

KEVIN W. HECTOR

Theology without Metaphysics

God, Language, and the Spirit
of Recognition



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1 | Therapy for metaphysics

As its name suggests, this book proposes a novel strategy by which to avoid metaphysics. There is nothing new about trying to avoid metaphysics, of course – in the memorable words of Hegel, “metaphysics is a word from which more or less everyone runs away, as from someone who has the plague”¹ – but unlike recent proposals, the chapters which follow pursue a *therapeutic*, rather than *apophatic*, approach to doing so. One of the difficulties facing any attempt to overcome metaphysics, it seems, is that certain metaphysical presuppositions about what it means to be in touch with reality – and about reality itself – have become common sense. A crucial first step in overcoming metaphysics, then, is to render these presuppositions visible *as* presuppositions; on a therapeutic approach, this is accomplished by defending an alternative account of reality, of “being in touch,” and so on, thereby stripping such presuppositions of their apparent self-evidence. Not just any account will do, however, since one

¹ Hegel, *Vorlesungen über die Geschichte der Philosophie*, Sämtliche Werke, vol. xvii, Glockner (ed.) (Stuttgart: Bad Canstatt, 1965), p. 400, cited as the epigraph to the first edition of Martin Heidegger’s “Nachwort zu: Was ist Metaphysik?” *Wegmarken*, *Gesamtausgabe* vol. ix (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 1976), p. 304 n1. Naturally, metaphysics – even the variety of metaphysics at which this book takes aim – has also had its defenders; the best recent example of such a defense is offered by Radical Orthodoxy, for which see, for instance, John Milbank, Catherine Pickstock, and Graham Ward, “Suspending the Material: The Turn of Radical Orthodoxy,” *Radical Orthodoxy: A New Theology*, John Milbank, Catherine Pickstock, and Graham Ward (eds.) (New York: Routledge, 1999); John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990, 2006); and John Milbank and Catherine Pickstock, *Truth in Aquinas* (London: Routledge, 2001).

who has long been in the grip of metaphysics may feel as if its loss leaves him or her out of touch with reality, as if condemned to a life among shadows. The therapeutic strategy, then, is to inoculate one against such feelings by explaining that which metaphysics purports to explain – what reality is like and what it means to be in touch with it – in terms of ordinary practices and experience, thereby deflating these notions and demonstrating that one need not appeal to metaphysics in order to do them justice. Before elaborating this strategy, however, we need to say more about the metaphysics at which it takes aim; to this we now turn.

The question of metaphysics

1

Modern thought has engaged in a recurrent rebellion against metaphysics: so, for instance, Kant's critical philosophy aims to make the world unsafe for Leibnizian metaphysics; Nietzsche insists that Kant is still beholden to the metaphysics at which his critique took aim; Heidegger claims that Nietzsche's "will to power" is the culmination, rather than overcoming, of metaphysics; Jean-Luc Marion argues that Heidegger's "ontological difference" keeps us bound within a metaphysics of Being/being; John Caputo maintains that Marion's "de-nominative" theology remains complicit in the metaphysics of presence; and so on. This recurrent rebellion against metaphysics indicates that although we moderns may want to avoid metaphysics, we have a hard time doing so. It would appear, in other words, that metaphysics is a kind of *temptation*: we want to resist it, but find it difficult to do so.

To see why this might be the case – and to begin gathering clues to a way forward – we must consider, first, the metaphysics against which theologians repeatedly rebel. It is important to address this matter explicitly, since the term "metaphysics" can be used to refer to several different things, and I am by no means suggesting that everything that goes by that name is to be rejected. So, for instance,

the term is sometimes used to designate any set of claims about that which transcends nature, or any set of claims about what things are like. I am emphatically *not* interested in doing without metaphysics in *these* senses – or, more precisely, I am interested in doing without them just insofar as they are bound up with the variety of metaphysics I *am* interested in doing without. (In light of this remark, some readers may understand this book as defending a revisionist metaphysics, rather than as doing without metaphysics. I have no objection to this interpretation, so long as too much is not made of it.)

Turning, then, to the metaphysics at which this project takes aim, it will be helpful to begin with Martin Heidegger's account of the subject, not least because his account has had unparalleled influence on contemporary anti-metaphysics.² To be sure, Heidegger himself defines metaphysics in more than one way, though the main lines of his account are fairly consistent. At the most general level, he defines metaphysics as an attempt to understand beings "as such," that is, "what beings are *as* beings."³ To this definition, Heidegger then adds a crucial qualification: metaphysics identifies the being of beings as that in and upon which they are *grounded*, and identifies this ground, in turn, with human *ideas* about them.⁴ Simply put,

² It is worth noting that Heidegger's account of metaphysics parallels Karl Barth's account of natural theology in crucial respects, as well as Rudolf Bultmann's account of "objectification," such that a theology that does without metaphysics (in Heidegger's sense) is roughly equivalent to one that does without natural theology (in Barth's sense) and objectification (in Bultmann's).

³ Heidegger, "Was ist Metaphysik?" *Wegmarken*, p. 118; "Einleitung zu: 'Was ist Metaphysik?'" *Wegmarken*, p. 378. Two notes on translations: first, here as elsewhere I am following the convention of translating Heidegger's "Seiende" as plural, since the latter best captures Heidegger's sense. Second, apart from a couple of exceptions, translations throughout are mine.

⁴ Heidegger writes, accordingly, that in metaphysics "the being of beings is preconceived as the grounding ground. Therewith all metaphysics is in its ground and from the ground up, that which accounts for the ground" ("Die onto-theo-logische Verfassung der Metaphysik," *Identität und Differenz*, *Gesamtausgabe* vol. XI [Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 2006], p. 66).

then, Heidegger claims (a) that metaphysics equates the being of beings – their fundamental reality – with our conceptions of them, and (b) that it thus fits beings into a prior conceptual framework. To get a grip on what Heidegger means by this claim – and on what grounds he asserts it – it will be helpful to look at examples of such metaphysics; for this reason, we will consider Heidegger’s treatment of two figures whose thought he regards as the very epitome of metaphysics: René Descartes and Friedrich Nietzsche. Not, to be sure, because Heidegger is a reliable guide to these figures, but because his treatment of them sheds invaluable light on Heidegger’s own thought.

2

We begin with Descartes, whose philosophy Heidegger describes as “the initiation of the fulfillment of Western metaphysics.”⁵ Like many historians of philosophy, Heidegger sees Descartes’s project as a response to problems posed by the Renaissance and Reformation, the net effect of which were to undermine appeals to tradition and revelation. We will say more about these problems in the next chapter, but for now their upshot is straightforward enough: neither historical precedent, nor the alleged claims of revelation, nor even the deliverances of sense-perception had proven sufficient ground by which to determine what to believe or how to act, since each of these had either been proven wrong (as when scientific investigation had disproven certain traditional beliefs) or, at the very least, as themselves in need of a ground (as when claims about revelation were at issue in debates among Protestants and Roman Catholics). For reasons we shall rehearse in the following chapter, the moral drawn from this story by Descartes and others was that reason alone would have to provide such grounds. Heidegger thus characterizes Descartes’s situation as one

⁵ Heidegger, “Die Zeit des Weltbildes,” *Holzwege, Gesamtausgabe* vol. v (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 1977), Zusatz 4, p. 99.

in which certain intellectuals, at least, had been liberated from their bondage to churchly and supernatural authorities, but because these authorities had been the foundation upon which beliefs had previously been grounded, it followed that these intellectuals would now have to find a new ground for belief. Given that neither tradition, nor revelation, nor even sense-perception could provide such a ground, the only place left to turn was to the human knower him- or herself.⁶ On Heidegger's account, then, "the metaphysical task of Descartes became this: to create the metaphysical ground for the liberation of the human person to liberty as the self-determining that is certain of itself."⁷ The old foundations having crumbled, Descartes needed to lay a new, more secure foundation on the basis of liberated human reason.

It is against this background, Heidegger thinks, that one should understand Descartes's famous "*cogito ergo sum*," the upshot of which is that the "I" is necessarily co-positing in all thinking and, indeed, is the rule by which the latter must be measured. The crucial move here, on Heidegger's reading, is Descartes's identification of fundamental reality or "substance" with that which human persons clearly and distinctly perceive – that is, with that which they *represent* to themselves – so that the content of one's representations can be equated with an object's ownmost being.⁸ This is crucial, since

⁶ Thus Heidegger: "Liberation *from* the salvation-certainty provided by revelation," he claims, "must in itself be a liberation *to* a certainty in which the human person secures truth as that which is known in his or her knowing. That was possible only in that the self-liberated person him- or herself guarantees the certainty of the knowable. Such a thing could happen, however, only insofar as the human person decides by and for him- or herself what is knowable as well as what it means to know and to secure the known" (Heidegger, "Die Zeit des Weltbildes," Zusatz 9, p. 107).

⁷ Heidegger, "Die Zeit des Weltbildes," Zusatz 9, p. 107. On this point, cf. Heidegger, *Nietzsche*, vol. II, *Gesamtausgabe*, vol. II.2 (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 1997), pp. 117–30.

⁸ So Heidegger claims that, for Descartes, "the true is that which the human person clearly and distinctly sets before him- or herself and thus confronts as that which is brought-before-oneself (represented or 'set-before'), in order to secure that which is represented in such confrontation. The security of such setting-before is *certainty*" ("Die Metaphysik als Geschichte des Seins," *Nietzsche*, vol. II, p. 389). The key here,

the representing subject then encounters nothing other than that which it represents to itself, and it represents to itself nothing other than that which has been subjected to its own measure. As a result, “only what is secured in the manner just noted – through representation – is validated *as* a being,” and “the human person becomes to each being that upon which the manner and truth of its being is grounded.”⁹ (Heidegger here points, as evidence, to Descartes’s assertion that the substance of a corporeal object is that which can be subjected to the rule of mathematics, namely, the object’s extension, shape, position, and motion.)¹⁰ Descartes thereby responds to the problems mentioned above: human belief and action are secured, on this account, precisely because the representing subject encounters – and can encounter – nothing other than objects whose fundamental reality corresponds to the subject’s predetermined measure. The security of the representing subject is thus guaranteed in advance, since anything that does not fit neatly into its categories is consigned to “mere appearance” and so, finally, to non- (or second-class) being.

As Heidegger reads him, then, Descartes’s metaphysics is characterized by an account of being-as-such and of the representations to which such being must correspond. From one point of view, this account is novel, since the priority Descartes accords to the representing subject has few precedents. From another point of view, however, Descartes’s representationalism can be seen as the culmination of all prior metaphysical systems, in the sense of

obviously, is the notion of “representation,” in which one “brings that which is represented before oneself, of oneself, as something standing over against oneself, relates it to oneself and in this relationship forces it into the normative domain of the self” (“Die Zeit des Weltbildes,” p. 91).

⁹ Heidegger, *Nietzsche*, vol. II, p. 150; “Die Zeit des Weltbildes,” p. 88.

¹⁰ Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit* (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer Verlag, 1927, 1953), especially pp. 95–7; cf. René Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy*, in *Oeuvres de Descartes*, vol. VII, Charles Adam and Paul Tannery (eds.) (Paris: Librairie Philosophique J. Vrin, 1983), pp. 43 and 80.

making explicit that which lay hidden at the heart of those systems. Looking back over Descartes's shoulder, in other words, one can now see those systems for what they are, namely, attempts to secure human knowing by identifying the being of beings with human ideas about them. Heidegger traces the beginning of metaphysics, in this sense, back to Plato.¹¹ Two steps are crucial to the emergence of such metaphysics, the first of which is the drawing of a distinction between the "thatness" and "whatness" of a being.¹² So the being of a stone, for instance, can be understood in terms of its existence – the very fact *that* there is a stone – or in terms of its essence – what makes it the thing it is, namely, its stone-ness or "idea." The second step is to identify whatness as that which is fundamentally real about a being, at which point "all essential determinations of essence as such, i.e. the character of beings, are brought within the compass of *kataphasis*, i.e. of *kategoria*, they are categories."¹³ Human knowledge is thereby secured here, too, since the fundamental reality of an object is thought to be identical with that in terms of which humans know it, namely, ideas or categories. Heidegger claims, accordingly, that "*meta-physics begins* with Plato's interpretation of being as *idea*," and that, ever since, "being is sought in the idea, in ideality and ideals."¹⁴ We can thus see the sense in which Descartes is supposed to represent the culmination of the history of metaphysics, since Descartes's

¹¹ So on one reading, for instance, Plato argues that one's perception of some object counts as knowledge only when it has been "tied down" by a reasoned account (*Meno*, 97e–98a; cf. *Theaetetus* 201d, and *The Republic* 476a–d), and it can be so tied only by something that does not change, namely, the ideal Forms of which the object partakes (cf. *Timaeus* 27d). For Plato, then, one's perception of a particular object-instance counts as knowledge only insofar as one recognizes it as an instance of an unchanging idea, and it is the latter which is taken to be that which an object truly or fundamentally is. (Translations taken from Plato, *Complete Works*, John M. Cooper [ed.] [Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1997].)

¹² Heidegger, "Die Metaphysik als Geschichte des Seins," pp. 363ff.

¹³ Heidegger, "Die Metaphysik als Geschichte des Seins," pp. 392–3.

¹⁴ Heidegger, *Nietzsche*, vol. II, p. 196.

representationalism simply makes explicit that which was implicit in Platonic metaphysics – namely, the identification of the being of beings with human ideas about them.

That which is implicit in metaphysics is not yet entirely explicit, however. The final step remains to be taken by Nietzsche, whose philosophy Heidegger describes as “the fulfillment” or “completion” of Western metaphysics.¹⁵ The key development is this: whereas Plato and Descartes still see ideas and representations as corresponding to the way things really are – and identify “the way things are” with extra-phenomenal essences – Nietzsche insists that our ideas are measured only by standards of our own positing. Heidegger claims that this insistence marks the birth of a new consciousness, one that “unconditionally and in every respect has become conscious of itself as that knowledge which consists in knowingly willing the Will to Power as the being of beings.”¹⁶ To be sure, Heidegger thinks there is nothing novel about identifying the being of beings with something that humans have posited; what is new, rather, is Nietzsche’s explicit awareness that this is the case, and his consequent refusal of appeals to that which transcends such positing. Heidegger claims, accordingly, that Nietzsche’s philosophy marks the consummation of metaphysics, since here, for the first time, it becomes explicit that human persons answer only to humanly posited values. We could thus understand the fulfillment of metaphysics as proceeding through three steps: (a) Plato identifies the being of beings with ideas, but thinks of these ideas as objectively real – as part of the furniture of the universe, as it were – and so thinks of human knowledge as dependent upon something external to it; (b) Descartes identifies the being of beings with that which fits within the representing subject’s predetermined categories, thereby eliminating the assumption that the ideas to which beings conform are

¹⁵ Heidegger, *Nietzsche*, vol. II, p. 171; cf. *Nietzsche*, vol. I, *Gesamtausgabe* vol. VI.1 (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 1996), p. 431.

¹⁶ Heidegger, “Nietzsche’s Wort: ‘Gott ist Tot,’” *Holzwege*, p. 257.

themselves external to human subjects; Descartes thinks his procedure is warranted, however, by the fact that these categories correspond to the fundamental reality of objects, and so still thinks of human knowing as dependent upon something external to it; (c) by contrast, Nietzsche asserts that the decision to understand objects in, say, mathematical terms is just that, a decision, and that the resultant knowledge counts as such just because we have decided so to count it; more generally, then, Nietzsche contends that the ideas and values in terms of which we understand the world are irreducibly *our* ideas and values, and that we must have the courage to take responsibility for them. The consummation of metaphysics, therefore, is the insistence that there is nothing outside of human positings to which those positings must – or can – answer. The quest for a secure ground is thereby fulfilled: “In that the Will to Power achieves its ultimate, unconditional security,” Heidegger argues, “it is the sole criterion of all securing and thus of what is right ... What it wills is correct and in order, because the Will to Will is the only order that remains.”¹⁷

Simply stated, then, Heidegger understands metaphysics as the attempt to secure human knowledge by identifying the fundamental reality of objects – their being as such – with our ideas about them. The bottom line, according to Heidegger, is that “metaphysics is anthropomorphism – the forming and beholding of the world according to the image of the human person.”¹⁸ In order to set this understanding of metaphysics apart from other referents of that term, we can label it *essentialist-correspondentist metaphysics*, since what sets the latter apart is precisely an understanding of the being of beings – their essence – as that which must correspond to the ideas of a human knower.

¹⁷ Martin Heidegger, “Überwindung der Metaphysik,” *Vorträge und Aufsätze, Gesamtausgabe*, vol. VII (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 2000), p. 86.

¹⁸ Heidegger, *Nietzsche*, vol. II, p. 111.

We can spell this out further by considering some of the critiques to which such metaphysics has been thought liable, beginning with those leveled by Heidegger himself. Four critiques are especially pertinent to the present argument, but before turning to them we must consider, if only briefly, Heidegger's own fundamental concern with metaphysics. His worry, simply stated, is that metaphysics precludes being itself from coming into view, since metaphysics pictures Being as grounded in beings rather than vice versa. That is to say, insofar as metaphysics grounds thatness in whatness, it grounds the being of beings within beings themselves, thereby taking Being (as opposed to Nothing) for granted. Heidegger claims, accordingly, that "metaphysics makes it seem as if the question concerning Being has been asked and answered. Yet metaphysics nowhere answers the question about the truth of Being, because it never asks this question. It does not ask it, because metaphysics thinks Being only in that it represents beings as beings."¹⁹ Heidegger's treatment of metaphysics is thus motivated by his concern with the question of Being, yet the latter is of little interest to the present proposal; those interested in a theological treatment of this question can turn instead to the brilliant work of Paul Tillich. We will focus, rather, on Heidegger's analysis itself, not the project in whose service it was set.

Heidegger's central concern *is* related, however, to a criticism relevant to our project, namely, that metaphysics does violence to objects by forcing them into predetermined categories. Heidegger claims, that is, that in metaphysics, "human persons give beings their measure, in that they determine from and by themselves what should be allowed to circulate as being," in consequence of which "the metaphysically stamped manner of human representation finds everywhere only the metaphysically constructed world."²⁰

¹⁹ Heidegger, "Einleitung zu: 'Was ist Metaphysik?'" p. 370.

²⁰ Heidegger, *Nietzsche*, vol. II, p. 151; "Überwindung der Metaphysik," p. 71.

Metaphysics ends up doing violence to the objects to which it directs its gaze, accordingly, insofar as such objects are allowed to show up – indeed, to *be* – only as they fit within a prior framework established by one’s ideas, words, categories, and so on. The notion that the mind corresponds with reality, in other words, carries freight in both directions: on the one hand, it pictures one’s words and categories as corresponding to an object’s fundamental reality, but on the other, it ends up equating an object’s fundamental reality with that which fits within the bounds of those categories.²¹ The danger is obvious: if one thinks that one’s preconceived ideas correspond to an object’s fundamental reality, one may be tempted to force the object to fit one’s conception of it, whether because one fails to see anything beyond one’s conception or, worse, because one tries to make it conform to that conception. We see this sort of violence at its most graphic when human persons are its object – when, for instance, a woman or a person of color is allowed to “show up” only insofar as he or she fits within one’s prior conception of femininity, blackness, and so on, and when his or her attempts to transcend these conceptual boundaries are met with implicit or explicit resistance.²² This violence is compounded by the fact that metaphysics can render one insensitive to actual experience, since the essence to which one’s ideas supposedly correspond is defined as that fundamental reality which stands at a remove from experience. (More on this in a moment.) Metaphysics thus seems to limit an object’s particularity to that which fits within one’s preestablished ideas about it, which explains why it is commonly criticized as “totalizing,” “calculating,” and “instrumentalizing.”²³ Insofar as metaphysics identifies

²¹ On a *correspondentist* picture of such correspondence, that is; as I explain in [Chapter 5](#), some correspondence theorists resist this problem by insisting that the “direction of fit” moves from world to mind, as it were, but not vice versa.

²² Of many relevant examples, see Naomi Wolf, *The Beauty Myth: How Images of Beauty are Used Against Women* (New York: Anchor Books, 1991), and Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (New York: Grove Press, 2004).

²³ As claimed by Emmanuel Levinas, Martin Heidegger, and Theodor Adorno, respectively.

an object's essence with one's ideas about it, it may force the object to fit into one's preconceptions, and this conceptual violence may give comfort, in turn, to other sorts of violence.

This critique is related to a second: because metaphysics identifies fundamental reality with idea-like essences, it pictures such reality as standing at a remove from everyday, phenomenal experience; one is thereby tempted to think that such experience is somehow out of touch with reality (including the reality of one's very self).²⁴ As Heidegger famously argues in his analysis of "The Worldhood of the World," the metaphysical tendency is to see the objects one experiences, objects of everyday to-ing and fro-ing, as in some respect "mere appearances," and an object's ultimate reality as standing at a remove from such experience.²⁵ A sense of distance from reality is thus cultivated, and while neither Plato, Descartes, nor any other metaphysician seems to have been troubled by this distance, this is only because each claimed for humans an experience-transcending faculty by means of which to bridge it. This is evident in the fact that whenever a prevailing picture of correspondence has been called into question, skeptical worries have become rampant. (As I suggest below, this is one way of understanding some claims of postmodernism.) The picture of such distance and correspondence contributes, in turn, to the idea that the correctness of one's beliefs consists wholly in one's standing in a certain relationship to objects, which has seemed to entail that one's answerability to objects is incompatible with, say, answerability to one's peers, or that the latter is irrelevant to the former. Hence Richard Rorty, for instance, draws a sharp distinction between approaches which seek "objectivity" and those which seek "solidarity," and because he wants to see human persons as "answerable only to those who answer to us – only to conversation partners,"

²⁴ With respect to the self, consider a claim of Kant: "as concerns inner intuition," he argues, "our own subject is known only as appearance, not as it is in itself," *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*, *Kants Werke: Akademie Textausgabe* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1968), p. B156.

²⁵ For which see "The Worldhood of the World," part III, Division 1 of *Sein und Zeit*.

he concludes that “we are not responsible either to the atoms or to God, at least not until they start conversing with us.”²⁶ If one were to do without correspondentism, on the other hand, one might free oneself from this sense of incompatibility – one might even arrive at a view according to which one answers to objects *by* answering to one’s peers. A view along these lines is defended below.

A third critique is more specifically theological. According to this critique, metaphysics fits God, too, into an essentialist-correspondentist framework, such that God, too, is conceived as an object which corresponds to one’s preconceptions. That is to say, if God is thought to correspond to one’s ideas of God, then God will be cut down to size like any other object. Hence, if idolatry is “the subjection of God to human conditions for the experience of the divine” (as Jean-Luc Marion asserts), it would appear that metaphysical theism is unquestionably idolatrous, since God is here subjected to the conditions imposed by correspondentism and essentialism.²⁷ In Heidegger’s memorable verdict, “one can neither fall to one’s knees in awe, nor can one play music and dance before such a god.”²⁸ The ideas with which God’s essence is thought to correspond, moreover, are almost always drawn from an idealized picture of human persons, such that “God” turns out to be a projection of ourselves. Metaphysical theism thus appears guilty of a particular sort of idolatry, namely, that of attempting to speak of God by speaking of human persons in a loud voice.²⁹ We will have much more to say about these matters in the

²⁶ For the former, see Rorty, “Solidarity or Objectivity?” *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991), p. 21; for the latter, see Rorty, “Response to Jeffrey Stout,” quoted in Jeffrey Stout, “On Our Interest in Getting Things Right,” in *The New Pragmatists*, Cheryl Misak (ed.) (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 9.

²⁷ Marion, *L’Idole et la Distance: Cinq Études* (Paris: Éditions Grasset and Fasquelle, 1977), p. 23.

²⁸ Heidegger, “Die onto-theo-logische Verfassung der Metaphysik,” p. 77.

²⁹ For an influential critique along these lines, see Karl Barth, “Das Wort Gottes als Aufgabe der Theologie,” in *Das Wort Gottes und die Theologie* (Munich: Christian Kaiser Verlag, 1924).

sections which follow – and, again, in [Chapter 3](#) – but for now, it is important to note that metaphysical theism is taken to be idolatrous in two respects: it is accused (a) of subjecting God to humanly constructed preconditions, and (b) of projecting a God in our image.

This leads us to a final critique, to the effect that metaphysics is fundamentally an act of self-justification (in the theological sense). As Heidegger argues, metaphysics “justifies (*rechtfertigt*) itself before the claim of justice (*Gerechtigkeit*) that it has itself posited,” and such justification is the secular counterpart of a theological doctrine of justification (*Rechtfertigung*).³⁰ On Heidegger’s account, metaphysics is fundamentally the project of subjecting objects to a predetermined measure in order to assure the security of one’s knowledge. One thus provides the measure by which to justify all that is, including God, and thereby to see oneself as justified. At bottom, then, metaphysics can be seen as a theological project – specifically, the project of self-justification.³¹

As the term is to be used here, then, metaphysics is characterized by two features: first, essentialism, that is, a picture according to which an object’s ultimate reality is identified with a real, idea-like “essence” that stands at a remove from ordinary experience, such that the latter may come to seem shadowy, second-rate, a realm of “mere appearance,” etc. Because fundamental reality is thus thought to stand apart from experience, it might appear that human knowers are in fact cut off from reality, since we are immediately in touch only with the phenomenal realm. This leads to a second feature of

³⁰ Heidegger, “Nietzsche’s Wort: ‘Gott ist Tot,’” p. 244.

³¹ For a career-length elaboration and defense of this point, see the work of Robert W. Jenson, especially *A Religion Against Itself* (Richmond, VA: John Knox Press, 1967), *God after God: The God of the Past and the God of the Future, Seen in the Work of Karl Barth* (New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1969), *The Triune Identity: God According to the Gospel* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1982), and *Systematic Theology*, 2 vols. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996 and 1999).

metaphysics, namely, what I am calling correspondentism, according to which the distance between human persons and fundamental reality is supposed to be bridged by dint of our ideas and words hooking up with or corresponding to such reality. Once these features have been made explicit, it is easy to see why one would want to avoid metaphysics, since it seems alienating, violent, and idolatrous. This raises an obvious question: given these reasons for wanting to avoid metaphysics, why has it seemed so hard to do so? Why is it, in other words, that generation after generation proclaims the end of metaphysics, only to be accused by its successors of remaining in its clutches? In the sections that follow, we will consider two very different answers to this question.

Apophatic anti-metaphysics

What I am calling apophatic anti-metaphysics offers a ready explanation of why it would be difficult to free oneself from metaphysics: metaphysics is almost impossible to avoid, on this view, precisely because language itself is complicit in it. Derrida's assertion is typical: "ordinary language," he claims, "is neither innocent nor neutral. It is the language of Western metaphysics, and it carries with it not only a considerable number of presuppositions of all kinds, but presuppositions inseparable from metaphysics."³² Derrida's contention here is not simply that certain everyday concepts reflect and reinforce metaphysical presuppositions (as when one speaks of seeing an image with "the mind's eye"); his contention, rather, is that language use is *itself* metaphysical. Indeed, the very use of concepts is thought to be complicit in correspondentism, since, by applying a concept to some object, one fits it into a predetermined framework: so when one predicates "redness"

³² Derrida, "Sémiologie et Grammatologie," in *Positions* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1972), p. 29. Heidegger anticipates this claim: "Our Western languages are, in different ways, languages of metaphysical thinking" ("Die onto-theo-logische Verfassung der Metaphysik" p. 78).

of a fire hydrant, for instance, “person” of a person, or “unjust” of a particular social arrangement, one fits the object into a prior category to which the object is then thought to correspond. Subsequent chapters will elaborate this claim in a variety of directions, but for now, it suffices to note that on this view, one could do without metaphysics only by doing without – or at least loosening the grip of – language and concept use. Some theologians have attempted to do just that; this section considers two of the most prominent.

1

We begin with Jean-Luc Marion, one of the most influential of contemporary apophatic theologians. As Marion sees it, a God whom one could conceptualize would be no God at all; such a “God” would be an idol. To see how he arrives at this conclusion, recall, first, that Marion understands idolatry as “the subjection of God to human conditions for the experience of the divine”; hence, if concepts are a kind of “human condition,” and if their application to God is thus “a subjection of the divine,” it follows that a “God” grasped by concepts would be an idol.³³ Marion claims, accordingly, that “the concept consigns in a sign that which the mind first seized with it (*concipere, capare*); but such seizure measures not according to the amplitude of the divine, but according to the scope of a *capacitas*,” in consequence of which “the concept, when it knows the divine in its hold and thus names ‘God,’ defines it. Defines it, and therefore measures it according to the dimension of its hold.”³⁴ To apply a concept to God, then, would be to turn God into “God,” since concepts cut objects to their measure by fitting them into antecedently defined categories. The very attempt to apply concepts to God, in other words, is idolatrous.

³³ Marion, *L'Idole et la Distance*, p. 23. Marion elsewhere claims that “equivalence with a concept transforms God into ‘God,’ into one of the infinitely repeatable ‘so-called gods’” (*Dieu sans l'être* [Paris: Librairie Arthème Fayard, 1982], p. 51), and that “only an idol could be identified with the concept” (*L'Idole et la Distance*, p. 103).

³⁴ Marion, *Dieu sans l'être*, pp. 26, 44.

This claim is reinforced by Marion's understanding of divine incomprehensibility: "Even if we were to comprehend God as such (by naming him in terms of his essence)," Marion reasons, "we would at once be knowing not God as such, but less than God, because we could always easily conceive an other still greater than the one we comprehend. For the one we comprehend would always remain less than and below the one we do not comprehend. Incomprehensibility therefore belongs to the formal definition of God, since comprehending him would put him on the same level as a finite mind – ours – and would submit him to a finite conception."³⁵ On Marion's view, accordingly, God cannot be conceptualized, since, on the one hand, concepts force objects to fit the measure of their grasp, such that a conceptualized "God" would necessarily be an idol, and, on the other, it belongs to the divine nature to exceed one's understanding, such that, again, God must utterly transcend one's conception of God.

Marion insists, therefore, that in order to avoid idolatry, theology must avoid applying concepts to God. He thus proposes, first, a "de-nominative" or non-predicative understanding of God-talk; that is, he proposes "the substitution of praise for predication," since praise, on his view, involves a "suspension of all predication."³⁶ When one uses language to praise God, on this account, one does not predicate concepts of God; on the contrary, one directs one's praise to the unknowable Giver of the gift in view of which one lifts one's voice. One praises God (whom Marion, following Pseudo-Dionysius, here refers to as "the Requisite") by directing one's speech toward the unknown Whence of that for which one gives praise; on this account, then, "each *x*/requestant aims at the Requisite in a relationship where the latter remains inherent in the former (*interior*

³⁵ Marion, "In the Name: How to Avoid Speaking of 'Negative Theology,'" in *God, The Gift, and Postmodernism*, John D. Caputo and Michael J. Scanlon (eds.) (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1999), pp. 36–7.

³⁶ Marion, *L'Idole et la Distance*, p. 197, and "In the Name," p. 32.

intimo meo), yet without pretending that this aim predicates categorically of that at which one aims. That is to say that, for each requestant *x*, there exists at least one determination *y* in accordance with which the Requisite may be praised. This means that *y* aims at the Requisite, but describes the requestant *x*; yet *y* itself is related to the Requisite in that it is this relationship that constitutes the sole stake of the utterance.³⁷ Marion's argument here is fairly dense, but its point seems clear: when one praises God as wise, for instance, the meaning of "wise" is determined by its usual, predicative use, which entails that its content has reference to creatures; to praise God as wise is not to predicate this concept of God, however, but to point beyond the concept to the One upon whose giving all things – including creaturely wisdom – depend. In this way, "a relationship manifests itself between the speaker (requestant) and the utterance (request), where the 'as' indicates that the request (for example, 'I praise you, Lord, as beauty') aims for a third point on the straight line that is determined by the first two, a point situated infinitely beyond the segment that they suffice to determine."³⁸ When one praises God as wise, accordingly, one aims at the incomprehensible Giver by seeing this One *as* the Giver of all good things; in this way, "one returns to the Requisite the gifts and the names that the Requisite ensures in distance."³⁹

This brings us to the second aspect of Marion's proposal, namely, his insistence on the absolute ontological and theological priority of Charity. Because God is the One who gives-to-be all that is (*es gibt*), it follows that an act of giving, charity, or donation is prior to being/s; this means, on the one hand, that the radical distance of God from being/s *must* be acknowledged, and, on the other, that this distance *can* be acknowledged. All that is – and the fact *that*

³⁷ Marion, *L'Idole et la Distance*, p. 235.

³⁸ Marion, *L'Idole et la Distance*, p. 236. On this point, see also David Burrell's brilliant *Analogy and Philosophical Language* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1973).

³⁹ Marion, *L'Idole et la Distance*, p. 243.

anything is – depends upon a prior act of charity, an act that is necessarily misunderstood if conceived of as if it stood within the realm of that which it gives to be; hence the distance of the Gift must be acknowledged. And yet, because all that is depends upon this prior giving-to-be, it follows that the Giver's distance can be acknowledged precisely by recognizing the Giver's absolute precedence over being/s.⁴⁰ The recognition that being/s depend upon a prior Gift thus provides one with a sense of God's "depth," and "this 'depth' offers the inconceivable knowledge of the very one who provides it: the depth which appears only from the point of view of charity, makes charity alone appear (beyond all knowledge)."⁴¹ Marion concludes, then, that Charity is the only name suitable for God, since this name alone signifies that which is infinitely qualitatively different from all being/s.⁴² This brings us back to Marion's first point, since to speak this name is both to praise God and to see why praise is the only sort of talk proper to God: "if God gives," Marion argues, then "to say 'God' requires one to receive the gift and – since the gift happens only in distance – to return it. To return the gift, to play in redundancy the imponderable donation, this is not said, but done," and that which is "done" is a life of praise.⁴³

On Marion's account, then, to predicate a concept of God would be to contain God within the horizon of being/s, but since God gives-to-be all that is, such containment would be an act of idolatry. Marion thus renounces predicative discourse in favor of a discourse of praise: by praising God as wise, as just, as beautiful,

⁴⁰ Similar proposals are offered by Calvin O. Schrag, *God as Otherwise than Being: Toward a Semantics of the Gift* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2002); and Merold Westphal, *Overcoming Onto-Theology: Toward a Postmodern Christian Faith* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2001).

⁴¹ Marion, *L'Idole et la Distance*, p. 310.

⁴² Hence Marion: "What name, what concept, and what sign is still useable? Only one, no doubt, love, or as one would say, following St. John – 'God [est] *agape*' (1 John 4:8)" (*Dieu sans l'être*, p. 73).

⁴³ Marion, *Dieu sans l'être*, p. 154. (I added quotes to the word "God" for the sake of clarity.)

and so on, one aims at the incomprehensible Whence of all good gifts. In this way, Marion's project exemplifies what I am calling apophatic anti-metaphysics: whereas metaphysical theism fits God within the horizon of realities to which human thought corresponds, Marion insists that God is absolutely prior to any and all such realities, since all realities depend wholly upon God's originary act of giving-to-be.

2

Marion's is not the only variety of apophatic anti-metaphysics, however; its main competitor is an equally influential, "deconstructive" anti-metaphysics. We can conveniently summarize the latter approach by considering the work of John Caputo, since he frequently sets his views in critical conversation with Marion, though numerous others have pursued a similar strategy.⁴⁴

Like Marion, Caputo takes it that there is something violent about language, and, indeed, that "violence belongs structurally to, indeed constitutes, language itself."⁴⁵ Language is violent, according to Caputo, inasmuch as it seeks to fit objects within its horizon, to

⁴⁴ A relevantly similar approach is taken by Gordon Kaufman, *The Theological Imagination: Constructing the Concept of God* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1981), *In Face of Mystery: A Constructive Theology* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), *Essay on Theological Method* (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1995), and *In the Beginning ... Creativity* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004); Elizabeth A. Johnson, *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse* (New York: Crossroad Publishing, 1992, 2002); Sallie McFague, *Metaphorical Theology: Models of God in Religious Language* (Fortress Press, 1982) and *Models of God: Theology for an Ecological, Nuclear Age* (Fortress Press, 1987); Graham Ward, *Barth, Derrida, and the Language of Theology* (Cambridge University Press, 1995); John Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1989, 2004); and Kevin Hart, *The Trespass of the Sign: Deconstruction, Theology, and Philosophy* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2000).

⁴⁵ John D. Caputo, "How to Avoid Speaking of God: The Violence of Natural Theology," in *Prospects for Natural Theology*, Eugene Thomas Long (ed.) (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1992), p. 142.

pin them down, and to hold them within its grasp. This being the case, Caputo reasons that “there really is nothing we can say about God that is not violent in the sense that it does not cast God in certain terms, that it does not subject God to a certain horizontality, and so set up something *anterior* to God, with a kind of ontological violence.”⁴⁶ Caputo would agree with Marion, therefore, that the application of concepts to God is an attempt to bring God within the horizon of the thinkable, and is as such an act of idolatry. Caputo differs from Marion, however, in maintaining that there is something far more worrisome than this conceptual violence, namely, the blood-spilling violence which inevitably results when one forgets the inescapability of conceptual violence and instead sees concepts as in perfect harmony with reality. His foremost concern, then, is “the system of exclusions that is put in place when a language claims to be the language of reality itself, when a language is taken to be what being itself would say if it were given a tongue.”⁴⁷ That is to say, if one forgets that one’s concepts fit objects into a certain framework, one will be tempted to see that framework as itself natural, in consequence of which objects and persons who disagree with one come to be seen as unnatural, as opponents of the Truth, and so on. Forgetfulness of conceptual violence thus paves the way for physical violence.

Caputo advocates a deconstructive approach, therefore, as a means by which to make explicit the inescapability of conceptual violence, thereby to remind us that our language should not be thought to correspond to objects themselves. He grants that “the primordial yes we say to language is a human necessity, is always already violent,” but contends that we should nevertheless “say yes to this *archi-violence*, which is nothing more than the constraint imposed upon us by our human condition, in order to avoid the violence that

⁴⁶ Caputo, “How to Avoid,” p. 143.

⁴⁷ Caputo, *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida: Religion Without Religion* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997), p. 17.

excludes, excommunicates, silences.”⁴⁸ The deconstructive strategy, then, is to demonstrate the extent to which one’s talk of any object depends upon, and is caught in the swirl of, historically contingent mediations. Deconstruction thus “insists that there is no reference without difference, no reference outside of a textual chain. It argues that the range of reference of a term is set by its place within a systemic code,” in the hope that, once this becomes apparent, one will no longer be tempted to think of one’s particular language as corresponding to an object’s ownmost reality.⁴⁹ By insisting upon the mediatedness of one’s access to reality, accordingly, Caputo aims to free us from thinking that objects – God or otherwise⁵⁰ – can be pinned down; their otherness is thus protected, and “the thing itself slips away leaving nothing behind, save the name.”⁵¹

This approach is best illustrated by Caputo’s “deconstruction” of Marion, which can be summarized in terms of two objections. Caputo claims, first, that there is no non-predicative means by which to refer one’s words – even words of praise – to God, since intentionality is an irreducibly conceptual affair. I will say more about the argument underlying this claim in [Chapter 4](#), but for now, it suffices to point out that from Caputo’s point of view, one can direct one’s words to God only if one has some conceptually specified object in mind; as evidence, he points to the fact that one’s praise must be addressed to God (explicitly or not), and however one does so – whether one addresses God as “you,” “the God of Israel,” or “The Unknown” – one necessarily employs concepts, for apart from such

⁴⁸ Caputo, “How to Avoid,” p. 150.

⁴⁹ Caputo, *Prayers and Tears*, p. 17.

⁵⁰ Caputo remarks that “like negative theology, deconstruction turns on its desire for the *tout autre* ... The difference is that in negative theology the *tout autre* always goes by the name of God, and that which calls forth speech is called ‘God,’ whereas for [deconstruction] every other is wholly other” (*Prayers and Tears*, pp. 3–4).

⁵¹ Caputo, *Prayers and Tears*, p. 43. Caputo defends a similar argument in “For Love of the Things Themselves: Derrida’s Hyper-Realism,” *Journal for Cultural and Religious Theory* 1:3 (August 2000).

concept use, one's praise would remain undirected. Caputo thus insists that "we can never eliminate the conditioning to which we subject God without knocking out the conditions in terms of which it is possible to think or speak about God."⁵² This objection is related to a second: Marion claims that God must not be subjected to any anterior conditions, such as those proper to being/s, yet by naming God in terms of "love" and its variants ("charity," "donation," "gift," etc.), Caputo argues that Marion has merely substituted one set of conditions for another; contrary to what Marion may think, he has by no means escaped from such conditions. Caputo thus maintains that "when you speak of God without Being, or beyond Being, you have not extricated God from all anterior conditionality. You have not gotten something unconditioned but something better conditioned to a religious sensibility. Such a God is nothing unmediated or unconditioned, and we cannot rightly claim that this is God's point of view." Caputo insists, therefore, that Marion "has not found a world beyond human mediation that speaks God's own language – for God does not have a language – but he simply shows us why we ought to prefer the biblical vocabulary. He has managed to occupy not God's point of view but that of a certain human religious experience that is from one end to the other expressed in the thoroughly human terms of loving, giving, and earthly glory."⁵³ While it may seem as if "love" does not subject God to human conditions, since love emphasizes God's grasp of us rather than the reverse, this does not entail that the concept escapes either from the flux of mediation or from the violence of subjecting an object to its conditions. The attempt to use "love" as a means by which to avoid conceptual violence is therefore futile, according to Caputo, and it is also dangerous, since it perpetuates the illusion that God corresponds to one's own language for God. That is, if one claims that certain concepts somehow transcend the anterior conditioning which characterizes other concepts, one necessarily "invests one's own finite, mediated

⁵² Caputo, "How to Avoid," p. 144. ⁵³ Caputo, "How to Avoid," p. 142.

views with a pretended absolute authority, lends support to absolute violence. The attempt to eliminate ontological violence, to extricate God from any anterior conditions of possibility, is both misguided and hell-bent on producing a worse violence, ethico-ontical violence, violence of the meanest sort.”⁵⁴ As evidence of this, Caputo points to Marion’s seeming willingness to submit all God-talk to the authority of an ecclesial hierarchy.⁵⁵

On Caputo’s account, then, the violence of language is inescapable, yet this violence provides one with the resources to avoid something worse, namely, the objectification of otherness and the authorization of a system of exclusions. Because one’s grasp of objects is always mediated by concepts, one never grasps the thing itself; the violence of concepts thus fails to hit its target, such that things themselves slip out of one’s hands. So long as one keeps this in mind, one is freed from the temptation to see objects as corresponding perfectly to one’s language for them, which can free one, in turn, from the temptation to *force* objects to fit one’s idea of them.

3

We have before us two apparently contrary means by which to resist the violence of metaphysics: on one account, conceptual idolatry is resisted by means of a non-predicative discourse of praise in which God’s originary Charity is affirmed as absolutely prior to all words and being/s; on the other, one resists correspondentism’s totalizing effects by demonstrating that one’s grasp of objects is always mediated through historically conditioned language, such that objects themselves elude one’s grasp. There is no need to try to adjudicate between these proposals here, since, for our purposes, what they have in common is far more important than their differences. So Marion and Caputo agree, for instance, that it would be idolatrous to think that one could conceptualize a “wholly other” God, since

⁵⁴ Caputo, “How to Avoid,” p. 148. ⁵⁵ Caputo, “How to Avoid,” pp. 146–7.

they see concepts as fitting that to which they are applied into a pre-determined framework. Each rejects the essentialist-correspondentist picture, in other words, according to which one's thoughts and words stand in a one-to-one relationship to the fundamental reality of objects, in order to keep God from being included in this picture. As we have seen, there is good reason to reject this picture, but – and now we are moving into the argument which follows – it would be a mistake to suppose that one's rejection of correspondentism collaterally commits one to some variety of apophaticism. That is to say, one's rejection of correspondentism *would* entail apophaticism only if language and concepts were inherently correspondentistic, which brings us to something else Marion and Caputo have in common, namely, an assumption to the effect that language – at least in its predicative varieties – is essentially correspondentistic. Thus, to take one example among many, Marion claims that “language, when it predicates categorically, produces objects and, whatever they may be, eliminates distance by that very appropriation.”⁵⁶ For his part, Caputo claims, again, that “violence belongs structurally to, indeed constitutes, language itself,” from which he infers that “the only way to keep God's alterity safe is to save him from the cutting tips and incisions of the accusing *kategoriai* of kataphatic theology, from ensnarement by some name.”⁵⁷ Each seems to think, therefore, that language, and especially concept use, is inherently correspondentistic and so violent, in consequence of which each assumes that one can resist such violence only by maintaining distance between language and its objects (particularly God). From the point of view of the present proposal, however, it would appear that this assumption rests upon, and so implicitly takes for granted, precisely that which Caputo and Marion aim to resist, namely, essentialist-correspondentist metaphysics. (Turnabout is fair play, of course: I have little doubt that the present proposal will appear correspondentistic from their vantage point, though I try to dispel this appearance throughout the

⁵⁶ Marion, *L'Idole et la Distance*, p. 231. ⁵⁷ Caputo, *Prayers and Tears*, p. 44.

following chapters.) Correspondentism projects a certain picture of language according to which, among other things, concepts hook up with objects “in themselves.” It is not hard to see why one would want to reject this picture, but it raises a rather obvious question: why would one accept this picture at face value? Why would one assume, in other words, that the essentialist-correspondentist picture of language itself corresponds to language’s essential reality? We will return to this question in a moment.

One other assumption deserves note: it would appear that both Marion and Caputo equate transcendence with distance, such that the otherness of God (or objects) requires that there be a gap between God and that which human persons can know or experience. Caputo thus asserts, for instance, that “the transcendence of the other positively demands that the *Erlebnisse* of the other be inaccessible to my perception, otherwise the other’s experience would be mine and her otherness undermined.”⁵⁸ God must stand apart from one’s experience, on this account, for otherwise, God’s transcendence would be compromised. For his part, Marion seems to think that a putative experience of God necessarily involves certain preconditions – the conditions of the possibility of any human experience, including a person’s historical and physical location – such that God cannot be identified with that which one experiences. Because Marion understands idolatry, recall, as “the subjection of God to human conditions for experience of the divine,” he insists that it is precisely God’s “distance” from experience “that identifies and authenticates the divine as such.”⁵⁹ Both authors claim, then, that God must remain distant from one’s putative experience of God, for otherwise, God’s transcendence would be violated. Moreover, neither seems to think that there is anything controversial about this way of picturing divine transcendence; they seem to think, rather, that this picture is self-evident, and offer no arguments on its behalf. This is not to suggest

⁵⁸ Caputo, *Prayers and Tears*, p. 22. ⁵⁹ Marion, *L’Idole et la Distance*, p. 25.

that they are unwarranted in holding such a view, nor that there are no arguments to be offered for it – I will canvass one such argument in the following section – but it does raise an important question: Why would one assume that God must stand at a remove from that which one experiences (or could experience)? We will return to this question in a moment; for now, it suffices simply to raise it.

Apophatic anti-metaphysicians resist correspondentism by insisting that God cannot be set within the horizon of human conceptuality, since concepts are thought to subject that to which they are applied to a set of prior conditions. Marion thus resists what he calls “conceptual idolatry” by proposing a non-predicative discourse of praise, founded upon the recognition that all being/s depend wholly upon an originary act of Charity; Caputo, on the other hand, opposes correspondentism by insisting that one’s access to objects is always mediated by historically contingent concepts, such that one cannot grasp objects themselves. Each thus provides a means by which to avoid essentialist-correspondentist metaphysics. These are not the only ways of doing without metaphysics, however, as the next section makes clear.

Therapeutic anti-metaphysics

The previous section considered an apophatic explanation of why it would be difficult to avoid metaphysics: on that view, the difficulty is written into language itself, such that one could avoid metaphysics only by maintaining an appropriate distance between language and God. This section proposes an alternative explanation: metaphysics seems difficult to avoid, on this account, precisely because a metaphysical way of seeing things has become so familiar that we no longer recognize it *as* a way of seeing things; the metaphysical framework has become common sense, in other words, to such an extent that we operate within its bounds without realizing it. From

this vantage point, then, in order to do without metaphysics, one would first need to render these commitments visible *as* commitments. There are two canonical means by which to do so: on one approach, one traces the history of certain ideas and practices in order to demonstrate that they are products of cultural developments and interests, thereby stripping away their seeming naturalness; this is the genealogical method practiced by Nietzsche and Foucault. Alternatively, one can render the common-sense metaphysical picture visible simply by setting another plausible picture alongside it; this is the therapeutic strategy made famous by Wittgenstein. This book develops a version of the latter approach.

1

As just noted, a therapeutic approach explains metaphysics' seeming irresistibility in terms of one's being held captive by a picture; the therapeutic solution, accordingly, is to free one from this picture by setting another alongside it. Not just any picture will do, however; in order to be freed from metaphysics' grip, it is crucial that the alternative picture treat the homesickness one may feel for that which has been left behind; otherwise, the therapy may not take. Such homesickness comes in many forms, each of which is characterized by a sense of alienation: someone long in the grip of metaphysics may feel as if the loss of correspondentism means that he or she is out of touch with the world, or as if a loss of essences entails that he or she experiences "only" appearances. Such feelings indicate that one is still in the grip of a metaphysical framework, since it is that framework's inflationary claims about reality and about being in touch with objects that make one feel as if something is *missing* once one rejects it. Indeed, from a therapeutic point of view, the "distance" which features so prominently in apophatic anti-metaphysics (and several other varieties of postmodernism) could be regarded as exemplifying precisely this sort of homesickness: there, the rejection of correspondentism is thought to leave one out of touch with

God and other objects, whereas the very idea that one could be *out* of touch seems to depend upon a rather inflated notion of what it means to be *in* touch. Certain reductionisms are likewise a sign that one is still in the grip of metaphysical assumptions, as when Rorty insists that in order to see oneself as answerable to one's peers, one must see oneself as *unanswerable* to God and other objects. Rorty assumes that answerability to one's peers is incompatible with answerability to objects, yet this assumption seems to depend upon his taking for granted a correspondentist picture of the latter sort of answerability.⁶⁰ To shake oneself free from metaphysics, accordingly, it will not do simply to reject it (though this is indeed a start); one must also free oneself from the sense of loss one may feel insofar as metaphysical assumptions continue to inflate one's sense of reality, of "being in touch," of language, and so on; for otherwise, one will remain bound by the metaphysical framework even in rejecting it. Hence, an account is "therapeutic," in the current sense, if it deals with theoretical problems not by trying to solve them as they stand, but by identifying and contesting the presuppositions which made them seem like problems in the first place.⁶¹

A simple example from Wittgenstein should illustrate the point. Wittgenstein notes that we seem to take for granted "a certain

⁶⁰ It is ironic that Rorty is in other respects the very epitome of a therapeutic philosopher; see, for instance, the other essays in *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth*. For an attempt to disentangle these strands of Rorty's thought, see Stout, "On Our Interest in Getting Things Right."

⁶¹ As I am using the term, then, an approach counts as therapeutic not because it is marked by theoretical quietism – marked, that is, solely by the offering of reminders that ordinary language is in order as it stands and that one is simply confused if one thinks it faces problems that require theoretical solutions – but because it does without one of the key ingredients in one's feeling the need for such solutions, namely, essentialist-correspondentist metaphysics. On my approach, accordingly, theoretical quietism of a certain sort is one of the *consequences* of a therapeutic strategy, rather than the strategy itself. (I have little interest in fighting over the term "therapy," however, so those who insist that it just is theoretical quietism should feel free to affix some other label to my approach – call it "recognition-theoretic pragmatism," for instance.)

picture of the essence of human language. Namely this: the words of language name objects – sentences are combinations of such namings. In this picture of language we find the root of the idea: each word has a meaning. This meaning is coordinated with the word. It is the object for which the word stands.”⁶² We take for granted a picture of language, in other words, according to which words correspond with meanings and meanings are the fundamental reality of language – which is to say that we think of language in essentialist-correspondentist terms. Wittgenstein then observes a peculiar phenomenon: on the one hand, “a picture has been conjured up which seems to determine the sense *unambiguously*”; on the other hand, “actual use, in contrast with the picture just sketched, seems like something muddled.”⁶³ The essentialist-correspondentist picture portrays a word’s meaning as something which, in crystalline purity, transcends ordinary language use, in consequence of which the latter comes to be appear “muddled.” It appears muddled, however, only because and to the extent that “a *picture* holds us captive,” such that if we were no longer captivated by this picture, we might no longer think that there is anything “muddy” about ordinary language.⁶⁴ Wittgenstein aims to free us from this captivity, then, by demonstrating that one can make perfect sense of the workings of ordinary language without appeal to essences, correspondence, and the like, though one cannot understand the latter without appeal to the former – as he summarizes the strategy, “the *preconception* of crystalline purity can be eradicated only if we turn our whole examination around.”⁶⁵ By explaining the meaningfulness of language in terms of language use itself, accordingly, Wittgenstein aims

⁶² Wittgenstein, *Philosophische Untersuchungen = Philosophical Investigations*, G. E. M. Anscombe (ed.) (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 2001), §1.

⁶³ Wittgenstein, *Philosophische Untersuchungen*, §426.

⁶⁴ Wittgenstein, *Philosophische Untersuchungen*, §115. Nietzsche makes precisely this point in his famous remarks about the “History of an Error” in *Twilight of the Idols* (Cambridge University Press, 2005), p. 171.

⁶⁵ Wittgenstein, *Philosophische Untersuchungen*, §108.

to disabuse us of the sense that ordinary language may be out of touch with its fundamental reality. This is what leads him to focus on “language games,” for instance, a category which “should accentuate the fact that the *speaking* of language is part of an activity or a life-form”; it likewise leads to his famous dictum that, for a large class of cases, “the meaning of a word is its use in the language.”⁶⁶ I will discuss these claims at some length in the chapters that follow, but for now, the important point is that Wittgenstein endeavors to free us from an essentialist-correspondentist framework by laying another alongside it, and he frees us from thinking we have thereby lost anything by demonstrating that the former framework’s explananda can be explained in terms of ordinary practices.

This brief sketch of Wittgenstein points us to a key feature of what I am calling therapeutic anti-metaphysics, namely, its strategy of reversing metaphysics’ usual order of explanation by giving priority to that which lies near to hand, particularly ordinary practices and experience. The strategy, simply stated, is to explain that which metaphysics purports to explain – what reality is like and what it means to be in touch with reality – by means of something non-metaphysical, thereby deflating these notions and demonstrating that one need not appeal to metaphysics in order to do them justice. By deflating metaphysical notions of reality, correspondence, and so on, and explaining how one might begin with ordinary experience in order to arrive at suitably uninflated versions of these same notions, one can exorcize the metaphysical ghosts by which we have been haunted. That is the hope, at any rate.

2

The present proposal is therapeutic in precisely this sense: it aims to make the metaphysical framework visible – and so render it

⁶⁶ Wittgenstein, *Philosophische Untersuchungen*, §§23 and 43.

optional – by setting another account alongside it, and to do so in such a way that one can shake free from the sense of loss which leaves one feeling alienated from, or nostalgic for, that which metaphysics has habituated one into taking for granted. The first step in the requisite therapy, then, is to contest the assumption that God must stand at a remove from the realm of creaturely experience, such that God’s putative appearance in the latter would be, at best, *merely* an appearance – the assumption, in other words, that there must be a gap between God and God-with-us. This step is necessary, since the assumption that God stands at a remove from creaturely experience makes it seem as if one must choose between correspondentism – the establishment of a bridge between oneself and that which transcends experience – and apophaticism of the sort defended by Marion and Caputo.

To understand this assumption, consider the following argument of Gordon Kaufman: Kaufman conceives of “God” as the ultimate point of reference for all experience, and thus claims that “God cannot be conceived as simply one more of the many items of ordinary experience or knowledge, in some way side by side with the others: God must be thought of as ‘beyond’ all the others, not restricted or limited by any of them but relativizing them all,” since, “without such unique logical status, God would be conceived as of the same order as the many things which need to be grounded beyond themselves, rather than as the ground or source of them all.”⁶⁷ God cannot enter into the realm of creaturely experience as Godself, according to Kaufman, for to do so would mean that God was no longer the ultimate point of reference in terms of which to understand all else – for in that case, God, too, would need to be understood in terms of an ultimate point of reference, such that God would no longer be a good candidate for “God.” Kaufman maintains, therefore, that God must stand at a distance from creaturely experience – he thinks the

⁶⁷ Gordon Kaufman, *The Theological Imagination: Constructing the Concept of God* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1981), p. 81. See also “The Problem of God,” *God the Problem* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1972).

very idea of “experience of God” is “a category mistake”⁶⁸ – because, according to his definition, something *within* creaturely experience could not be God. On such a view, then, there must be an ontological and epistemological gap between God and one’s (putative) experience of God. This view encourages us to think that we are out of touch with God’s fundamental reality, or else that we could be *in* touch with God’s reality only in virtue of our minds’ or words’ capacity to transcend experience and so enjoy correspondence-like access to that reality, in which case the loss of such correspondence would once again leave us out of touch with God. In order to achieve the aims of this project, accordingly, this view will have to be subjected to a bit of therapy.

As luck would have it, the doctrine of God is one of the areas in which contemporary theologians have pursued a decidedly therapeutic, anti-essentialist tack – a tack, that is, whose goal is to free us from the assumption that God must stand at a remove from creaturely experience.⁶⁹ We might think here, for instance, of Karl Rahner’s famous axiom, that “the ‘economic’ Trinity is the ‘immanent’ Trinity and vice versa,” and his consequent insistence that the God who savingly acts in history is one and the same as God “in Godself.”⁷⁰ Or again, we might think of Karl Barth’s insistence that

⁶⁸ Gordon Kaufman, *In the Beginning ... Creativity* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2004), p. 110.

⁶⁹ In addition to Rahner and Barth, see, for instance, Catherine Mowry Lacugna, *God For Us: The Trinity and Christian Life* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1991); Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theo-Drama: Theological Dramatic Theory*, vol. III, *Dramatis Personae: Persons in Christ*, trans. Graham Harrison (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1992); Robert W. Jenson, *The Triune Identity: God According to the Gospel*, and *Systematic Theology*, vol. I, *The Triune Life* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996); Eberhard Jüngel, *God’s Being Is in Becoming: The Trinitarian Being of God in the Theology of Karl Barth*, trans. John Webster (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2001); and Bruce L. McCormack, “Grace and Being: The Role of God’s Gracious Election in Karl Barth’s Theological Ontology,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Karl Barth*, John Webster (ed.) (Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. 92–110.

⁷⁰ Karl Rahner, “Der Dreifaltige Gott als transzendenter Urgrund der Heilsgeschichte,” in *Mysterium Salutis: Grundriss heilsgeschichtlicher Dogmatik*, vol. II, *Die*

“statements about the actuality of divine ways-of-being ‘antedecently in Godself’ cannot be different, content-wise, from those made about their actuality in revelation,” such that God’s being-with-us is understood as the repetition *ad extra* of God’s being-in-Godself, and God’s being-in-Godself as the eternal prototype of this being-with.⁷¹ The point of such approaches, simply stated, is so to think of God that God’s appearance in the realm of creaturely experience is not seen as a *mere* appearance, as if God stood at a remove from such appearances. Hence, whether by denying the idea of a being of God “in Godself,” or insisting that God’s ownmost essence cannot be contrary to that which is experienced of God, or claiming that God’s being-in-Godself just is God’s being-with-us, several contemporary theologians have sought to free us from the assumption that there need be an ontological and epistemological gap between God and God-with-us. (At the risk of repeating myself, it is crucial here to bear in mind the difference between claiming that God need not be thought to stand at a remove from that which is publicly experience-able of God, and claiming that God’s being-in-Godself must correspond to one’s preconceived ideas of God.)

Any one of these approaches would suffice for present purposes, but with a view to the argument which follows, it will be worthwhile to consider one such approach in greater detail. I have defended a version of this approach at length elsewhere, so I can afford here simply to outline its key steps.⁷² The first is a deployment of the Barthian strategy mentioned in the previous paragraph, namely,

Heilsgeschichte vor Christus, Johannes Feiner and Magnus Löhrer (eds.) (Einsiedeln: Benziger, 1967), p. 328.

⁷¹ Karl Barth, *Die Kirchliche Dogmatik*, vol. 1, *Die Lehre vom Wort Gottes*, part 1 (Zollikon-Zürich: Evangelischer Verlag A. G., 1932), p. 503.

⁷² For further elaboration and defense of these claims, see my “God’s Triunity and Self-Determination: A Conversation with Karl Barth, Bruce McCormack, and Paul Molnar,” *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 7:3 (2005), pp. 246–61, and “Immutability, Necessity, and the Limits of Inference: Toward a Resolution of the Trinity and Election Controversy,” *Scottish Journal of Theology* (forthcoming); see, too, Barth, *Die Kirchliche Dogmatik* 1/1, and Jüngel, *God’s Being Is in Becoming*.

to explaining God's being-in-Godself as the eternal prototype, as it were, of God's being-with-us, and explaining the latter as the repetition *ad extra* of God's being-in-Godself. The idea, briefly stated, is to understand God's eternal being as the ongoing activity of triune communion, and God's acts *ad extra* as a continuation of (and persistence in) this activity: so God is thought to create by repeating *ad extra* God's eternal "othering" of Godself (traditionally described in terms of the Father's begetting of a Son) and maintaining communion with this creation; to redeem creation by repeating *ad extra* God's eternal devotion to (and so reflection of) Godself, thereby drawing creation into the communion in which God subsists (traditionally described as the reconciling work of the incarnate Son); and to actualize this inclusion by repeating *ad extra* God's eternal glorification of (and so conformity to) Godself (traditionally, the Spirit's work of conforming creatures to God, thereby effecting their adoption into God's family). The first move, then, is to understand God's being-with-us as the repetition *ad extra* of God's being-in-Godself.

The second move is to understand God as wholeheartedly identified with these acts, such that there is no height or depth in which God is indifferent or opposed to them. Here we find a useful clue in Hegel: "it is solely the risking of life," Hegel asserts, "by which freedom is proved, through which it is proved that the essence of self-consciousness is not *being* (as facticity), not the *immediate* manner in which it emerges, nor its submergence in the dissemination of life, but rather that that which is merely present in it is nothing for it but a vanishing moment, that it is only pure *being-for-self*."⁷³ Hegel's point is that by risking one's factual existence for the sake of one's being-as-self-constituted, one becomes and thereby essentially *is* that which is so constituted; to use Hegel's idiom, what one is *in* oneself becomes identical with what one

⁷³ G. W. F. Hegel, *Phänomenologie des Geistes* (Hamburg: Felix Meiner Verlag, 1988), pp. 130-1.

is *for* oneself. To be sure, Hegel's argument must be modified to be applied to God, but for present purposes, the point is simply that if God were to sacrifice that which is factually essential to God for the sake of being with us, it would demonstrate that God had identified wholeheartedly with this being-with; stated in traditional idiom, the fact that God gives God's Son for our sake reveals God's wholehearted love for us, in view of which it is unimaginable that there is any height or depth in which God is indifferent to the act of being-with-us. Hence, whereas the first step was to sketch a picture according to which God's being-in-Godself need not stand at a distance from God's being-with-us, the second step is to understand God as volitionally determined for (and so identified with) that being-with.

So far, then, so good: if God's being-in-Godself is ontologically fit for being-with-us, and if God is wholly devoted to this being-with, it seems to follow that God's appearance in the realm of creaturely experience need not be construed as *mere* appearance. We have yet to address one further problem, however, namely, the fact that the alleged distance between God and God-with-us can be underwritten not only by a particular understanding of God, but by an understanding of creation, too. That is to say, even if God's being-in-Godself is fit for being-with-us, it does not necessarily follow that God *can* be with us as Godself, since it could well be that there is something about creaturely reality that renders it unfit for God to act in it as Godself. This brings us to a final step: if God is wholly committed to us, and if creation is in some respect due to God and so subject to this commitment, it follows that creation, too, can be understood as fit for God's being-with-us. That is to say, if the one who creates and governs the world is one and the same as the one who has determined to be God-with-us, it follows that creaturely reality need not be thought to pose an obstacle to this being-with. This move opens up the possibility of understanding God's entrance into creaturely experience in terms of

Schleiermacher's axiom, namely, that "the supernatural becomes natural."⁷⁴

3

It is at just this point, though, that an earlier problem re-emerges: if language is inherently metaphysical, then even if God need not be thought to stand at a distance from creaturely experience, God *would* have to stand at a distance from talk of God, for otherwise, God would become "God" – that is, an idol. It should be obvious, then, that certain assumptions about language, too, must be subjected to therapy, which brings us to the argument of the following chapters. In order to do without the essentialist-correspondentist picture of language – without thereby cultivating a sense of distance from or nostalgia for what one loses in doing so – the following chapters elaborate and defend an account of language which begins with ordinary social practices and then explains how one could use these practices to arrive at (suitably deflated versions of) that which the metaphysical picture purports to provide. Then, in order to show that the loss of correspondentism does not entail that God is necessarily distant from language, I supply an account according to which God-talk, too, can be an example of "the supernatural becoming natural" – an account, that is, which explains how God could make use of human language, and how language could be fit for this use. Here, several strategic commitments are crucial: there is a commitment, first, to explaining semantical notions such as meaning, truth, and reference in terms of pragmatics – in terms, that is, of the norms implicit in what we do with language – and to explaining pragmatics, in turn, in terms of intersubjective recognition. On

⁷⁴ See here Schleiermacher's *Der Christliche Glaube nach den Grundsätzen der evangelischen Kirche im Zusammenhange dargestellt*, second edn. (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1960), §88.4.

the basis of these commitments, I propose a non-essentialist, non-correspondentist account of language, according to which (a) to use a concept is to intend one's usage as going on in the same way as certain precedents and to claim this same precedent-status for one's own usage; (b) the meaning of a concept is a product of the normative trajectory implicit in a series of such precedents, which entails that a concept's meaning changes, if only slightly, each time a candidate use is recognized; (c) to refer to an object is to link up with a chain of precedents that carries on the normative commitment implicit in an initial picking-out, in such a way that one inherits (and renders further inheritable) that commitment; and (d) to judge some proposition to be true is to see it as going on in the same way as one's other commitments and to use it to judge still other propositions. One can thus arrive at an account of concepts that do not "contain," of meaning without "meanings," of reference without "presence," and of truth without "correspondentism."⁷⁵ We arrive, in other words, at an account according to which language might be fit for God-talk.

With this account on board, we can then explain how language could be used to speak of God (without thereby turning God into "God"). The key to this explanation is a novel understanding of the Holy Spirit's work, according to which the normative Spirit of Christ is carried on from person to person by means of intersubjective recognition. The proposal, briefly stated, is to understand the Spirit's work in the following terms: after Jesus Christ had taught his disciples how to follow him, he recognized them as competent to recognize other persons and performances as doing so; the disciples, in turn, recognized still others as competent recognizers, and so on; in this way, the Spirit implicit in Christ's own normative assessments

⁷⁵ I hope to avoid misunderstandings by distinguishing "correspondence" from "correspondentism," since the former is ambiguous between what I have been calling "correspondentism" and the common sense notion that a belief counts as true just in case it gets its subject matter right. On this point, see [Chapter 5](#).

was passed along from person to person. When this account of the Spirit is brought together with the account of language discussed in the previous paragraph, a theology of God-talk emerges: (a) to use a concept is, again, to intend one's usage as going on in the same way as a trajectory of precedents; the Spirit of Christ enters into, and so appropriates, these trajectories, thereby bringing them into conformity with Christ; (b) the meaning of a concept is the product of a normative trajectory of precedent uses; when the Spirit appropriates a concept, its trajectory is both judged (insofar as precedent and subsequent applications fall short of the concept's meaning as applied to God) and fulfilled (since its meaning as applied to God is retrospectively recognizable as the trajectory's culmination); (c) because the Spirit carries on the norms implicit in Christ's own commitments, the Spirit renders his reference to God inheritable: by linking one's God-talk to a chain of precedents which defers to Christ's own reference-commitment, one can inherit (and so carry on) that commitment; and (d) one takes a theological proposition to be true if it coheres with one's other commitments, and to take it to be true is to use it to judge still other propositions; in this way, the normative standard by which a candidate belief's truth is assessed is carried on from person to person, and through this process the Spirit conforms one's beliefs to Christ and maintains the standard by which they are to be assessed. The "supernatural," namely, one's ability to speak of God, thus becomes "natural": the Spirit of Christ enters into ordinary discursive practices in order to appropriate human concepts, to judge and fulfill their meaning, to enable one to refer to God, and to provide the possibility of speaking truly of God. The present proposal thus provides a non-essentialist, non-correspondentist account of theological language which enables one to do without metaphysics – and, importantly, without the sense of alienation which characterizes some rejections of metaphysics.

Apart from doing without metaphysics, there are several other reasons to pursue a strategy of this sort. One of its virtues is that it questions the assumption – made explicit by Rorty – that one’s answerability to God (and objects) is incompatible with answerability to one’s peers, and that espousal of the former sort of answerability therefore insulates God-talk (and the agendas it underwrites) from criticism. On the present proposal, one answers to God *by* answering to one’s peers, such that one’s invocation of God need not be thought to lift one’s claims above the fray of reason-giving, critique, and so on. Second, because it sees novelty as the rule in language use rather than the exception, this proposal underwrites a kind of expressive freedom according to which one can use language to say things that have never been said before (which are nevertheless meaningful to others), and can see such language as one’s own. Indeed, because one’s use of language and recognition of other uses contributes to the standard by which such use is judged, it follows that one can see one’s God-talk as self-legislated, since one contributes to, administers, and authorizes the norms by means of which such talk circulates and is judged. And finally, since it takes recognition-theoretic pragmatism as its explanatory primitive, this proposal traces out several pathways by which certain boundaries might be traversed: it provides a path between analytic and Continental philosophy, for example, as well as some paths between theology, philosophy, and social theory.⁷⁶

⁷⁶ On the one hand, consider some examples of the range of philosophers and social theorists whose thought can be linked up with by means of “recognition,” pragmatism, or both: Fichte, Hegel, W. V. O. Quine, Ludwig Wittgenstein, Wilfrid Sellars, Donald Davidson, Hilary Putnam, Richard Rorty, Robert Brandom, Mark Johnston, Bjørn Ramberg, Dagfinn Føllesdal, Jürgen Habermas, Axel Honneth, Stephen Darwall, Nancy Fraser, Cheryl Misak, Pierre Bourdieu, Michel Foucault, Judith Butler, Terry Pinkard, Robert Pippin, Hubert Dreyfus, Cornel West, Arthur Fine, Bas van Fraassen, and Danielle Macbeth. On the other hand, consider the extent to which a recognition-theoretic pneumatology enables one to move from the

It is important to note, however, that even if my argument were wholly successful, it would not entail that competing approaches are unwarranted. We need to distinguish here between a strong and a weak version of the argument I am proposing. A strong version would argue for an account that is both necessary and sufficient, which would in turn render incompatible views (including both metaphysical and apophatic approaches) unwarranted. A weak version, on the other hand, argues for a merely sufficient account, one which is entitled to its own view and so entitled *not* to hold alternative views. The argument that follows is a species of the latter, which means, among other things, that if it is successful, it will demonstrate that one *need* not accept the metaphysical or apophatic picture of God and language, not that one *cannot* accept these pictures. These pictures, in other words, are simply to be rendered optional. The fact that I am trying only to render them optional, in turn, imposes certain explanatory burdens on my proposal: in order to persuade readers to exercise this option, I need to demonstrate not only that my account is plausible, but that it does justice to the concerns which might attract someone to one of its competitors. Implicit in the therapeutic strategy itself is a commitment to explaining how one would arrive at a deflated version of that which metaphysics purports to explain, but I still need to show how the present account would do justice to the concerns which animate apophatic anti-metaphysicians. Three such concerns stand out: concern to uphold God's transcendence, concern about the violence of concepts, and concern with the oppressive uses to which concepts are put. I deal with the first concern (in [Chapter 3](#)) by distinguishing divine transcendence from "distance" and explaining the former in terms of grace; with the second (in [Chapters 2 and 3](#)) by elaborating an account according to which concepts should not be thought

insights of these figures to an account of the inspiration and illumination of Scripture, regeneration, sanctification, and so on. This book traces one such path between these disciplines.

to contain that to which they are applied; and with the third (in [Chapter 6](#)) by identifying the critical resources implicit in normative trajectories of recognition, particularly as these resources are made explicit in experiences of disrespect.

5

These remarks about the nature of the present argument lead to some others. First, this book is offered primarily as a contribution to Christian theology, and is, as such, an exercise in “faith seeking understanding” – an exercise, that is, in trying to explain, as far as possible, that which Christians believe.⁷⁷ It should be obvious that as such an exercise, the project is free to borrow from philosophy and social theory insofar as these shed light on Christian belief. Indeed, since I am here elaborating an account of God-talk, I not only *can* engage with philosophy, there is a sense in which I *must*, since any such account will involve claims about the way language works, and these claims ought to be independently defensible. It is worth pointing out, however, that because it is faith-seeking-understanding, theology does not become something else when it makes use of insights from other disciplines. That is to say, insofar as such insights are put into the service of understanding the faith, they thereby become *theological* insights.⁷⁸ Hence, even though philosophy does a good bit of work in the chapters which follow, the project remains a decidedly theological enterprise.

A second remark has to do with the decision to focus here on language. There are at least two reasons to focus primarily on language

⁷⁷ To be clear, “the faith” should be understood as pluriform and as the ongoing product of recognitive practices, as I explain below. I should not be thought guilty, in other words, of holding naïve assumptions about a monolithic, fact-of-the-matter set of beliefs which could simply be identified with “the faith.”

⁷⁸ For a nice defense of this view, see Victor Preller, “Water into Wine,” in *Grammar and Grace: Reformulations of Aquinas and Wittgenstein*, Jeffrey Stout and Robert MacSwain (eds.) (London: SCM Press, 2004), pp. 253–67.

rather than, say, thoughts or the mind. The first is relatively straightforward: given the contemporary landscape, one has little choice but to deal with language, since language has become the principal target of anti-metaphysical critique. One simply could not contribute to the current discussion without considering language. A second reason is related to the first: our best understanding of thoughts, representations, beliefs, and so on depends upon language, not only in the (non-trivial) sense that any explanation will be given in language, but in the sense that concepts and beliefs appear to bear some relationship to the words and sentences which express them. It seems clear, for instance, that one's initial learning of concepts depends upon the use of language, which suggests that there must be some relationship between the two. There is good reason, accordingly, to focus on language. It is important to note, though, that the account which follows focusses almost exclusively on just one stretch of language about God, namely, assertions, statements, propositions, claims, and so forth. Naturally, there is a good deal more than assertion involved in God-talk; there are questions, commands, laments, and so on. To be perfectly clear, the fact that I focus on assertions should not be taken to imply that this is the only variety of God-talk, nor that it is more important than the others. There is good reason to focus on assertions, however, since the most widely accepted accounts of the meaning of questions, commands, and other speech acts understand them in terms of their relation to assertional content: so the meaning of a question is understood in terms of the range of assertions that would count as an answer, the meaning of a command in terms of what assertible state of affairs one would have to bring about in order to count as obeying it, and so on.⁷⁹ There is reason to think, then, that if we can get an explanatory grip on the

⁷⁹ The classic treatment of questions is elaborated in Lauri Karttunen's "Syntax and Semantics of Questions," *Linguistics and Philosophy* 1 (1977), pp. 3–44; for a comparable account of some other speech acts, see Donald Davidson, "The Emergence of Thought," *Subjective, Intersubjective, Objective* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), pp. 123–34.

assertional varieties of God-talk, we can use it to get a grip on the others. In what follows, accordingly, I focus almost exclusively on the former.

One last remark: the argument defended here is necessarily characterized by a kind of circularity, in consequence of the fact that one can neither compare theological beliefs with something strictly belief-free, nor ground such beliefs on an indubitable foundation.⁸⁰ I will say more about this point in [Chapters 4](#) and [5](#), but for now, it is important to realize one of its implications for theological construction, namely, that such construction cannot proceed by testing beliefs all at once, as it were, since there is no belief-free foundation on the basis of which one might do so. This does not entail that these beliefs are exempt from criticism, however; it entails only that we cannot criticize all of them simultaneously. To invoke Otto Neurath's famous image, "we are like sailors who must rebuild their ship on the open sea, without ever being able to disassemble it in dry-dock and build it anew out of the best materials."⁸¹ So long as we leave a sufficient number of other beliefs in place, we are free to test the correctness of any one of them. This is the procedure adopted here: I have already discussed an account of God, for instance, according to which there need be no distance between God and creaturely experience of God; this account contributes to subsequent claims about language, but the very possibility of such an account obviously presupposes some ability to talk about God. The procedure, then, is (a) to suspend questions about God-talk in order to develop an understanding of God, (b) to use this understanding of God in

⁸⁰ For arguments on this point, see e.g. W. V. O. Quine, "Two Dogmas of Empiricism," in *From a Logical Point of View: Nine Logico-Philosophical Essays*, second edn., revised (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1953, 1961, 1980), pp. 20–46; and Wilfrid Sellars, *Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1956, 1997).

⁸¹ Otto Neurath, "Protokollsätze," *Erkenntnis* 3 (1932), p. 206. For an elaboration on this view, see Donald Davidson, "A Coherence Theory of Truth and Knowledge," *Subjective, Intersubjective, Objective*.

order to help make sense of God-talk, and then (c) to use the resulting account of God-talk to support the already-established understanding of God. Like Neurath's sailors, however, I can repair only one board at a time, and I have here focussed my repair work almost exclusively on the problem of theological language. Naturally, that does not mean that other boards are not in need of repair, only that their repair falls outside the scope of the present project. This means, in particular, that while I have tried to render an independently defensible account of theological language, my account presupposes accounts of certain other subjects, especially God, which may also be independently defensible – so I would argue – but are not here explicitly defended.

The present approach is thus therapeutic in that it aims to free us from the metaphysical picture by setting an alternative picture alongside it. By taking ordinary practices and experience as its explanatory primitive, the latter picture frees us from the grip of metaphysics not only by rendering metaphysics optional, but by helping us see that nothing of value is lost when we exercise this option. If we understand God on the basis of God's being-with-us, the semantics of ordinary language on the basis of recognitive practices, and the Spirit of Christ as entering into, and mediated through, these same practices, we can arrive at an account according to which one's disavowal of metaphysics does not entail that God stands at a distance from one's language about God.

Conclusion

Metaphysics, as the term is being used here, is characterized by two features: *essentialism*, the supposition that that which is fundamentally real about an object is an idea-like "essence" (which stands at a remove from that which one experiences); and *correspondentism*,

the claim that human minds or words are in touch with this reality in virtue of their enjoying a kind of privileged access to it. No wonder, then, that generations of theologians have rebelled against such metaphysics, since metaphysics seems to alienate us from experience, to do violence to objects, and to reduce God to an idol. Many today who reject metaphysics do so by means of an apophatic approach, but this is not the only available option; in what follows, I elaborate and defend what I am calling by contrast a therapeutic approach, the aim of which is not only to do without metaphysics, but so to free us from its grip that we feel no sense of loss upon leaving it behind. We turn, then, to an account of language which aims to free us from the assumption that to talk of God is necessarily to inscribe God within a metaphysical framework.