


# Of poetics and possibility: Richard Kearney's post-metaphysical God

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This article provides an overview of Richard Kearney's attempt at re-imagining God post-metaphysically. In the context of a continental dialogue on the topic, Kearney has responded to onto-theology with a hermeneutic and phenomenologically informed attempt to rethink God post-metaphysically. This eschatological understanding of God is expounded in the article and is placed in relation to Kearney's more recent concept of Anatheism. The article closes with a few remarks on what may be gained by Kearney's work, as well as outlining a few critical questions.

## Introduction

This article provides an overview of Richard Kearney's attempt at re-imagining God post-metaphysically. As part of a continental dialogue on the topic, this Irish student of Paul Ricoeur has responded to onto-theology with a hermeneutic and phenomenologically informed attempt to re-imagine God post-metaphysically.<sup>1</sup> This wager forms part of a larger project to imagine 'philosophy at the limit', also the title of a trilogy published in the early years of the new millennium. The focus of this article will fall on the third leg of the trilogy;<sup>2</sup> the 2001 publication *The God who may be: a hermeneutics of religion*. In this volume, Kearney treads the ground between onto-theology's metaphysical God as pure being and negative theology's God as pure non-being, choosing instead to articulate a narrative eschatology (Thompson 2003:102), where:

God neither is nor is not but may be. That is my thesis in this volume. What I mean by this is that God, who is traditionally thought of as act or actuality, might better be rethought as possibility. To this end I am proposing here a new hermeneutics of religion which explores and evaluates two rival ways of interpreting the divine – the *eschatological* and the *onto-theological*. The former, which I endorse, privileges a God who possibilizes our world from out of the future, from the hoped-for eschaton which several religious traditions have promised will one day come. [...] Instead of seeing possibility as some want or lack to be eradicated from the divine so that it be recognized as the perfectly fulfilled act that it supposedly is, I proffer the alternative view that it is divinity's very potentiality-to-be that is the most divine thing about it. (Kearney 2001:1–2)

## Posse and Esse: Kearney's post-metaphysical God

Kearney explores how we may move from old metaphysical notions of God – 'as disembodied cause, devoid of dynamism and desire' – to a more eschatological idea of God as possibility to come: 'the *posse* which calls us beyond the present toward a promised future' (Kearney 2001:3).<sup>3</sup> It is wiser, he holds, to understand divinity as a 'possibility-to-be' than as pure being (onto-theology) or pure non-being (negative theology). He envisions his God of the possible as passionately involved in human affairs and history and therefore as much closer than the metaphysical and scholastic deity to:

the God of desire and promise who, in diverse scriptural narratives, calls out from burning bushes, makes pledges and covenants, burns with longing in the song of songs (*sic*), cries in the wilderness, whispers in caves, comforts those oppressed in darkness, and prefers orphans, widows, and strangers to the mighty and the proud. This is a God who promises to bring life and to bring it more abundantly. A God who even promises to raise the dead on the last day, emptying deity of its purported power-presence – understood

1. Kearney, who wrote his doctoral thesis under Ricoeur's supervision [*Poétique du Possible: Vers une Herméneutique Phénoménologique de la figuration* (1984)] currently holds the Charles B. Seelig Chair of Philosophy at Boston College.

2. The first book of the trilogy, *On Stories* (2002), looks to the central role that narrative and storytelling plays in the lives of human beings, giving us a 'shareable world' (Kearney 2002:3) and providing us with a most viable form of identity (Kearney 2002:4). In *Strangers, gods and monsters: ideas of otherness* (2003), Kearney considers the strange, the divine and the monstrous as three different figures of otherness, illustrating the essential role of hermeneutical understanding for responding to the other (Gregor 2008:148).

3. This essentially demonstrates what Kearney specifically means by 'post'-metaphysical, when applied to re-imagining the sacred. Kearney does not imply a move away from metaphysics altogether, which would be intellectually impossible to do consistently. Instead, he wishes to engage the specific way in which Greek metaphysics has influenced the Judeo-Christian theological tradition, at the same time hermeneutically and phenomenologically exploring counter-narratives in the tradition that may facilitate an eschatological approach to re-imagining God.

metaphysically as *ousia*, *hyperousia*, *esse*, *substantia*, *causa sui* – so that God may be the promised kingdom. (Kearney 2001:2)

## Readings of Exodus 3:14

Kearney considers the story of Moses' encounter with the Divine in the burning bush as an example of religious transfiguration. He sees the enigmatic formula whereby God answers Moses' request to disclose his name, אֱהִיָּה אֲשֶׁר אֲהִיָּה,<sup>4</sup> as God declaring his own *incognito* and manifesting godself in terms of an indefinable divine self-definition where the verbal play leaves us wondering whether God is reducing godself to a metaphysics of presence, or in fact rendering godself immune to it (2001:22).<sup>5</sup> He proceeds to discuss two main traditions of interpretation, one which he terms the 'ontological', and the other 'eschatological', before offering an 'onto-eschatological' interpretation as a third, median way. He suggests an interpretation of the transfiguring God as 'I am who may be' as a way of obviating the extremes of being and non-being, so that:

*'Ehyeh'asher'ehyeh* might thus be read as signature of the God of the possible, a God who refuses to impose on us or abandon us, traversing the present moment while opening onto an ever-coming future. (Kearney 2001:22)

### The ontological reading of אֱהִיָּה אֲשֶׁר אֲהִיָּה

With the Greeks rendering the phrase – Ἐγώ εἰμι ὁ ὢν (*ego eimi ho on*, I am the one who is) – in terms of εἶναι, the verb 'to be', Augustine and the Latin interpreters read the phrase as an affirmation of being, denying any fundamental difference between the Latin *ego sum qui sum* and the *esse* of metaphysics (Kearney 2001:22). Consequently, early and medieval theologians judged the formula to be the highest expression of '*vere esse, ipsum esse*, that is, Being-itself, timeless, immutable, incorporeal, understood as the subsisting act of all existing' (Kearney 2001:22). Augustine's views were developed further by Aquinas. For both these theologians, 'the *esse* of God is nothing other than his *essentia*, and as such exists eternally in the present without past or future: that is, without movement, change, desire, or possibility', and so the God of Exodus became enthroned as 'the most fully-fledged "act of Being"'<sup>6</sup> (Kearney 2001:23).

4. The original Hebrew is translated into Greek as Ἐγώ εἰμι ὁ ὢν (*ego eimi ho on*), into Latin as *ego sum qui sum* and into English as 'I am who am' and 'I am he who is' (Kearney 2001:22). These English translations serve as an illustration of the extent to which most Western translations have been influenced by: 'Greek ontology and particularly the metaphysical emphasis on presence and identity. This is surely one of the main reasons why the non-Hebrew versions of Ex 3:15 take the form of the present tense of the verb to be – 'I am he who is' (New Jerusalem Bible) or 'I am that I am' (King James Bible) (Kearney 2001:117, note 2).

5. The fact that this rare passage adds the verbal promise 'to be' to the 'I Yahweh' of other passages suggest that the Tetragrammaton partakes 'in the semantic field of the verb traditionally rendered as 'to be' – in the constative or conditional mood' (Kearney 2001:22).

6. In a dialogue with John Panteleimon Manoussakis in Rome, 2002, that continues a conversation between Marion and Kearney on 02 October 2001 in Boston, Marion explains his attempt to speak of God in terms 'otherwise' than Being: 'For a long time, one could actually say since the times of Plato, philosophy has been thinking of God in terms of 'beingness' of the *ousia* that grounds or is grounded by the highest being. And for a good reason, being is our ultimate concern: the being we have or the being we lack. But when translated and projected as God, being becomes an idol and perhaps the most resistant idol of God. That is why I have been trying to speak of God without Being or in terms that are otherwise than Being, such as the event, the icon, the other. I was happy to see that I am not alone in this effort. Richard Kearney's recent book, *The God Who May Be*, signals a new way of thinking of God or, better still, as a call that provokes us to think of the phenomenon of God in new ways' (Manoussakis 2004:17).

Ricoeur claims that the encounter of biblical religious thought with Greek metaphysics led philosophers to the idea of Being as the proper name of God and of it designating God's very essence. This laid, as Etienne Gilson showed, the foundation on which all Christian philosophy would build: the claim that there is one God and that this God is Being (Kearney 2001:24). This ontological tenure that the God of Exodus secured in the God of metaphysics has come to be known, after Heidegger, as 'onto-theology': 'a tendency to reify God by reducing Him to a being (*Seiende*) – albeit the highest, first, and most indeterminate of all beings' (Kearney 2001:24).

### The eschatological reading of אֱהִיָּה אֲשֶׁר אֲהִיָּה

Kearney argues that the eschatological counter-tradition to ontological approaches, where the emphasis falls on the ethical and dynamic character of God, is more attuned to the original biblical context of meaning than the essentialist conceptions of divine Being in medieval and post-medieval metaphysics (2001:25). Kearney points to the appellative (rather than predicative) nature of God's self-revelation that comes in the form of a promise [*This is the name I shall bear forever, by which future generations will call me*] (Ex 3:15)]. Instead of hypostatizing the name, he suggests that we read it in the context of dynamic mandate. Hearing the formula in terms of function, narrative and relation, rather than in terms of substance, syllogism and abstraction, enables multiple interpretations of the verb 'to be' and suggests that Moses' 'Here I am' (in response to God's call) and God's 'I shall be' are dependent on each other if the Kingdom is to enter history (Kearney 2001:26). The Name is therefore both theophanic and performative: having been experienced by the Israelites as God of their fathers, God now reveals godself as God of their sons and daughters, as a God committed to an action of salvation.

But the eschatological promise is made in the context of an I-Thou relationship (Moses and God), which implies that there are two sides to the promise: both human and divine. God's commitment to a kingdom of justice needs the commitment of his faithful too, as heralded by the response of the people when they enter into covenant with Yahweh at Sinai. And yet, this does not entail conditionality, for the promise is granted unconditionally. The gift is not imposed, and the people are free to accept it, or not to: 'the ... promise can be realized only if those who receive it do not betray its potential for the future' (Kearney 2001:29). Kearney (2001) explains the implications:

What was crucial for Greek thought was *to be* since divine being was ultimately deemed timeless and permanent, ontological rather than moral. (Just think of Aristotle's God.) For the Hebrews, by contrast, what is most important is *to become, to be able*. Thus while the Hellenists translate Exodus 3:14 as 'I am the Being who is eternal', a non-Hellenic Jew like Maimonides encourages us to conceive of Yhwh as an agent with an active purpose, a God who *does* rather than a *being who is* (*Guide of the Perplexed* 1.45–58). (p. 31)

Also:

In the circular words, I-am-who-may-be, God transfigures and exceeds being. His *esse* reveals itself, surprisingly and

dramatically, as *posse*. The Exodus 3:14 exchange between God and Moses might, I have been suggesting, be usefully reread not as the manifestation of some secret name but as a pledge to remain constant to a promise. God, transfiguring himself in the guise of an angel, speaks through (*per-sona*) a burning bush and seems to say something like this: *I am who may be if you continue to keep my word and struggle for the coming of justice*. ... This God is the coming God who may-be. ... This Exodic God obviates the extremes of atheistic and theistic dogmatism in the name of a still small voice that whispers and cries in the wilderness: *perhaps*. Yes, perhaps if we remain faithful to the promise, one day, some day, we know not when, I-am-who-may-be will at last be. Be what? we ask. Be what is promised as it is promised. And what is that? we ask. A kingdom of justice and love. There and then, to the human 'Here I am', God may in turn respond, 'Here I am'. But not yet. (Kearney 2001:37–38)

## Enabling God: Kearney's God of small things

From this, Kearney draws an indissoluble communion between God and humans that finds expression in 'commitment to a shared history of "becoming"' (2001:29): 'God may henceforth be recognized as someone who *becomes with us*, someone as dependent on us as we are on Him' (Kearney 2001:29–30). And if God's relation with humans is indeed characterised by covenant rather than conceptuality, then this calls for revision of most philosophical reflections of God (such as 'the orthodox onto-theological categories of omnipotence, omniscience, and self-causality') (Kearney 2001:30).

God's promise is to be God at the *eschaton*, and meanwhile, he is in the process of establishing his kingdom of justice in the world. But the relative pronoun אשר (*'asher*, 'what, who') stretches this point even further, indicating that the content of what God will be depends on the content that God's people will give it through their actions in space and time (Kearney 2001:30). Seen comprehensively, then, it is the unaccomplished nature of the verb, the relative pronoun and also the performative (rather than constative) formulation in the voice of the first person ('I may be') that renders Exodus 3:14 'a call to human attestation through a history of effectivity' (Kearney 2001:30).

Kearney (2001) wagers that a 'seismic shift' occurs at the chiasmus where אהיה (*'ehyeh*) meets εἶναι (*einai*), with:

God putting being into question just as being gives flesh to God. At this border-crossing, the transfiguring Word struggles for carnal embodiment even as it dissolves into the flaming bush of its own desire. (p. 34)

For him, the counter-tradition of readings calls for a new hermeneutic of God as May-Be, or, as he calls it, an 'onto-eschatological hermeneutics' or a '*poetics of the possible*' (Kearney 2001:37). This does not imply that God is conditional, however, because for Kearney God's infinite love is not conditional, even if God's future being may be dependent on our actions in history: 'As a gift, God is *unconditional* giving. Divinity is constantly waiting' (Kearney 2001:37).

Kearney's God-who-may-be offers to humans 'the possibility of realizing a promised kingdom by opening ourselves to the transfiguring power of transcendence' (Kearney 2001:2). This God does not impose a kingdom and neither declares it already accomplished from the beginning. Instead, he pictures each human person as carrying the capacity within himself or herself to both be transfigured in this way and transfigure God in turn by giving life and incarnation to divine possibility (Kearney 2001:2). Because the promise that God will be God at the *eschaton* is exactly that – a promise rather than an already accomplished possession – it indicates the 'space of the possible' as 'a free space gaping at the very core of divinity', rendering 'all things possible which would be otherwise impossible to us – including the kingdom of justice and love' (Kearney 2001:4).

But with a God that is *posse* instead of *esse*, without our response, the promise remains ineffective. Therefore, '[t]ransfiguring the possible into the actual, and thereby enabling the coming kingdom to come into being, is not just something God does for us but also something we do for God' (Kearney 2001:4). Enabling the kingdom to be manifested in our world as *esse* is no grandiose and imposing manifesto, however, but instead materialises through small acts of love and mercy, for:

God speaks not through monuments of power and pomp but in stories and acts of love and justice, the giving to the least of creatures, the caring for orphans, widows, and strangers; stories and acts which bear testimony – as transfiguring gestures do – to that God of little things that comes and goes, like the thin small voice, like the burning bush, like the voice crying out in the wilderness, like the word made flesh, like the wind that blows where it wills. (Kearney 2001:51)

## Presence from the beyond: Kearney's eschatological God

Kearney's reader is at times left wondering what exact content he gives to eschatology, or the *eschaton* as such. At times, the eschatological moment seems to refer to all the small instances of love and justice in the world – when humans actualise the possibility of the Kingdom, transforming *posse* into *esse*. At other times, he does seem to envision a form of delayed *eschaton*.<sup>7</sup> Some clarity emerges from his other publications.

In a poetic manner, Kearney attempts to articulate the gift in terms of 'a cocreation of history by humanity and God, leading

7. Here, Kearney considers the question: what would happen to the God of the Possible if we were to destroy the earth? How can God's promise of a kingdom on earth be fulfilled if there is no earth to come back to? What might be said of the existence of God in such a scenario? (Kearney 2007:59).

Kearney offers an answer in three parts. *Firstly*, he suggests that, as 'eternally perduring and constant' (in the sense of remaining faithful and attentive to us in each present moment), 'God would live on as an endless *promise* of love and justice', even if we were to fail this covenant by frustrating its historical fulfilment *on earth* (2007:59). *Secondly*, Kearney proposes that all the 'eschatological "moments"' where, in the past, the divine was incarnated in the world through acts of *caritas* would be preserved by the divine *posse* as eternal *memory* (past). 'In kairological as opposed to merely chronological time, these instants would be eternally "repeated" in divine remembrance' (Kearney 2007:60). The *third* part of Kearney's answer suggests that, should world annihilation prevent a future realisation of the divine *posse* as a kingdom come *on earth*, we cannot by such an act of destruction prevent God from starting over again, since *posse* is precisely the possibility of endless beginning. But, because the *posse* of the Kingdom is not only a promise for universal humanity, but also for unique selves 'whose singular good, but not evil, will be preserved eternally in the recollection of the *deus adventurus*', such selves would 'return with *posse* – as part of God's eternal promise – but without the *esse* of a Second Coming' (Kearney 2007:60–61).

to the Kingdom' (2006:368). Although this cocreation, from the human side, involves our ethical being in the world, we are ignorant of what it will be, because it 'goes beyond the sphere of the phenomenology of history ... It's an *eschaton*. We can prefigure it as eschatology, but it's really something that God knows more about than we do' (2006:369). Divinity, for Kearney, is a constant gifting of the possibility of the Kingdom. This can be interpreted as the eschatological Kingdom at the end of history, or as the Kingdom *now*, 'in the mustard seed, in the little, everyday, fragile, most insignificant acts' (2006:372):

The divine possible takes its leave of being having passed through it, not into the pure ether of non-being, but into the future which awaits us as the surplus of *posse* over *esse* – as that which is more than being, beyond being, desiring always to come into being again, and again, until the kingdom comes. Here at last we may come face to face with the God who may be, the deity yet to come. (Kearney 2001:4)

Thus, the possibility of good and the possibility of non-good exists in every moment, with the implication that we are actualising or not-actualising the Kingdom in every moment (2006:373). Kearney (2006) therefore urges us to depart from thinking that when the Messiah comes, he brings the end of everything:

The coming of Christ *wasn't* the end of the world: the Messiah always comes again in history. And the Messiah is always – including the Christian Messiah – a God who is *still* to come (even when the Messiah has already come). The Messiah is one who has already come and is always still to come. [...] God always comes *and* goes. And that's the nature of the Messiah: it's already here – the Kingdom is already here – but it is also not yet fully here. And it's this double moment that's terribly important because the possible does not mean The End: the telos of universal history coming to an end at the end of time – that's Hegel. That's triumphalism. [...] In contrast to such triumphalist teleologies and ideologies of power, the divine possible I am speaking of comes in tiny, almost imperceptible acts of love and poetic justice. (pp. 373–374)

Yet, despite this emphasis on the moment-to-moment tiny acts of love and justice bringing in the Kingdom, Kearney (2006) also describes a more comprehensive *eschaton*:

If and when the Kingdom comes, I believe it will be a great kind of 'recollection', 'retrieval', or 'recapitulation' (*anakephalaitosis* is the term used by Paul) of all those special moments of love. But you can't even see it in terms of past, present, and future because the eternal is outside time, even though it comes *into* time all the time. Christ is just an exemplary figure of it. [...] Because we're temporal, we're confronted with this unsolvable paradox or aporia – namely, that the Kingdom has already come and yet is not here.<sup>8</sup> And that's the way it is for our finite phenomenological

8. 'The kind of hermeneutics of religion that I'm talking about in my recent trilogy, by contrast, would be much more guided by the paradigm of Jacob's ladder, where there's to-ing and fro-ing, lots of people going up and down, in both directions. No absolute descent or absolute ascent. It's little people going up and down ladders. And that, to me, is how you work toward the Kingdom. 'Every step you take...' (as the song goes). Each step counts. Messianic incursion, incarnation, epiphany is a possibility for every moment of our lives. Because we are finite and temporal, the infinite can pass through time, but it can never remain or take up residence in some triumphant or permanent present. That's the difference between the eternal and time. They can crisscross back and forth, up and down, like the angels on Jacob's ladder. But they are never identical, never the same. That's what a hermeneutic affirmation of *difference* is all about. As opposed to deconstructive *différance*, which, in my view, gives up hope in the *real possibility* of mediation and transition' (Kearney 2006:379).

minds. And no metaphysics and no theology or philosophy can resolve that one. (p. 374)

He sums up:

But for me, God is the possibilizing of the impossible. 'What is impossible to us is possible to God'. We actualize what God possibilizes and God possibilizes what remains impossible for us. To sum up: God as gift means God is *poeticizing*, *possibilizing*, *transfiguring*, and *desiring*. That's my religious phenomenology of the gift. (Kearney 2006:374)

Another way to understand this is by referring to messianic time, which in Kearney's understanding 'subverts and supersedes the linear, causal time of history moving ineluctably from past to present to future' (Kearney 2001:81). The grace of the messianic time surprises us with now-possible impossibilities, revealing 'possibles which are beyond both my impossibles and my possibles', and which would have been impossible had they not been a gift (Kearney 2001:82). The advent promised by the possibilities opened up by the eschatological I-am-who-may-be is so infinite that it is never final, and it is for this reason that the *posse* calls us to struggle for justice – the coming of the kingdom from 'out of the future into every moment, from beyond time, against time, into time – the Word becoming flesh forever, *sans fin*, without end' (Kearney 2001:82).

## New possibilities: Kearney's invitation to systematic theology

Kearney believes that thinking of God in terms of possibility makes a difference in three ways. Firstly, 'it means that the presuppositions and prejudices that condition our everyday lives are put into question in the name of an unprogrammable future' (Kearney 2001:4). The God of *posse* reminds us that God depends on us to be and that no Word can be made flesh without us. If we refuse the kingdom, it will not come. The divine 'perhaps' hovers over 'every just decision or action that ensures that history is never over and our duty never done' (Kearney 2001:4–5).

Secondly, 'the God-who-may-be reveals that since no die is cast, no course of action preordained, we are free to make the world a more just and loving place, or not to' (Kearney 2001:5). Opting for a God of *esse* rather than a God of *posse* is to finally say 'no' to theodicy, for it reveals history as a divine venture and human adventure. The presence of evil in our societies does not testify to the pre-established will or destiny of God, as is the case in the metaphysical thinking of God as pure act and necessity. Instead, it reminds us of our responsibility (Kearney 2001:5). For if evil is the absence of God and the lack of divine goodness, then its presence testifies to the consequence of our 'refusal to remain open to the transfiguring call of the other *persona* – the summons of the orphan, widow, or stranger, the cry of the defenceless one: "where are you?"' (Kearney 2001:5).

Finally, 'the God-who-may-be reminds us that what seems impossible to us is only seemingly so' (Kearney 2001:5). In

the light of God's transfiguring power, what hitherto seemed impossible now appears to be possible as the eschatological potentials latently inscribed in the historically impossible, are disclosed. As such, the *posse* keeps us open to hope, even if it must be a hope in spite of injustice and despair, that the *posse* may become increasingly incarnated in *esse*, 'transmuting being as it does so into a new heaven and a new earth' (Kearney 2001:5).

### Kearney's post-metaphysical God and post-religious faith

An interesting development in continental philosophy has been to – while accepting Pascal's distinction between the God of the philosophers and the God of the patriarchs – give precedence to the latter. This indicates a movement toward a God who transcends old onto-theological and metaphysical categories (Manoussakis 2006a:xvii). To this, critical hermeneutics has added a dual movement of both suspicion and affirmation. In particular, Kearney's diacritical hermeneutics attempts to mediate between Schleiermacher's romantic hermeneutics that 'retrieves and reappropriates God as presence' and Derrida and Caputo's radical hermeneutics that 'elevates alterity to the status of undecidable sublimity' (Manoussakis 2006a:xvii).

In *Anatheism: returning to God after God* (2010), Kearney has attempted to reposition religious faith in a 'postmodern world that becomes characterised by either insipidity or dogmatic extremity' (Soultouki 2010:445). He uses anatheism to denote his moving in the space in between theism and atheism, but without seeking a synthesis and without proposing anatheism as a new religion (Soultouki 2010:445). Instead, it is in the re-encounter with and the recapturing of what we were under the impression to have already possessed or had relinquished that anatheism finds its reference (Soultouki 2010):

Anatheism is a movement back and beyond God, a concept that revisits the idea of God as a gift and suggests faith as a matter of reception and interpretation, rather than a teleological choice. What can be regained by the anatheistic movement, according to Kearney, is a new understanding of God in both secular and spiritual terms. (p. 446)

In a 2009 essay on the topic of anatheism, Kearney (2009) reviews the contributions that Levinas and Derrida have made to the atheistic critique of the traditional God of onto-theology and then discusses Ricoeur's work to show:

how the atheistic critique is a necessary moment in the development of genuine faith that involves a renunciation of fear and dependency as well as a reaffirmation of life and a return to existence. (p. 167)

He then discusses how such a return to God is possible, the ethical position that enables it, the reinterpretations of biblical traditions that it entails and the revival of God as an enabling God, and considers what the relationship between an atheist philosopher and theologian would entail (2009:167). Kearney considers Levinas, Derrida and Ricoeur to have

been partial to an 'ana-theist' movement that involves a 'double and supplementary gesture of abandonment and retrieval of God' (2009:167):

This view holds that one cannot begin to return to a new – 'messianic' or 'eschatological' – sense of the holy until one has left the old God of metaphysical causality and theodicy behind. God cannot advene until we have resigned our attachment to divine omnipotence. God cannot come until we have said our final adieu.<sup>9</sup> (Kearney 2009:168)

Ricoeur urges us to acknowledge the critique of ethics and religion undertaken by the school of suspicion. This is because, post-critique, it will be impossible to return, in Ricoeur's words, to a 'moral life that would take the form of naïve submission to commandments or to an alien or supreme will, even if this will were represented as divine' (Kearney 2009:174). It is from the hermeneutics of suspicion that 'we learn to understand that "the commandment that gives death, not life, is a product and projection of our own weakness"' (Kearney 2009:174). For Ricoeur, Levinas, and Derrida, then, Kearney envisions the option (not the necessity) of anatheism, offering the possibility of belief after atheism, for a return to a post-religious theism purged by the criticism of Freud and Nietzsche (Kearney 2009:175).

### Questions to a God of Posse

As the section headings in *After God: Richard Kearney and the religious turn in Continental Philosophy* (Manoussakis 2006b) show ('Philosophy facing Theology' and 'Theology facing Philosophy'), Kearney's work has commitments to both the philosophical and the theological communities, with the result that both these are questioned (Gregor 2008:149). Although he emphasises throughout that he works as a philosopher and is not attempting theological analysis, his 'God-who-may-be' project cannot avoid making theological moves, and some are concerned about the theological implications of his claim that humans must 'enable' God to be God (Gregor 2008:149).

One significant theological concern, for example, has been Kearney's lack of locating the cross and suffering within his Christology and eschatology (Gregor 2008:149). The powerless nature of the God-who-may-be is relevant to this point, for the God who appears to Moses, does not simply deliver his people in a grand illustration of majesty, but instead, invites Moses' participation in enabling love and justice. For Gedney (2006), Kearney has, with this 'account of God's powerful powerlessness':

created not only a significant summation of his recent thinking on narrative and hermeneutics but also a space for renewed conversations with Ricoeur's many accounts of the 'suffering servant', as well as with the difficult religious possibilities inherent in Derrida's thinking; renewed conversations that show not only the possibilities for understanding among friends

<sup>9</sup>With this formulation, Kearney plays on Levinas' A-Dieu: Without this movement of atheistic separateness, the other as irreducibly alien and strange cannot be recognized as *other*. And that, for Levinas, rules out the possibility of a genuinely religious relationship with God understood as absolute Other. We must, Levinas concludes accordingly, be *contre-dieu* before we can be *à-dieu* – in the double sense of taking leave from the old God as we turn to (*à*) a coming God. (Kearney 2009:168)

engaged in the struggle with human suffering but also the rich possibilities for new conflicts of interpretations. (p. 98)<sup>10</sup>

But from a theological perspective, this admittedly does not go far enough, and therefore, the invitation is open for theology to develop the possibilities for re-imagining the suffering God in post-metaphysical terms. Kevin Hart's point that theology is grounded in the 'in between', and that its starting point must therefore always be the life, death and resurrection of Jesus (i.e. the centre of salvation history) and not creation or *eschaton*, is a valid one indeed (Hart 2009:730). Although Hart may go too far in limiting the contribution of philosophy to that found in Scripture, his criticism should remind us that post-metaphysical or postmodern theologies will be the richer for finding their structure and content from hermeneutically re-engaging their foundational narratives, and especially that of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus.

Kearney, of course, does not set out to write a theology, and so, it is rightly the task of those theologians who would respond to Kearney's invitation to dialogue, to interpret the Jesus narrative in conversation with the God Who May Be. Marion has likewise pointed, following Barth and Bultmann, to the continuity between hermeneutics' general structure and the case of faith, which emphasises the importance of the dialogue between philosophy and theology. Emphasising the 'deep rationality in the operations of faith, understanding, interpretation', which, although irreducible to the usual rules of hermeneutics and phenomenology, is still connected to it, Marion states:

I think we are no longer in a situation where you have 'reason or faith'. Reason is a construct. It is not optional, it is done. *I would say that the difficulty for Christian theology now is perhaps that Christian theology assumes too much of the former figure of metaphysics and philosophy, which is already deconstructed. And this opens, I think, new fields for creative theology. But many theologians, if I may say so, have not taken quite seriously the end of metaphysics, and deconstruction, and so they miss these open opportunities.* It is perhaps surprising that philosophers are maybe more aware of new possibilities for theology than theologians (or at least some of them). (Marion, during a 2003 dialogue with Kearney published by Manoussakis [2004:25], [*author's own italics*])

This brings us to the question of metaphysics. Indeed, one of the most urgent questions springing from Kearney's hermeneutics of religion that will have to be analysed and evaluated by theological reflection is of whether this God-who-may-be is a God at all or merely a 'regulatory concept' (William Desmond), a unifying idea (Craig Nichols) that serves as centre for Kearney's newly constructed 'ethical monotheism' (Jeffrey Bloechl) (Manoussakis 2006a:xix). And

10. In dialogue with Kearney, Derrida also comments on the powerlessness of the God-who-may-be in light of his notion of *Khôra* as the indifferent space of possibility: ... I would like to tell you that I found your book powerful; it is powerful in its powerlessness. ... Your book formalizes questions in a way that is absolutely wonderful. I read your book in agreement all the time with this tiny difference on the question of power. The 'may-be'. There are two ways to understand the 'may'. 'I may' is the 'perhaps'; it is also the 'I am able to' or 'I might'. The 'perhaps' (*peut-être*) refers to the unconditional beyond sovereignty. It is an unconditional which is the desire of powerlessness rather than power. I think you are right to attempt to name God not as sovereign, as almighty, but as precisely the most powerless. Justice and love are precisely oriented to this powerlessness. But *Khôra* is powerless too. Not powerlessness in the same sense as poor or vulnerable. Powerless as simply no-power. No power at all (Manoussakis 2004:10–11).

the demanding task of giving definition to God that follows from this question, raises the question whether Kearney can avoid metaphysics altogether.

Furthermore, although Kearney's hermeneutical and phenomenological approach certainly opens many possibilities for novel thinking in terms of the Judeo-Christian tradition, the question of whether this tradition informs Kearney to the extent that his findings are no longer purely phenomenological observations, is a valid one. Patrick Masterson has insisted that Kearney's phenomenological perspective 'be qualified and complemented by certain metaphysical considerations which Kearney disputes' (2008:247). Masterson's objection concerns the limits of phenomenology for describing transcendence, for phenomenologically given transcendence is essentially a transcendence that is accessible to human experience, and therefore, a transcendence that is relativised as 'transcendence-for-humans' (Masterson 2008:261). An 'experientially inscribed transcendence', he holds, '... cannot be phenomenologically legitimated as experience of divine transcendence', and thus, it calls for a different approach (2008:261). For Masterson, Kearney's proposal is more pre- than post-metaphysical and must be complemented by a 'more fundamental metaphysical level of discourse' (2008:263).<sup>11</sup>

Masterson would thus impose on Kearney's *Philosophy at the Limit* the very metaphysics that he set out to avoid in the first place, namely the constraints of the metaphysical categories of *esse*, as opposed to the ethically creative (and co-creating) experience of God as transfiguring and eschatological *posse*. Yet, the question of metaphysics is not entirely out of place, for if Kearney envisions an eschatological kingdom, actualised in our world through the many small seeds of love and justice, he has yet to explain on what basis any act can be described as loving and just, so that it seems his ethically minded hermeneutics can hardly avoid metaphysical categories as a whole.

## Conclusion

Clearly, Kearney's work opens as many doors of possibility as it raises concerns. Future critiques of Kearney's projects will certainly have to take issue with these questions, and in this respect, we are fortunate that Kearney's work is still in process and that he has so willingly engaged in interdisciplinary conversation. The voluminous reactions to his work, especially his trilogy, illustrate not only the relevance of his philosophical writings for the study of religion in our day but also the relevance of theology and religion for philosophy as it is being produced by major contemporary thinkers (Manoussakis 2006a:xviii).

11. Masterson's understanding of philosophy is that our lived experiences provide us with a pre-philosophical foundation for our philosophical deliberations after the fact (Masterson 2016:2; cf. Masterson 2013:171). Kearney's phenomenological approach is therefore, for Masterson, closer to pre-metaphysics (2016:125). Masterson argues that the kind of post-metaphysical trends in philosophy of religion, such as that proposed by Kearney, requires metaphysical qualification (2016:2): '... this phenomenological and hermeneutical manner of speaking requires a metaphysical counterpoint which seeks to express what we can say of God himself, independently of the relationship of humanity to him. This metaphysical retrieval seeks to identify what God simply as such must be whether or not we exist, or recognize and acknowledge him' (p. 125). For Masterson, hermeneutics and phenomenology may result in ambiguity and misrepresentation when it is not grounded in 'an affirmation of the independent existence of God, affirmed as the metaphysical condition of possibility' (Masterson 2016:125; cf. p. 129).

It seems, then, that the playfield is open for philosophy and theology to engage anew around the themes of eschatology, metaphysics and its deconstruction, ethics, imagination and religion. But we would hope for more, still. We would dream of a two-way discourse between theology and philosophy. Or to use Kearney's image (cf. footnote 8) in a different context, we would be as Jacob on the ground, dreaming of angels moving in both directions up and down the ladder, so that the twin disciplines may be mutually enriched by their explorative play.

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