myself to the Other. While the Said is the birthplace of ontology, the Saying is the place where proximity to the Other is at last conceivable, the place of ethics and responsibility. It is where that which escapes Being, (i.e., the Infinite) can be sought.

For Levinas the Saying and the Said are two aspects of language which bear their own distinct meanings. It is easier to analyze the Said because it is an intentional communication, whereas the Saying is more elusive. In short, the Said can be seen as the traditional philosophical discourse that overlooks the encounter with the Other, (i.e., the event of language, the Saying). Levinas is very aware of the difficulty of trying to make the Saying an object of philosophical discourse or enquiry because the attempt alone suffices to bring the Saying into the realm of the Said and thereby strip it of its essential
quality, that which is Other about it. The problems are parallel: the Other is in danger of becoming an alter ego the same way that the Saying is in danger of being reduced to the Said. “The movement back toward Saying is the phenomenological reduction in which the indescribable is described” \(^{147}\) Who does the Saying? It is a self, pre-original, irreducible point of reference, a self not yet conscious of itself.

The reduction to Saying leads back to something pre-original, pre-phenomenological, before the constitution of the Ego and the birth of consciousness [. . . ] The subject, for Levinas, is not the humanist or existentialist originator of its own actions and meanings, but neither is it the structuralist or post-structuralist battleground of structures and ideologies. Prior to consciousness, hence also prior to choice, commitment, activity or passivity, the subject is exposed to the Other, capable of speaking and responding to the discourse of others. Most importantly, the ethical nature of this exposure is brought out by the verbal link between the ability to respond and responsibility: ‘saying is to be responsible for others [dire, c’est répondre d’autrui]. \(^{148}\)

Also included in this section on discourse is Levinas’s writings about text, in particular his Talmudic interpretations. The Talmud, as a text and as a prophetic book, is of utmost significance for Levinas—a source of inspiration and a possible explanation for human discontent with discursive reasoning. The appeal to prophetic inspiration demonstrates that the Saying is greater than being and transcends it; the Infinite is that which directs all thoughts and all words toward meaning.

The community is the space of the Saying, not the already established Said but the place of living discourse which plays a fundamental part in his philosophy, as was the case with Ricœur.

Levinas sees no contradiction between respecting the authority of a particular text and simultaneously allowing for the uniqueness of each individual interpretation, given the inexhaustible meaning of the Talmud and the possibility of revelation informing and

\(^{147}\) Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 53.
modifying interpretation. The reader solicits the text with current interests in mind, and is reciprocally solicited by the text to an exploration of meaning. The biblical and talmudic texts invite the reader to explore context of quotation in light of the particularities of the current discussion. Following Ricœur, Levinas draws on Gadamer’s hermeneutics: the act of reading brings about a fusion of horizons and is rooted in tradition. In this way interpretation is saved from arbitrariness, subjectivism, and “hermeneutic nihilism” 149 Levinas’s talmudic readings leave space for innovation—the reader plays active role but not exclusive role in the production of meaning.

Discourse in the form of prayer occupies an important place in Levinas’s talmudic writings. The idea of prayer, as grounded in a community, highlights a different aspect of discourse—having its origin in the ‘here below’, prayer moves beyond language, transcending it:

In [prayer] the individual renews his links—through the number, or minyan— with the community of Israel dispersed throughout space and time, and through this unity he renews his links with the highest Unity. His presence and participation in the office, for which the prayer of an isolated person is often merely a consolation, the act of embracing such ancient expressions, such primordial thoughts, all those verbal gestures in a language that thousands of years of history have not destroyed—all this makes one conscious of the presence, permanence and eternity of Israel. 150

Levinas’s writings on prayer are rooted in the idea of community: “whatever the ultimate meaning of prayer, whatever its heights or depths, it is collective prayer, familiar to us all, that opens up this ultimate meaning to the daring tenderness of the few” 151 Essentially for Levinas it is God, by means of a community and through the method of prayer, that allows for meaningful experience. For Levinas, one of the definitions of

148 Ibid., 47.
149 Davis 115.
150 Levinas, Difficult Freedom, 270.
community is Israel; however, he is clear in his stipulation that Israel is not a substitute for an experience but rather the context for the fulfillment of one. “Through Him it is possible to have an elementary, massive and incomparable experience, one we must cultivate in this way: the experience of the reunion of Israel. It does not, for all that, represent a necessary collectivist substitute in the absence of any transcendent nourishment.”  

II.D. The Praxis of Ethical Relationships

The notion of praxis in Levinas’s work takes the shape of ethics. Ethics here designates something other than the conventional or ontological definition. The exposure to the Other, effected in the Saying, provides the core of Levinas’s ethics and distinguishes it from traditional systems. We are in a world and community face-to-face with others, responsible both to and for others. This responsibility is a prior condition to the constitution of the self because who I am is defined and realized by coming into contact with the Other. Otherness prevents totalizing conclusions and allows for a meaningful communal relationship between self and other. Traditional ethical systems are rooted in egoism but Levinas argues (and here diverges from conventional definitions) that responsibility to the Other is actually the fundamental structure underlying ethics. In this way, ethics precedes metaphysics. All social interaction necessarily takes place within the sphere of the other. Therefore, ethics in the Levinasian sense is an inescapable part of being human.

151 Ibid.
152 Ibid.
What Levinas calls “L’ethique” (the ethical) does not mean ethics as norms for behavior, rather, it is understood as “a domain from which nothing human can be excluded,” it is the space for consideration of identity and relation to the world. Levinas frequently declares that he never wrote an ethics—not as doctrine about moral principles, norms, obligations, or interdictions that rule human behavior. Ethics here signifies the place where the ethical and theoretical cannot be opposed or even distinguished, where opposition between “is” and “ought” is neither possible nor valid. Morality is not simply a branch of philosophy but that which could be called a first philosophy because of its emphasis on the primacy of relationships. First philosophy is the irreducible structure on which the rest of Levinas’s philosophy rests. He starts not from the ego or cogito (as would a traditional metaphysics-based ethics), but with the ‘face-to-face’, a confrontation of two selves, confrontation that is both descriptive and normative and the condition upon which subjectivity develops.

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153 Davis 3.
155 Here lies another possible critique of Levinas: the ethical dimension is supposedly where the descriptive and prescriptive meet, but this is ambiguous, and perhaps deliberately so. He is not always clear how, when, or why the move is made from “is” to “ought”.

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III. JEAN-LUC MARION

In his 1977 work *L'idole et la distance* Marion understands the “death of God” to mean the death of the metaphysical concept of God. He undoes traditional Nietzschean pessimism by arguing that perhaps the seeming failure of God (a God that is eventually “killed” by modern humankind) is really proof of God’s loyal omnipresence. Marion understands the true presence of God to be a function of distance, thus, if we have “killed” God we have killed only what was nearby, that which was understood ontologically, a function of the category of being. He goes further to say that not only is God understood as a function of distance, but that even questions of presence or absence fall into the category of that which needs to be deconstructed—namely, all concepts and language that we have employed to render “God” understandable or accessible. Concepts or definitions arising out of metaphysics are inherently flawed because they impose limits on the limitless—God by definition exceeds every description we can invent. Marion sees this failure as promising, opening up new space for a new theology of “God without being”. Respect of distance and the refusal to reduce God to our concepts of Being allow for true thought and language about that which has been in the past unthinkable and ineffable. The key text for this section will be Marion’s *God Without Being* in which he elaborates the discussion begun in *Idol and Distance*—he attempts to escape the limits imposed by thinking in terms of being by understanding history as phenomenologically signaling God’s presence in contrasting ways: the idolatrous versus the iconic.
III.A. The Subject as Recipient and Participant

In a way that is reminiscent of Levinas’s philosophy of the Self and Other, Marion’s subject only becomes such to the extent that he/she is subjected to the otherness of another person—the subject is called into selfhood. Marion repeats Levinas’s phenomenological grounding of subjectivity, which is a sense-bestowal from the exterior, from an encounter with the Other. Marion refers to this sense-bestowal as the claim, stating:

The claim calls me. I have not even been able to say, before the claim has already hailed me, and therefore has taken and comprehended me, because it has summoned and named me as a me. Indeed, what can I answer to a claim, if not ‘me voici! Speak!’ such that I no longer have to speak (myself) in the name of I?? The claim alone first speaks and therefore exempts me from the I and establishes me as a me.\(^{156}\)

This “naming” of the self is constitutive. It is Marion’s way of bypassing the problem of the Ego and developing a sense of identity that does not have subjective origins but is instead constructed in response to the claim. Why is the notion of the self a key concept in Marion’s phenomenology? While he spends less time on the issue than either Ricœur or Levinas, the self is one of the basic elements necessary for Marion to develop the idea of donation (givenness): essentially the “me” becomes the recipient when in relationship with God as Giver.

Marion’s subject provides the base for the other elements we will consider. They are all contingent upon understanding the self as having been constituted by the claim. From the idea of subjectivity we will proceed to formulate a concept of God as the non-ontological Other (how does the subject conceive of the Divine in a way that avoids idolatry); the self as the recipient of the saturated phenomenon (known only through
revelation, i.e., revealed to the subject); and finally the self as participant in the Eucharist. Marion’s philosophy culminates in this idea of participation—each individual partakes of the body and blood of Christ and in that sense expresses and confirms their individual faith, yet the Eucharist is simultaneously a communal activity where selves enter into community with one another. These various functions and roles of the self will be examined in more depth in the following subsections.

III.B. God as the Non-ontological Other: The Triumph of the Iconic Over the Idolatrous

For Marion alterity clearly refers to G®d—as contrasted with Ricœur’s ambiguity and Levinas’s Other as both human neighbor and Infinite God—a continuous search for alternate ways of speaking about the Divine, an attempt to be free of the quotation marks by understanding “God” outside ontology.

As a well-known contemporary phenomenologist, Jean-Luc Marion initially adopts the phenomenology of Heidegger, believing him to be the first to disassociate God and Being, yet there is still a fundamental difference between Heidegger’s Being and Marion’s G®d. This difference relates to the difference between a being and Being (Daesin) as conceived by Heidegger—a being is something we can possess while Being is elusive, avoiding description and explanation. The continual forgetting of this difference has led to linking the two, to describing Being in terms of a being, to constructing a metaphysics or ontology. These systems provide beings with a foundation that eventually results in a highest Being which is its own cause (i.e., Descartes’ Causa Sui). According to Marion, it is imperative that the distance be maintained between

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being and Being, and criticizes Heidegger for relegating God to a place within the system that articulates this difference. For Marion, Heidegger’s injustice lies in the way he reduces or neutralizes God instead of placing God completely apart from ontological systems. In this, Marion considers Levinas a strong ally, for as we have seen Levinas is preoccupied with maintaining the radical alterity of God which he terms illeity.

One of Marion’s major contributions has been his phenomenological discussion of the idol and icon; it is this distinction that gives us access to that which is completely other. It is helpful to preface the discussion with a clarification: the idol and icon are not two different types of being. The same thing can be either one or the other at different moments, because “[t]he idol and icon determine two manners of beings for being, not two classes of beings.” 157 The comparative phenomenology of the idol and icon concerns modes of apprehension and reception of the divine in visibility.

Marion states that “the conceptual idol has a site, metaphysics; a function, the theology in onto-theology; and a definition, causa sui.” 158 The idol is the result of human projection. Finding its origin in our human subjectivity, the idol represents our expectations frozen into an image that simply reflects us back to ourselves. “The decisive moment in the erection of an idol stems not from its fabrication, but from its investment as gazeable, as that which will fill a gaze.” 159 The intention of the glance does not permit itself to be transcended, thus neither the intention nor the glance itself are able to go past the visible, they are fixed and reflected back to the gazing self. “The idol thus acts as a mirror, not as a portrait: a mirror that reflects the gaze’s image, or more exactly, the

157 Marion, God Without Being, 9.
158 Ibid., 36.
159 Ibid., 10.
image of its aim and the scope of that aim.”  

However, the mirror remains invisible, so the viewer has the illusion of seeing something divine when gazing at the idol. The divine is enclosed and trapped in the human glance. “What renders the idol problematic does not stem from a failure (e.g. that it offers only an ‘illusion’) but, on the contrary, from the conditions of its validity—it’s radical immanence to the one who experiences it, and experiences it, rightly so, as impassable.”  

Measures used to gauge concepts supposedly representing God are simply products of human thought. Idols are conceptual—“When a philosophical thought expresses a concept of what it then names ‘God’, this concept functions exactly as an idol.”  

According to Marion, modernity’s concept of God has developed in this idolatrous manner and has thus silenced God and left humanity with the false conviction of having ‘killed’ God.

Marion’s phenomenology of the icon gives us access to the divine due to its origin beyond subjectivity. The icon is not produced by the human glance as is the idol, the icon summons the viewer’s glance. “The icon does not result from a vision but provokes one.”  

With the icon the invisible is made visible because the glance and its intentions are no longer frozen; they transcend the icon and find no rest, the glance can only focus on infinity. “…the icon opens in a face that gazes at our gaze in order to summon them to its depth”  

This idea has biblical reinforcement: Paul’s letter to the Colossians refers to Christ as “the icon of the invisible God”  

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160 Ibid., 12.
161 Ibid., 28.
162 Ibid., 16.
163 Ibid., 17.
164 Ibid, 19.
165 Colossians 1:15
God cannot enter our thoughts without saturating them, exceeding them, entering into our thought “only in obliging it to criticize itself.” 166 The only scriptural idea that serves as both name and intention is Agape, “God is Agape.” 167 God as Love is not fulfilled by being conceptualized and does not allow the idolatrous gaze: “For Love does not present itself as an object to be admired and contemplated in and of itself, but rather directs the recipient’s gaze to the Giver and Subject of that Love. Love does not pretend to comprehend or embody the invisible but instead gives itself over in order that the intention of the Giver might be encountered by the recipient.” 168 169

This notion of givenness that we touched upon in the intro becomes a central idea in Marion’s philosophy. “For what is peculiar to love consists in the fact that it gives itself. Now, to give itself, the gift does not require that an interlocutor receive it, or that an abode accommodate it, or that a condition assure it or confirm it.” 170 This is how God moves out of the constraints of idolatry—the fact that no one can impose any conditions. Reason is not capable of disclosing religion because it is an idol; only revelation (i.e. self-giving) can be classified as an icon. For us as humans its necessary first to be in order to then act, speak, or love. But we should not reduce God to our categories of being or impose our determinations. For God the opposite is true—God is love before being, constituting a “radical reversal of the relations between being and loving” 171 compared with what we know from our human experience. Marion encourages us to think God outside the concept of Sein, in the horizon of God’s own self-revelation as Agape.

166 Marion, God Without Being, 19.
167 1 John 4:8
168 Foutz 5.
169 Marion has been criticized for ignoring the possibility that love itself could become an idol.
170 Marion, God Without Being, 47
171 Ibid., xx.
As much as Marion draws on phenomenology in order to articulate the idol/icon distinction, he also recognizes potential shortcomings in its applicability. God’s face could never appear within the horizon of phenomenology because God cannot be reduced to the perception of the ego or constituted by the I.  

“God would fail to appear as a phenomenon precisely because he exceeds the limits of a horizon and refuses to be reduced to the ego’s constituting glance.”

In this rejection of Husserlian phenomenology Marion proposes another possibility, that of an unconditional and irreducible phenomenon that reverses the reduction by surpassing it. “The religious phenomenon is an impossible phenomenon, for Marion, not because it fails to measure up to the ‘criteria of phenomenality,’ but because it overwhelms those conditions—it exceeds them, bedazzles them, saturates them with a donation which far exceeds the intention.”

This is what Marion refers to as the saturated phenomenon, God giving himself in Christ.

III.C. Christ as the Word Incarnate

GΩd, liberated from onto-theological conceptions, is at the origin of meaningful religious discourse according to Marion. God is the source—discourse does not have human origins but is dependent upon God’s self-revelation. Christ calls himself the Word, the Logos, and he abolishes the gap between speaker and sign. Christ says Himself and thereby transgresses language. “The Word says [himself] absolutely though

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173 Ibid.
174 Ibid.
unspeakably, unless he is only absolved from unspeakableness in traversing it by a perfect incarnation.”  

The Word/Logos is the *Said* of the Father. The Word is the discourse that changes humanity definitively: “Only the Said that lets itself be said by the Father can assure the pertinence of our logos concerning him.” We must let the Word speak, to and about God. The theologian should abandon “discourse and every linguistic initiative to the Word, in order to let himself be said by the Word, as the Word lets himself be said by the Father [. . .] Our language will be able to speak of God only to the degree that God, in his Word, will speak our language and teach us in the end to speak it as he speaks it.” Marion sees this distinction as the fundamental difference concerning Christianity:

That which theology has to say, that which distinguishes its voice from among the other voices of the world is the fact that Christ alone abolishes the distance between speaker and speech, between sign and referent. For just as Christ speaks the Word of God, he himself is the Word, and thus speaks himself. This is the power and promise of the Christian theology: Christ speaks himself, the Word. Thus any legitimate Christian theology must be conceived as a logos of the Logos, a word of the Word, rather than proposing its own logos about the Logos or allowing its own logos to precede the Logos.

As we have seen, with the icon the invisible is made visible, but this move from idol to icon necessitates our thinking in terms of *donation*. Why is this concept so important in

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175 Marion, *God Without Being*, 141.
176 In this Marion’s thinking differs from that of Levinas; the *Said* no longer has a negative connotation but instead refers to what the Father has spoken, i.e. Christ as Word. Given this distinction, one must be cautious about the danger of viewing Marion’s thinking as “completing” that of Levinas the way some view Christianity to be the “fulfillment” of Judaism. Rather, the dialogue between the two must be thought of as a valid expression of two different faith systems, both valuable and complete yet with acknowledged differences.
177 Ibid., 143.
178 Ibid., 144.
179 An interesting consideration here would be Marion’s emphasis on silence as a valid and appropriate discourse—paradoxical because at first it appears to be the *absence* of discourse. An interesting topic for further study would be Marion’s place in the tradition of negative theology.
the philosophy of Marion? In an essay entitled “Sketch of a phenomenological concept of gift,” Marion elaborates on the centrality of understanding givenness (donation). Primacy is given to the notion of the gift because Marion sees the revelation is “saturated” meaning—a phenomenon must be able to give itself and the only way for this to occur is through the gift, (as the trait of every phenomenon revealing itself). Evidently, in order to understand the role of revelation, central to Marion’s thinking, this notion of the gift must be closely examined.

The gift understood in metaphysical terms is flawed according to Marion: the giver, as the active efficient cause, gives the gift to a passive recipient. In this sense, givenness is bound by a link of reciprocity—gratuity on the part of the giver implies that the giver needs to make restitution. The giver as the efficient cause produces a material cause (the gift) and the end result is a final cause, understood either as the benefit of the receiver or the glory of the giver. This definition of givenness is clearly paradoxical—Marion follows Jacques Derrida in his analysis of the gift. First, for the gift to remain a gift and not become a system of exchange, there must be no reciprocity, no debt is incurred, no contract entered. As soon as the gift-giver and gift-recipient are bound by reciprocity, true donation (givenness) disappears. The gift is only beneficial if the recipient does not immediately interpret it as something to be returned—this is the idea of pure gratuity. The recipient is not ungrateful, rather, a true gift surpasses consciousness so that it remains “unknown”. The disappearance of the recipient also implies that the

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180 Foutz 6.
giver must be unaware of the gift being given. Consciousness of the gift signifies self-recognition and approval on the part of the giver, a certain “narcissistic gratitude”. The difficulties here are readily apparent: if in losing the gift I re-find myself then we are back to a system of exchange. The loss becomes gain because the self weighs more that the gift given, therefore infinitely more is gained in the giving of the gift. Hence givenness only becomes possible once separated from metaphysics. It is this understanding of givenness that allows a discourse to emerge—it is God giving us the Word and enabling us to speak.

III.D. Eucharistic Participation

Discourse becomes meaningful insofar as people in the community participate in the transcendent. The Eucharist, which is the meeting point of immanence and transcendence and central to Marion’s thought, necessitates a community. It is a ritual practiced with other people in the presence of God, it is also a ritual done in the presence of a community and in communion with God. Love can only be known through praxis—in loving and being loved. It belongs to the realm of personal relationships, love is dependent upon performance to be realized.

As was demonstrated in the previous section, “other hermeneutics fixate on meanings within the text, [while] theology and Christian readers desire the advent of the referent himself.” 183 We are unable to understand the text apart from the help of the Word—we must go beyond the text to the Word and let Christ as Logos reveal Himself and inform our reading of texts. But how does this occur? Marion answers: through

183 Foutz 6.
participation. Marion’s philosophy is essentially one of action in the form of participation in the Eucharist.

To illustrate this point Marion uses the example of Jesus appearing to the two men on the road to Emmaus—the risen Christ does not disclose his identity until the three participate in the Eucharist. “[T]hey said to one another, ‘did not our hearts burn within us, when he was speaking along the way, when he opened to us the text of the Scriptures?’” 184 The importance of the Eucharist in Marion’s philosophy is evident. Scripture, as the Word of God, is understood through the Word (Logos), that is, Christ. It is this “self-referentiality” (the Logos making the Word comprehensible) that allows us to interpret the text and find it meaningful. “The Eucharist accomplishes, as its central moment, the hermeneutic. It alone allows the text to pass to its referent, recognized as the nontextual Word of the words.” 185

The third and fourth elements under consideration (discourse and praxis) are inextricably linked: interpretation and meaning are impossible without acknowledging the site of action. We join with Christ, the referent, as we participate in communion. “The Eucharist alone completes the hermeneutic; the hermeneutic culminates in the Eucharist; the one assures the other its condition of possibility: the intervention in person of the referent of the text as center of its meaning, of the Word, outside of the words.” 186 Again we see circular reasoning, not vicious or redundant but rather where each part aids in our understanding and considered together they form an intelligible, comprehensible whole. “The circle is closed: the hermeneutic presupposes that the disciples occupy the

184 Luke 24:32
185 Marion, God Without Being, 149.
186 Ibid., 151.
eucharistic site of the Word, but their hermeneutic, in return, passes through every text and all speech, toward, again, the absolute referent.” 187

Marion clearly affirms the necessity of a community as the only possible context for joining together the various elements we have considered.

Finally the community: it hears the text, verbally passes through it in the direction of the referent Word, because the carnal Word comes to the community, and the community into him. The community therefore interprets the text in view of its referent only to the strict degree that it lets itself be called together and assimilated, hence converted and interpreted by the Word, sacramentally and therefore actually acting in the community. 188

His emphasis on community refers directly back to Scripture and our responsibility as participants:

Marion places the locus of communal identity in participation of the Eucharist [. . .] this basis of identity is much more meaningful and nearer (if not identical) to the outward criteria of communal identity suggested by Christ himself in Scripture. Thus Marion grounds his understanding of the community on a very sure foundation, a foundation which both Christ and Scripture demand of the individual. It is clear that these two witnesses place upon the individual a responsibility to participate in the Eucharist with the understanding that it is done so in order to partake and encounter the Living Christ. 189

Essentially, praxis for Marion takes the form of faith, belief as the culmination or fulfillment of discourse. Faith is an end in itself. “Faith neither speaks nor states; it believes, and has no other end than to believe.” 190 We end our discussion of Jean-Luc Marion with a clear organization of the four elements: bringing the individual into relationship with the Other, (GΩd,) by way of the Word, (Christ,) at the site of Eucharistic practice.

187 Ibid., 152.
188 Ibid.
189 Foutz 8.
190 Ibid., 183.
CONCLUSION

“In order for love to be able to penetrate the World, which is Redemption, in order for Time to move to Eternity, Love must not remain at the state of individual enterprise, it must become the work of community, the time of a community. One must be able to say, from now on, ‘We’.”

This final section will be an examination of why the four elements identified in the work of each philosopher not only allow the idea of religious community to emerge, but actually necessitate such a move.

At first glance, the idea of limiting subjectivity of interpretation within a community seems natural, given that the Biblical and Talmudic texts originated in a community and have been preserved in the same fashion. Indeed it would be ridiculous to assert that religious thinking can take place completely independently of a community. Despite many variations of both Christianity and Judaism that currently exist, at the core they are all the result of centuries of interpretation compounded and modified. All theologies that develop do so with the influence of a particular religious community. Thus the idea of community makes sense historically, but is it still relevant today? This exploration of religious community takes into consideration the analysis of the four elements as the shaping force behind contemporary Judeo-Christian thought.

The word community as I have understood it is admittedly ambiguous, and necessarily so. Rather than oversimplify, I have chosen to risk being too vague in order to preserve the complexities of what I understand a possible present-day religious community to be. It appears that a community preferences the “we” over the “other”—exactly the kind of thinking Levinas works to eliminate. There are many paradoxes to be examined here, as well as the complexities that arise from working with a notion with
such a loose definition. I want to establish broad ideas based on the four fundamental elements which could then later be adapted and applied to specific instances of religious community, be they Protestant, Jewish, Roman Catholic or otherwise.

Far from identifying a religious community with a homogenous group, (a “community” defined as consensus would be both threatening and entirely unworthy of philosophical consideration), there is obviously a precarious balance to be found here. On the one hand, community is a shared understanding between a group, and on the other it is a place fueled by difference. Calvin Schrag defines community as “principally a creative and self-affirming modality of being-with-others in society, as contrasted with conformism and mere conventionalism as a self-effacing modality of being-with” 193

There is clearly an element of transcendence at play here: the dialectic between self and community is something that continually constitutes itself and at the same time belongs to a tradition antedating the point of origin of the self. Similarly, Drucilla Cornell, representing the view of Hegel, writes that

> [t]he community is not an external force that coerces the previously isolated individuals; rather, the community is internal to the individuals themselves, their own interrelatedness, which makes them who they are. Recognition (Anerkennen) is achieved between individuals when they understand community as their internal interrelatedness, “the we that is I and the I that is we.” 194

Once again the focus is on the double identity of a community, as each individual remaining distinct but at the same time bound to and defined by the other members of the community.

191 Levinas, Difficult Freedom, 193.
192 One such paradox that arises in Ricœur’s thinking is the paradox of belonging to a community. It is not possible to arrive in nothingness—in this sense one is always fundamentally a part of a community antedating its particular members. It is also the case, however, that the members create the community, it is an entity in continual flux.
193 Schrag, The Self After Postmodernity, 91.
We can now define community broadly as the site where humanity is brought into relationship—the place where the self encounters the immediate other and the ultimate Other. Following Heidegger’s emphasis on the complex web of human relations and the impossibility of “pure” intentionality, we are always part of a community—albeit vague and nondescript—i.e. interacting with other human beings. Theoretically the concept of community appears to be a given, now we will try to narrow down our understanding given the four elements under consideration and their significance in determining a religious community.

Why is the idea of community that which emerges? What basis do I have for making this claim? I believe it is what makes the elements we have considered intelligible; without the context of community there would be no practical working space for their actualization and they would remain purely theoretical. Community brings the ideas of the self, other, discourse, and praxis into a working relationship; tacitly grounding the work of Ricœur, Levinas, and Marion even when not explicitly stated.

We will begin the synthesis with the first element—the self:

Although agreeing with the postmodernists in their assaults on both the classical substance-theory of the self and the modern epistemological or foundationalist construal of self as transparent mind, the principal argument is that a jettisoning of the self understood in these senses does not entail a jettisoning of every sense of self. In the aftermath of the deconstruction of traditional metaphysics and epistemology, a new self emerges, like the phoenix arising from its ashes—a praxis-oriented self, defined by its communicative practices, oriented toward an understanding of itself in its discourse, its action, its being with others, and its experience of transcendence.\textsuperscript{195}

Obviously the basic unit comprising any group of people is the \textit{individual}. There is a distinction to be made between a group of people and a community. Why does

\textsuperscript{194} Cornell 43.
\textsuperscript{195} Schrag, \textit{The Self After Postmodernity} 121.
community emerge from a study of the four recurrent themes, as opposed to just a group of people identified by their pursuit of similar interests? What is the fundamental difference between a group and a community, and specifically a religious community? Once a self becomes part of a group identity is lost. The goal of a group is to dissolve personal identity, to forgo individuality for the sake of the group. Community, on the other hand, is a cohesive whole comprised of individuals whose individuality is heightened and fulfilled given their relationship with other people. The self in community has been constituted by the presence of others and thus remains paradoxically intact. The self is not sacrificed for the sake of a community, but has necessarily been re-examined in light of the contemporary philosophical and religious context.

The self according to Ricœur, Levinas, and Marion is not understandable apart from the work of the other. Modernity, with its brazen proclamation of the capacity of the individual mind is gone and has been replaced by an emphasis on selfhood as constituted in relationship. According to this latter way of thinking, there is a dialectic at work that is only fully developed in the context of community. “Community is constitutive of selfhood. It fleshes out the portrait of the self by engendering a shift of focus from the self as present to itself to the self as present to, for, and with the other.” 196 We see the interplay between the self and community, each constitutes and is constituted by the other. Who we are cannot be discovered or defined except in a community where people confront each other. We are born into a world that is already constituted by language and community and who we are is both determined by and a reflection of that community. The community in which one finds oneself cannot be reduced to history,

196 Ibid., 78.
culture, or religious practices (though these may occupy significant roles)—the self is discovered as a result of confrontation and has no meaning except in context of community. Levinas’s concept of the “face-to-face” is a dialectical confrontation that grounds communication between others and oneself without reducing or absorbing either to the other. The Other that is essential in constituting our selfhood can also refer to the Divine. There is movement in two directions: a community is both a group of selves who are personally and individually communing with God and thereby joined in mind and spirit, and at the same time a gathering of people in communion with one another who then address God.

The notion of discourse, the third element present in the works we have examined by Ricœur, Levinas, and Marion, is also a fundamental part of distinguishing between a group and a community. A group, while often seeking to adopt particular discourse, is not defined by such. The community, on the other hand, is both embedded in a particular discursive history and tradition, and continually shaping its own space through discourse.

Discourse, as we have seen, can be understood in various ways: communication, texts, interpretation, meaning, prayer, etc. Discourse is what happens between people, or between people and God (i.e. between the self and the human other or between the self and the Divine Other). The self needs a way to relate to exteriority, discourse allows for this communication because it is reflexive. Discourse asks how we find meaning. Interpretation is community based, never carried out in isolation. Meaning lies in the synthesis of individual and communal formation:

Facts thus become defined as facts only against the backdrop of communalized interpretive practices. But such is also the case with respect to values. Values, like facts, do not fall fully clothed, fixed and finished, from some celestial abode. Values become values only when they are taken as being valuable within the
concrete context of everyday life. Like facts, values are constituted and defined against a backdrop of communalized interpretive practices.\textsuperscript{197}

There are no facts without interpretation because a fact becomes a fact only when it becomes relevant. Interpretation is the work of a community. Here we return to Gadamer’s \textit{fusion of horizons}—contact between the text backed by the author’s intent and the reader coming from a particular context allows for meaning.

Action, or praxis, also occurs in various forms, all obviously tied to the idea of community as a space that is continually evolving. It is in flux, adapting and shifting because the individuals who comprise it are also changing. Modernity was uneasy with change, postmodern thought welcomes it. Truth is dynamic, not static, and it is worked out communicatively.

Ricoeur’s notion of action relies heavily on his understanding of discourse, emphasizing the way in which we ‘say’ our actions and interpret their meaning. “To evoke the reason for an action is to try to place the action in a broader context, generally one composed of rules of interpretation and of norms of execution, which are assumed to be shared by the agent and the community.”\textsuperscript{198} Actions, as well as the motivation for those actions, do not necessarily have inherent worth, they become significant due to their place in a community. In order to be intelligible, both discourse and action require the history of discursive and institutional practices in addition to the current context. Religious phenomenon such as those we have discussed, are not isolated phenomenon. Religious community provides both historical perspective and constitutive capability, rendering action, thought, and interaction meaningful. In a community the people are players and participants, not part of a rigid pre-existing system. Communities are

\textsuperscript{197} Schrag \textit{Communicative Praxis and the Space of Subjectivity}, 93.
constructed by the recognition of historical and cultural components that have played a part in the members’ self-constitution, but they also highlight the ethical feature of self-actualization; i.e., the capacity to create and the responsibility that determines our relationship with alterity.

The self that is called into being through discourse and action is at the same time called into being within a community. This was already announced in the recurring references to communicative praxis as an amalgam of discourse and action, supplying the textured space for the self-implicature of the human subject in its manifold concretions.199

Were we to push this study past the theoretical level there would be numerous paths to follow—such as the move toward grounding the theoretical in particular instances of community. (“Jewish universalism has always revealed itself in particularism.” 200) The work of Ricoeur, Levinas, and Marion has shown that community is what saves us from arbitrariness, however, we are still left with only a vague idea of why one might choose a particular community over another. For instance, Levinas discusses Judaism as a community in various senses of the word, yet there exist many different Jewish communities to which one could belong and the issue of why one and not another is never addressed. In essence, we are saved from relativism within a community, but not saved from the relativity of communities. It can be inferred from the silence on this issue that personal tradition plays a role for each of the three—Levinas remains grounded in Jewish tradition and part of a Jewish community because that is what he knows and by which he has been constituted. Essentially participation in a community is motivated by personal choice.

198 Ricœur, Oneself as Another, 64.
199 Levinas, Totality and Infinity, 77.
200 Ibid., 164.
This work has been defined as phenomenological in nature. How has this approach been useful, and what are the potential shortcomings in the application of the phenomenological method? I believe that phenomenology, at its core, is conducive to the idea of religious community: “Husserl recognized the intersubjective communal grounding of the knowing activity and focused more on the ethical dimensions of this intersubjectivity, how the ‘I’ stands in the ‘we’.”  

However, Ricœur, Levinas, and Marion have been charged with the distortion of phenomenology and accused of using it improperly.

An interesting book has appeared recently entitled *Phenomenology and the “Theological Turn”* following the debate over Dominique Janicaud’s 1991 article, “Le tournant théologique de la phénoménologie française.” The book includes responses by Marion and Ricœur, among others, on the possibility of religion as a philosophical rather than a theological project. “Janicaud inverts the scenario of Plato’s *Apology*: he indicts Lévinas et al. for corrupting the future of French philosophy by introducing into phenomenology a god—the biblical God—who does not belong there.” Janicaud offers his own interpretation: there has been a rupture between the phenomenology of Husserl and Heidegger and that of contemporary phenomenologists who now consider religion a suitable subject for inquiry. He states that “Emmanuel Levinas’s *Totality and Infinity* is the first major work of French philosophy in which this theological turn is not only discernible, but explicitly taken up within a phenomenological inspiration.”

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201 Morgan 61.
203 Janicaud 4.
204 Ibid. 36.
an opening to the invisible, to the Other that thwarts the project of immanence. I would argue against Janicaud, as do Marion and Ricœur, that there is a doubly-directed movement here. Indeed, French phenomenology has become more theological in nature, but so has theology become more phenomenological. A more thorough and complex understanding of both of these systems will result in each informing the other. Herein lies what may perhaps be considered the strongest objection to my work: in exchanging the ontological vocabulary for the phenomenological one in order to explore different ways of speaking about the Divine, it is still ontology that dictates what can and cannot be said. While it is clear that modern and/or metaphysical thinking (insofar as the two can be equated) errs in its idolatrous conception of God identified with Being, so also the attempt to think of God “beyond” the ontological difference is to perpetuate the metaphysical system of thought. Ontology still determines the character of that which is thinkable.  

As a concluding remark I acknowledge the shortcomings of a work such as the one attempted here. Out of respect to the current philosophical setting, postmodern in its refusal of preferring any one particular understanding, I believe that various approaches are useful only insofar as they prevent the movement toward totalization—i.e. taking one approach and mistaking it for the approach. I do not see postmodern thought as weakening or even negating truth claims, but rather grounding them by acknowledging the complexity of any given project at hand—in this case a phenomenological approach to the possibility of continuing religious discourse is only valid insofar as one recognizes

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its shortcomings. By acknowledging the possibility of polyvalent truth one can be even more certain of what one believes, because shortcomings are taken into consideration as valid and valuable instead of glossed over in an attempt to make them disappear. I have chosen a philosophical approach because I believe it has particular merits, however, I recognize that there are other ways of speaking about the Divine.

The self in community is historically embedded but has resources for transcending historical specifics by being situated within communicative praxis and existing with others. The Enlightenment preoccupation with individuality undermined any understanding of humans as fundamentally social and communal creatures, embedded in a particular cultural history, and often shaped by religious values and beliefs. The idea of community re-emerges here, against the backdrop of postmodernity, having been informed by the philosophical context but not entirely determined by it. We are both individual and communitarian; contact with others is constitutive of selfhood, such as in Levinas’s face-to-face. God (or G®d) is radically other, otherwise than being, known by the trace and experienced in community. It is against this space, constituted by our participation, that a meaningful discourse is initiated and sustained.
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The following extended bibliographies (including books, articles, and secondary sources) of Paul Ricœur, Emmanuel Levinas, and Jean-Luc Marion include only those sources that have not been previous cited in the section entitled Works Referenced. They are organized alphabetically according to each philosopher. The extended bibliographies are not meant to be comprehensive lists but rather groups of specifically selected entries that will aid the reader in a continued exploration of themes or ideas presented in the preceding study. The limited nature of this study, as an MA thesis, prevented me from consulting the following works, however, out of fairness to Ricœur, Levinas, and Marion, I include these references as an indication of the depth of their work. The sheer volume of secondary sources (which has also been drastically edited here) is a testimony to the central place occupied by these three thinkers in contemporary philosophical and religious thought.
Extended Bibliography—Paul Ricœur

[For a comprehensive bibliography refer to Frans D. Vansina’s Paul Ricœur, Bibliography 1935-2000, (Louvain, Belgium: Leuven University Press, 2000.)]

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