

John Panteleimon Manoussakis, ed. *After God: Richard Kearney and the Religious Turn in Continental Philosophy*. New York: Fordham University Press, 2005.

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Preview

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Richard Kearney entitled his recent trilogy “Philosophy at the Limit.” The playful way that boundaries and limits are traversed and challenged within these texts leave the reader wondering what *limit* Kearney has in mind that might bind together the three books *On Stories*, *The God Who May Be* and *Strangers, Gods and Monsters*. Kearney is evasive on this point, among others, pointing to a number of boundaries at which philosophy operates. The recent compilation *After God* offers a series of profound engagements of Kearney’s philosophy and theology, a feast of careful readings and provoking challenges. It is daunting to attempt a faithful review of a book with dozens of authors. What is clearest about *After God* is that it flourishes at the limit of Kearney’s philosophy. The limit at which this volume functions is the slippery boundary where philosophy meets theology, and vice versa, the terrain which has increasingly consumed Kearney’s energy in recent years. *After God* is a series of engagements and dialogues at the cutting edge of Kearney’s creative hermeneutic philosophy.

Kearney’s works on narrative, philosophy, politics and fiction have resulted in a wide range of reactions and extrapolations. Though many of these diverse engagements are alluded to in *After God*, each of the twenty-six chapters engages the theological boundary of philosophy. And as many of the authors indicate, this is a particularly intriguing boundary space inhabited by long histories and linguistic complexity. The boundary between philosophy and theology is crowded, in fact, with giants like Plato and Aristotle, Augustine and Thomas, Whitehead and Levinas. In each of his recent works Kearney has inched steadily and painstakingly further into this hinterland, daring to be more and more theological in his hermeneutic adventures. These journeys and their rich theological significance are the fodder for *After God*.

The title is indicative of the posture of Kearney’s journey into theological territory. Kearney’s discussion of Moses’ encounter with the burning thornbush in *The God Who May Be* underscores the deeply eschatological character of the name and pursuit of God. In Exodus 3 Moses desires a name for the God who bids him to redeem the captive Israelites, and the name he is given functions more as a promise than a graspable title. Moses’ desire remains unquenched throughout his life; thirty chapters later we find Moses still longing to see the “glory” or the “face” of God. Tucked into the cleft of a rock, Moses is capable of seeing only a glimpse of the God after whom he has spent his life stumbling. Philosophy, if we have learned anything about this boundary-land, ventures into the field of theology like Moses creeping out from the cleft. The ground is sacred, if unsteady, but our posture is unmistakably

posterior. We are *after* the God whom we have experienced, if at all, in but glimpse and trace.

This volume also offers its own unique theological thesis, presented by Kearney and John Panteleimon Manoussakis. Kearney proposes a “fourth reduction” in phenomenology, to follow and radicalize the three reductions described by Jean-Luc Marion. Marion has suggested that the first reduction, the transcendental reduction, is authored by Edmund Husserl. Considered the founder of phenomenology, Husserl advocated a bracketing of inclination and opinion for the sake of discovering and describing the realm of “timeless truths” (5). Martin Heidegger initiated the second movement, an ontological reduction, which pointed at the long overlooked problem of the relationship and difference between Being and beings. Marion claims to have performed a third reduction, a donological reduction which pushes through and beyond the epistemological and ontological reductions and into the realm of gift and givenness. Marion points to the marvel of the “saturated phenomena,” the capacity of an event to super-abound and surprise. It is Kearney’s habit, perhaps in the spirit of his teacher Paul Ricoeur, to look for a *via media*, a middle way which navigates between dangerous extremes. But Kearney’s pathways are never trite compromises; they are radicalizations, retellings and re-nominations. His “fourth reduction” is neither a cancelling of the first three nor their repetition. Kearney proposes a microeschatological reduction (6) which turns toward the everyday and the capacity for “the God who may be” to make appearance in the banality of the “pots and pans” of lived experience. Such a fourth reduction is a retrieval of theology from the abyss of atheism and from the death of God. Such ana-theism (the retrieval of God after God) neither cancels the open options of theism or atheism, but dares to think after God and beyond religion.

This fourth reduction is an intriguing new approach to discourse in the hinterland between theology and philosophy. Some theologians have shied away from this shadowy place where theological language is subjected to heavy philosophical debate. Other theologians, like Augustine and Thomas Aquinas, have thrived in this domain. Interestingly, Marion has shown himself to be adept in both the theological domain (*God Without Being*) and in the philosophical domain (*Being Given, In Excess*), but when invited to dwell at the border between philosophy and theology, Marion seems to shudder at the danger inherent in this land. Marion’s fear, one might guess, may be that his rigorous philosophy be tainted or undermined by theological commitments. But Kearney is growing increasingly comfortable in this borderland. He exploits Marion’s reluctance by proposing a uniquely *theological* reduction. The fourth reduction, after all, mainly differs from Marion’s third reduction in its willingness to think of an eschatological activity of God in the phenomena. Everyday

events, Kearney's fourth reduction claims, are the subtle "lowercase" (in opposition to the upper-case characters of Metaphysics, Being, Theology and God) introduction to a future that is *after* the teleological end (11). Kearney humbly names this fourth reduction a mere "memo," a minor addendum to the other three. But it invites the reader to see that Marion's saturated phenomenon may be robustly seen as theological phenomena. Kearney's addendum to these first three reductions is actually an invitation to phenomenology and philosophy to join him "at the limit," in the land where the name of God is evoked, radicalized, doubted and even worshipped. As Manoussakis profoundly puts it, we see here an incarnational approach to phenomena. I believe the paradigmatic model for this microeschatological reduction is the Eucharist, where the banality of bread and wine irrupt with the mysterious presence of the Resurrected Christ. A morsel and a sip, the most ordinary of phenomena, are somehow the "meal of the future."

Manoussakis extends the theological significance of this "reduction" more robustly than Kearney. If there is a future to this "fourth reduction," even at the humble level of the "memo," it will be through a fortification of the theological nature of this reduction. The philosophical exploration of the microeschatology has been articulated powerfully through the second and third reductions; Heidegger and Jacques Derrida have released the content of beings and events from the overbearing imposing of Being, and Marion has established the surprising freedom and uncontainable fecundity of events and gifts. Manoussakis points beyond religion, toward an abandonment of religion for the sake of being a witness for the incarnation (32). The fourth reduction is a theology of hope more than it is a philosophy of openness.

Much of *After God* provides intriguing reactions to Kearney's foray into the realm between philosophy and theology. It is here that Kearney encounters both friction and sympathetic extrapolation. The book is divided into three parts, the first of which includes chapters by Kearney and Manoussakis describing the "fourth reduction." Part Two is divided between two subheadings, with nine chapters devoted to "Philosophy Facing Theology" and eight chapter devoted to "Theology Facing Philosophy." The seepage between these sections is rather astounding, sometimes to the point that the delineations between sections and genres of engagement are nearly indiscernible. The philosophers, including Kearney, William Desmond, Merold Westphal, Dominique Janicaud and Jeffrey Bloechl, all sound remarkably theological. The theologians, which include Manoussakis, Joseph O'Leary, Jean Greisch and Kevin Hart, each deal deftly with philosophical language. Part Three features exchanges with Derrida, Marion, and John Caputo, along with intriguing chapters by Caputo, David Tracy, Catherine Keller and Sally McFague. Entitled

“Recapitulations,” this final section includes some of the most productive and surprising conversations and interactions with Kearney’s work. The book concludes with an interview of Kearney by Mark Manolopoulos, which Kearney offers “In Place of a Response.”

Kearney is clearly audacious to both philosophers and theologians. Such is the fate of those who dwell “at the limit” which seems to transfix Kearney’s most recent writings. The questions seem to come heaviest from those who wonder about what happens to theology when subjected to the rigors of Kearney’s philosophy. The discomfort of theologians is complicated by the reluctance of Kearney to be explicitly and directly theological. He calls *The God Who May Be* a “hermeneutics of religion” and repeatedly underscores that what he is doing there “is not theology as such” (367). But theology is an ill-defined realm whose boundaries are notoriously fuzzy. In his chapter in *After God* Kevin Hart bemoans the general “avoidance of theology in the name of philosophy of religion” and wonders whether Kearney’s work does not shy away from central Christian theological claims. Hart represents just one of the sharp theological voices in this volume who are aware that one cannot creep into the boundary between philosophy and theology without “doing” theology. Theology is constructed on the twin foundations of the said and the unsaid. So while Kearney’s diacritical hermeneutic specifically avoids serious engagement with the complexities of Trinitarian theology, the omission is as telling as anything he includes. For Hart, to rethink the nature of God without respect to the cross and the grave of Jesus is to intentionally and constructively point elsewhere for thought about God. Kearney gestures vaguely toward a *perichoretic* dance of Father, Son and Spirit in eternal deference and bliss; but he fails to align this understanding of the Trinity with his rich description of the trauma, turmoil and terror of lived existence. In his chapter “God or Khora,” among the most intriguing reflections in *Strangers, Gods and Monsters*, Kearney reflects on the way that the concept *khora* includes “Jesus abandoned on the cross (crying out to the Father) or descended into hell” (*Stranger, Gods and Monsters*, 204). But Kearney’s discussion of Triune *perichoresis* is eschatological in a more distant and less gritty, incarnate sense than the “microeschatology” he offers elsewhere. It matters, after all, what sort of God we are *after*.

Catherine Keller represents a perplexing participant in some of the most recent and compelling discussions within Continental philosophy and theology. Committed to her own creative rendering of a basically Whiteheadian metaphysic, Keller has managed to find a significant voice in the midst of post-metaphysical conversations. Keller properly points out the idealism of Kearney’s eschatological vision; fearing that (like Jurgen Moltmann and Wolfart Pannenberg) his eschatological hope might liberate us from history rather than lead to the liberation of

history. Her philosophy, for all its creativity and complexity, remains a philosophy of the possible. At first glance this would seem to disqualify her from a field of philosophy so transfixed by the concept of impossibility. But Keller's philosophy of divine possibility binds her to the pains of the present in a manner that allows her to underscore the dissonance between current suffering and the bright future toward which Kearney rightly hopes. One may remain skeptical about the pervasive metaphysical commitments evident in Keller's writings, but her essay in *After God* provides additional evidence that there is plenty of room at the boundary-land for all stripes of philosophers and theologians.

Properly placed under the subheading "philosophy facing theology," Kearney has historically paid his best attention to the consequences of his philosophical language. His "fourth reduction" is as daring as it is promising, for it proposes a primarily *theo*-logical hermeneutic of events, gifts and faces. Manoussakis is justified in spinning this reduction in the language of the incarnation: "The face of the Other is essentially both the face of another and the face of God" (33). The persistent tug of the theological voices in *After God* draws Kearney into a more robust theological expression of his philosophy of divine possibility and eschatological hope. There is also an air of expectancy in this volume, a sense that Kearney's admirers and critics all expect more creativity to come from his pen. As David Tracy states it, "Kearney's rejection of theodicy does not become an occasion to reflect upon innocent suffering, the Cross, the Apocalypse, but there is no reason why his thought cannot be developed in this way" (354). With Tracy, I look expectantly toward such developments.

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