RICHARD KEARNEY’S
ANATHEISTIC WAGER

Philosophy, Theology, Poetics

Edited by Chris Doude van Troostwijk and Matthew Clemente

Indiana University Press
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An Anatheist Exchange: Returning to the Body after the Flesh

Emmanuel Falque and Richard Kearney

I

EF: I recently read Anatheism. I find your idea of returning to God after God very interesting. What fascinates me is your suggestion that it is better for the theist not to reject but to listen to what it means to be a man-without-God. I come to a similar conclusion in the third chapter of my book The Metamorphosis of Finitude titled "Is There a Drama of Atheist Humanism?" There I observe that we are no longer in the situation of the 1950s, no longer in the context of Henri de Lubac. In his work The Drama of Atheist Humanism, de Lubac examines the positivism of Comte, the materialism of Marx, and the nihilism of Nietzsche, in order first to understand them and then to reject them. In other words, de Lubac's attitude is a good one in the sense that he wants to understand before condemning, and that was absolutely new when Christianity was confronted in France with seemingly "virulent" forms of atheism. But today, the conflict between theism and atheism has lost its drama. Atheism is no longer seen as virulent (as in the 1970s), but as coherent. We all have friends and family members who do not believe in God. We don't have to condemn them, even if we are believers and they are not. We simply have to understand that their conceptions are different from ours. If my brother, my son, my sister, or my friend does not share my Christian views, it does not mean that their lives lack meaning just because their meaning is not my meaning. On the contrary, I have to accept that it is possible to find meaning in life outside of my own meaning, even if God is the meaning of my life. We have to recognize that we can be transformed by this other—and not just try to convert him. One can be "without God" without being "against God," as the theologian Eberhard Jüngel said. One of the greatest problems confronting Christianity today is to decide if there can still be sense and meaning outside of Christianity. It is exactly the question raised by MerleauPonty in his essay In Praise of Philosophy, without explicitly speaking of de Lubac. He asks, Why do you say that every nontheism is an a-theism or an...

anti-theism? Why do you think that not speaking about God means that one is against God? Merleau-Ponty recognized—and I think it is all the more evident today—that the historical situation has changed. The either-or of dogmatism or atheism is no longer sufficient. It hasn't been for some time. So for me, the question that must be asked is, "Should we search for a third path?" This, I think, is the question of Anatheism.

RK: Yes, it is. But the matter is complex. The third path, as you call it, is not some Hegelian mediation of theism and atheism leading to a higher synthesis of "absolute knowledge." There is no guarantee of dialectical progress. On the contrary, anatheism is a wager and a risk, an adventure and a drama. If it is a "third," it is a kind of excluded middle—what is forgotten or omitted in the adversarial binarism of theism-versus-atheism. I prefer to see the anatheist moment not as a telos but as a "possibility," a "promise," a "call"—a dis-position that bypasses the mutually exclusive "positions" of theistic or atheistic belief (namely, the propositional claim that God exists or does not exist). Anatheism is an invitation to think otherwise. Another kind of faith in the call of "Perhaps." That is why I wrote a book called The God Who May Be (2009) and why my first book was called Poétique du Possible (1984).

EF: But perhaps we differ in this: I am skeptical of this search for a third way whereas you embrace it. I would rather ask: "how can I be transformed by the atheist who lives without God but who is not against God?" It is for me a consequence of the Incarnation (our incarnation and Incarnation of God) that we have to think of this man without God but not against God. It is a paradox. But it means something like Gaudium et spes explains in § 22: it is because God became human that we understand what becoming human as such means. So my position is that, after the Incarnation, the word "atheism" is no longer adequate. I am not at all a defeatist with regard to the actual world—I often think of Kant who said in the beginning of his Religion Beyond the Limits of Reason Alone that each epoch believes itself to be worse than the preceding one according to a gradual decadence. What I explore in The Metamorphosis of Finitude is in a sense a fidelity to the spirit of Thomas Aquinas, who in the opening words of the Summa Contra Gentiles explains that he was obliged to seek refuge in Natural Reason, because he had no other means. For me, the Natural Reason of Thomas, the Natural Light of Reason, is nothing but the quest for a common name. Common for all people. Instead of saying "you need reason in order to be able to ascend to God," he says: "with the Jews I have the Old Testament in common, with the heretics I have the New Testament in common, but with the pagans I have nothing in common so I need to find this 'common' thing
I call ‘reason.’ My hypothesis, then, is this: one does not have to follow Thomas Aquinas to the letter, but one should be true to his spirit.

RK: What would you say is the “spirit” of St. Thomas today? Would you equate it with an appeal to the natural light of reason? A sort of reprise of natural theology?

EF: I understand it as an openness to the novelty of one’s time (for Thomas that was the introduction of Aristotelianism), transforming it in the light of Christianity. In The Metamorphosis of Finitude, I make the case that what we have in common today is no longer reason as it was for Aquinas. We think after Nietzsche, after Freud, so what we have in common is finitude, the consciousness and horizon of death, and thereby the necessity to ask the question of meaning from this perspective. If it is finitude that we all—believers and nonbelievers, Christians and pagan alike—have in common, then it is about finitude that we should first talk. This means that we have to speak primarily about the possibility of posing the question of meaning.

RK: So for you, the Christian is the one who lets him or herself be transformed by the one who does not believe. And at the same time, nonbelievers can let themselves be transformed by believers? I agree. Anatheism as I understand it is a crossing of belief and nonbelief. The holding open of a space and time where both can converse. In that sense it may be thought of as a double condition of hospitality to both faith and questioning—they need each other.

EF: The paradigm is dialogical, I agree, not as a paradigm of saturation but as a paradigm of transformation. How can the other who is without God but not against God teach me to be without God in my turn as well? So you see, I agree with your anatheist diagnostics. But I do have some hesitations about the idea of a third way, if the third way is only a manner of overcoming the opposition between theism and atheism. I worry that the third way—but you are very prudent on this point—might become a higher dialectical solution that reintroduces the question of God without us being transformed by the other who says that he does need God.

RK: I appreciate your reservations, but let me repeat: the ana of anatheism does not just come after theism and atheism, as some kind of speculative synthesis, but is a manner of being openly predisposed to the adventure of belief and nonbelief, of darkness and light. As when Dostoevsky says that “true faith comes forth from the crucible of doubt,” or John of the Cross and G. M. Hopkins testify that epiphany comes from the dark night of the soul. In a sense, the ana-turn is a return to the condition of the possibility of faith and nonfaith. It is what I call following Keats, “negative capability”;

namely, a disposition to receive what comes without knowing the answer in advance. Pure attention. Vigilance. Receptivity. What Rilke calls “the open.” The ana- is a letting go of something, of all that you think you know, in order to open yourself to the possibility of something novel and strange (which sometimes can be the oldest thing in the book). And, from a philosophical point of view, one can see analogies in the repeated attempts of thinkers from time immemorial to get back to first beginnings in order to question and wonder at what is—the Socratic method of not-knowing, Cusa’s docta ignorantia, Husserl’s phenomenological epoché (suspension of the natural attitude of prejudice and presupposition) so as to open one’s mind to the evidence, to the giving of givenness [Gegebenheit/Es Gibt], to the “things themselves” (which, for Husserl, are gifted as possibility and actuality). An openness to the call of the possible. A primary ontological attention to the primal ontological question: why is there something rather than nothing? Anatheism asks: Why is there God rather than no-God? It is a return to conditions of possibility, but deeper than Kant, because it is existential before it is theoretical. That is why the anatheist moment can be one of anxiety and crisis—experiencing one’s finitude and limit—as well as of wonder and surprise. That moment is often best captured in imagination—art, myth, metaphor, story, testimony—before it ever becomes a speculative or conceptual theory. Which is why I give such attention to writers, artists, and poets in Anatheism. They are privileged witnesses to wonder and epiphany, to a nondogmatic sense of the sacred that, I firmly believe, every genuine religion needs to be nourished by.

EF: Please, say more about this. I agree, of course, that the sacred is a dimension of the human being. But is the sacred exactly an experience of God? What does that mean to speak about the presence of God without God? Why do we have to oppose speculative theory or dogma on the one hand, and literature and art on the other? What is the use of culture, and even of Christianity, in that sense?

RK: Stories are more open than doctrines. As Ricoeur rightly says, l’imagination ne connaît pas de censure. Which does not mean it is mere fiction—or if it is, it is a fiction that speaks truth: an as-if that tells it as it is. Every tradition has its own unique set of narratives and testimonies and I do not want to attribute any triumphal superiority to those of my own Catholic Christianity—though of course they have priority for me as my personal faith heritage and primary belonging. I realize I have much to learn from the stories of others. I believe that narrative faith traditions have an equal right to be heard and read—which does not mean for one moment that they are the same. This for me this a crucial aspect of anatheism. It signals its
essential inter-religiosity. A readiness to provisionally suspend one's own inherited beliefs in order to listen to another's faith narratives in a way that allows for a more liberating, pluralist, and amplified appreciation of one's own. This detour of self-through-other permits one to return to one's own God anew. (Or maybe not, one may well embrace another spiritual path). Again, it is a risk and a wager, but a journey worth taking. A journey of exodus and possible return. That is why ana-theism is a movement of God-after-God. And narrativity is indispensable here. Without stories—our stories and the stories of others—we do not go beyond our enclosed selves; or if we do, we are left with an existential experience that we cannot communicate; or that is betrayed by being reduced too quickly to the rigid conceptual doctrines of our own tradition. Divinity is too big for one mansion. That is why God has many mansions. And many voices. And insists on revealing the divine in scriptures and stories—for example in the Abrahamic tradition, we might cite the narratives of Genesis, Exodus, and Kings down to the four gospels and the hadiths.

II

EF: How does this apply to your reading of your own narrative tradition? Is there something specific for you in the epiphany of God in Christianity?

RK: What interests me about Christ is that he came on earth to heal and tell stories. I see Judeo-Christianity as marking a mutation from one kind of God to another. From God as superintendant of the universe to God as suffering servant. That was the message of Isaiah. And it was Christ's too when he exclaimed "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" In that moment of atheism, he let go of the God of theodicy, the God of expiatory sacrifice, of substitutional atonement, of Patriarchal Power and Might—the magic Nobodaddy—and out of that moment of suspension and kenosis came the opening to another kind of God (after God)—to which Christ then consents: "Unto thee I commend my spirit." It is the same for Judaism (I am against supercessionism). Abraham on Mount Moriah let go of the God of blood sacrifice; he ultimately moved beyond Elohim's command to sacrifice his son Isaac: by embracing a God of Mercy, Yahweh, who says "Do not kill your son." Likewise, at Mamre, Abraham forwent his tribal God in order to welcome the three strangers from the desert—who are subsequently revealed as the God of hospitality and natality (the strangers at Mamre announce the birth of an impossible child, Isaac, prefiguring Gabriel's annunciation of another child, Jesus, in Nazareth). The annunciations of Mamre and Nazareth are two pages from the same book. Indeed, I often imagine that what Mary is reading in all those classic religious paintings of the Annunciation—there is always a page open at a lectern—is precisely the scene of the strangers announcing the birth of Isaac to Sarah and Abraham! In the hosting of strangers from nowhere, the impossible is made possible, hostility becomes hospitality. Abraham's old God is suspended [epoché] so that a new God can appear. There is a constant repetition of God-after-God-after-God. So I would say there are two ways of reading Anathemism. The first is the historical and sociological—as a phenomenon of contemporary faith after Freud, Marx, and Nietzsche, after the secular enlightenment and modern democratic revolutions—and the second is the existential, ontological, eschatological. The first is culturally and contextually specific; the second is trans-cultural, universal, timeless. Both are relevant.

EF: We should perhaps say that the drama of atheist humanism—or the return of anatheism—is not merely a question of time, history, culture. It is really an ontological question to be asked on a theological level. If we do not, we are simply thinkers of our time.

RK: Yes. But we need to think both our particular time and the quasi-universal condition of possibility of hospitality to the stranger, which I see as the inaugural "anatheist" moment of all wisdom traditions.

EF: But in order to transpose the question onto a theological level, you have to ask it in terms of human experience. Starting from myself, I can never affirm that after mankind there is something. It is God who says that there is something after me. That is the sense of Golgotha and of Christ on the cross. The theological question is to know what is meant by Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani. We know the famous phrase of Moltmann that God has been abandoned by God. With many others, Balthasar among them, I have criticized this thesis because the proper quality of God on the cross is that he continues to address himself to the father. That is, for me, the sense of the death of the son: that in his dying, he remains open to alterity. It is the father who opens this alterity. Or take the example of the disciples at Emmaus. It is not sufficient to remark that they only recognized Christ at the moment he disappeared. You have to interpret the text not from its end but from its beginning—"Weren't our hearts burning in us when we walked with him?" At this point, we cannot stay with hermeneutics. It is an affair of pathos, of a divine empathy—the kind that exists between two men who meet each other in their sorrow. The disciples recognize Christ because they have already experienced the feeling of recognizing him without recognizing who he is. This is the power of Christianity, but also its greatest difficulty: only through man can we see God.
RK: That sounds like apologetics or Christocentrism. Are you saying everyone is a Christian, even if they don’t know it? Are you espousing a version of Rahner’s “anonymous Christians”?

EF: No, they are not anonymous Christians. They have to be baptized, even secretly in their hearts. The question is not a question of identity (to be Christian or not) but of community (what do I have in common with the others who are not thinking and speaking like me?). Even if we are believers, we still have something in common with our “human brothers,” as Bernanos says. It is what I call l’homme tout court, the human as such, in the sense of our finitude: birth, anguish before death, suffering, joy, body, eros, and so on. Our community of humanity is the basis from which our differences can emerge. That is why I want to avoid any form of apologetics. My aim is not to convert anybody; I simply want to develop a credible Christianity, which is not only believable. It is God’s business to know if people convert, not mine. I only want to furnish words—in the line of Vatican II, starting from contemporary culture, in the words of actuality, words about finitude, and so forth—to say that Christianity can be credible. Instead of apologetics, I want to know and to make known where we are as human beings. But that does not mean that we have to stop at the cross—not because we don’t support the anguish of death, but because it is the choice of the father to make us pass from the corruptible to the incorruptible in his son. The Metamorphosis of Finitude is not just the title of a book, but the act by which the son carries the weight of the world and passes it to his father to transform it in the force of the Holy Spirit.

RK: Is it philosophy or theology you’re talking now?

EF: It is theology. But it is precisely because it is now theology that I can say that it was first philosophy. We don’t always suspect that someone who is speaking theologically is a philosopher and vice-versa. But I say that you have to cross the Rubicon. It is only when I am on the side of the resurrection that I can say, “truly I have been on the side of finitude.” Only when I am speaking theologically can I recognize myself as a philosopher.

RK: But could an atheist philosopher say that?

EF: He can’t assume to be a theologian, of course. But he can and must understand that I am a true philosopher when I am speaking about finitude at the beginning. I am against crypto-theology in philosophy, and I don’t want to live in what Paul Ricoeur called a “controlled schizophrenia” regarding the distinction between philosophy and theology. Today, as far as I can tell, we have two models: the model of separation and the model of crossing. The first seeks to establish “true discourse” by doing away with tradition. Contemporary philosophy of God is searching for a pure discourse: it may be the discourse of charity (Jean-Luc Marion), of the face (Emmanuel Levinas), of prayer (Jean-Olivier Chrétien), of the flesh as pure Christian experience (Michel Henry) and so forth. What we observe with these representatives of the “French theological turn” is that they are thinkers of rupture. The three orders of Pascal are always interpreted as separation and not figuration (which is my own interpretation, because Pascalian thought is first rooted in the link between the two testimonies). The second model of crossing is closer to the chiasmus of Merleau-Ponty than to the overcoming of metaphysics in Heidegger: it tries to show the inverse, that there is something in common in all humanity and that the order of believers is not necessarily better or superior than the others. The paradox is the fact that Catholic thinkers in France seems to be completely Protestant when they claim this model of rupture that is as sort of translation of the doctrine of pure grace in theology into philosophy. As long as Martin Heidegger remains the key source, French phenomenology will always stay in this model of rupture, which is the opposite to the model of continuity, as in Thomas Aquinas for example.

RK: I think you could also add the deconstructive model of radical alterity to your list of Jewish-Protestant rupture. Though it is curious how most of the French phenomenologists of the theological turn you just listed are of Catholic formation (who is more Catholic than Marion?). Ricoeur, a Protestant, seems to be closer to your second model of crossing and mediation. So let me try to understand your position better. For you, it seems, Catholicism is a theology of mixture, mediation, and métissage. And you oppose this to the current French phenomenology of separation and rupture, which is contextually and historically linked to the critical influence of Heidegger who, after 1917 and his return to Lutheranism, had a position much closer to Protestantism than to Catholicism.

EF: Indeed. And that French Heideggerian movement could be said to mark a conversion of theology by philosophy. But on the other hand, we have what I call the act of “crossing of the Rubicon.” It is not enough to convert or to translate theology into philosophy—with Heidegger—we have to also convert philosophy into theology. The conversion of philosophy by theology means that the link between philosophy and theology is two-way. I argue that this second option evolves in three phases in the history of Christian philosophy. The first phase refers to Duns Scotus, who wanted to liberate God and thereby—let’s say accidentally, because it was not his aim—provoked contingency. He says that contingent being is positive being. And this is precisely the first moment: I do not have an experience of God
other than through the human being. The second phase is that of Thomas Aquinas. He says that one can understand certain aspects of God—for instance, existence, unity, or infinity. But other aspects, he argues, cannot be accessed without revelation—that is that God is a trinity, that his only son became incarnate, that he suffered, died, and rose again. But what else does he say? He adds that human beings can grasp everything thanks to revelation. I do not have to reason my way to the understanding that God exists. I know it from scripture: “I am who I am” (Exodus 3:16). The third phase is Bonaventure. He introduces the idea that everything is contained in God. Nothing happens to men that does not happen first in God, that is, in the Trinity. For me, God becomes the author of transformation in the world. If there is anxiety in me, this anxiety is experienced in the relation between the father and son and is thereby transformed. For example, if a couple receives the Christian sacrament of marriage, the erotic love of a man for his wife and vice versa, is transformed in the Trinity. In my eyes, there is no equivocity (Nygren) and no univocity (Marion) between eros and agape, but rather a sort of metamorphosis of eros in agape. The Trinity is the author of this transformation and conversion. In that way, love or eros is not first an ideal of charity, but the meeting of two persons in their own chaos in the attempt to share it together and eventually to convert it into God. We must renounce the ideal of transparency or the transcendent view from above, as Merleau-Ponty said.

RK: Merleau-Ponty is not a thinker of rupture but a “continuist,” as Sartre observed. My own understanding of God-after-God is very informed by Merleau-Ponty as I try to show in the fourth chapter of Anatheism, entitled “In the Flesh: Sacramental Imagination.”

EF: Absolutely, even if the term “continuist” is not exactly the same as the term “chiasm” or “crossing” used by Merleau-Ponty, or as the term of “tiling between philosophy and theology” I use in Crossing the Rubicon. It is astonishing that neither Ricoeur, Henry, Chrétién, Marion nor Lacoste ever cite Merleau-Ponty. But today, for my generation, Merleau-Ponty is the philosopher par excellence, and I know he is also a key reference for you in Anatheism. My job is to show that we can think differently about philosophy and theology without contradicting the above-mentioned philosophers. That is also, for me, the reason for debating with Derrida and Marion in Le combat amoureux (The Loving Struggle), for example. Derrida has his chora, but Marion rejects it. Why? Because chora is a place of resistance and not of a transcendence (or of a gift) first given. In the words of Derrida, chora is the place of an irreducible darkness. Marion only seeks the darkness of bliss that is coming from Denys the Areopagite: being blinded by too much light. On this point Janicaud offers a compelling critique, which is addressed to all French phenomenology: can we found a phenomenology on the basis of the immanence that is not immanent? And his response is an emphatic no. That is why I think the proper sense of Christianity is to take seriously immanence and incarnation, which makes it all the more astonishing that contemporary French phenomenology is rather a phenomenology of transcendence and of the absolute.

RK: The anathetist embrace of immanence—or, more exactly, of transcendence-in-immanence—is also a responsively openness to chora. Christian incarnation is not dualist or gnostic. It starts with chora. The questions of God and chora need to be asked together.

EF: Yes, I would speak rather of a circumscription of chora. That is why I have developed the concept of a limited phenomenon instead of a saturated phenomenon—not against it, but only because there are two different ways in philosophy as in theology. In philosophy, it means that the beginning is not first revelation but finitude, not first the gift but the resistance of the world, the consistence of the body and the anxiety of death. It is another point of departure. And in theology, it means that God articulates himself and is namable, only within limits. God has chosen to be inscribed in limits because of his incarnation. It is the debate between Balthasar and Rahner on the anthropological reduction. For me, it is not enough to say with Balthasar that Rahner’s “anthropological reduction,” by means of the concept kenosis, has reduced God to humanity. Rahner simply accepts the fact that God transformed himself into a man. We don’t have to choose between Balthasar and Rahner; but we have to understand that we can’t speak only about the excess of God in the Dionysian way or about the absolute freedom of God in the manner of Duns Scotus. There is also the possibility of speaking about the humility of poverty of God in the manner of Bonaventure or about man created first in his own limits, as Thomas Aquinas implies.

III

RK: Some thoughts come to mind as you speak of revelation and the debate between von Balthazar and Rahner. The first is baptism. What does it mean? How does it begin? Is there a natural baptism of desire—as when Christ speaks of those “baptized in fire and spirit” (Matthew 3:11)—or does one need the official ritual of the church? I believe there is a baptism of desire that everybody shares. An “eclesiastical” baptism may come later from a priest for Christians, as a supplementary seconding in the
doctrinal language of the church. Otherwise, one has that crazy (now-suspended) Catholic doctrine of Limbo—as a place where babies go who don’t get dipped in a baptismal font! Ridiculous. Creation and kenosis and incarnation and salvation all come before the sacrament of baptism. Christ was begotten and made flesh and conceived and born before he was dunked by John the Baptist in the Jordan. Christianity as human incarnation comes before the sacrament of baptism. The sacrament of baptism simply confirms something that is already going on as promise, call, desire. Would you agree with this idea of natural baptism of fire or desire? A baptism that is ontological before it is theological?

EF: That is a difficult question, indeed. Yes, we could speak of a baptism of desire that is—if I understand you—a personal experience. But a baptism of desire presupposes desire. For me, however, the first experience is not the desire for God. The first experience for human being is the experience of death and finitude. In our culture, and even in our experience, it is no more possible to presuppose the existence of God or the aspiration to God. God is only a revelation or a manifestation given in the heart of finitude, in our limits. He is not first the accomplishment of our own desire to find something else, which is always a manner to run away from our living conditions. We have to speak after Nietzsche and the rejection of the "arrières mondes." I can’t stand Irenic Christianity with its romantic groveling before the newborn child. From Freud, after Nietzsche, we learn that birth is a rupture—that life is tragic. There is no surpassing my human condition by means of some form of pious desire. A nonbeliever is before death and not beyond it. A medical doctor, for example, knows that he is going to die like all his patients in the hospital. But he does not need to believe in the afterlife to give a sense to his own life. Perhaps it is, inversely, because he is not a believer that he tries to find sense in this life, by serving other people and so on. It is always a defect of believers to believe that there is no meaning to life independently of their belief. That’s why philosophy is always for me first.

RK: It sounds like Dr. Rieux in Camus’s The Plague.

EF: Exactly. He has given a meaning to his life, and he doesn’t need something that comes after, so desire is not the foundation of reality. To talk about the baptism of desire, we must acknowledge a desire that God has placed in each of us. But it is not a desire that we know from the start.

RK: I actually mean desire as a primal ontological hunger, not some romantic fantasy. Eros as a primal drive for connection and love, already present, as Klein and Freud realized, from the moment we are born. I think even Plato might agree (at least in the Symposium). So what I wanted to express is that, for me, the sacramental—whether it concern the first rites of baptism or the last rites of extreme unction—starts already with birth. And therefore, the first kenosis for each human being is birth. I think here also of the Orthodox Christians who hold that the first kenosis of God is the moment of incarnation (with its attendant acceptance of limit, finitude, humanity as earth-bound or humus). The second is the baptismal drowning in the Jordan. The third is the crucifixion, the letting go of the Alpha-God in order to become fully human and therefore fully God. And each time, eros is accompanied by a certain thanatos, living with a certain dying (to oneself), ascent with descent. There is nothing Irenic or sentimental about it. So, I like to think that there is a baptism at birth, which is what you might call a moment of death, of separation, of loss, and trauma. Even Levinas speaks of an “original trauma.” There is, from the start, already a radical experience of finitude and kenosis. I would thus link eros and kenosis as coterminous from that moment onward. Maybe it is proto-eros and proto-kenosis together making up a proto-baptism. One does not need to be baptized in a church to be saved, according to the old Catholic doctrine extra ecclesiam nulla salus. I think that the emphasis you and I are putting on Merleau-Ponty and the flesh, even all the way down to the animal—certainly the animal in us—reveals that there is nothing that cannot be sanctified. Joyce insisted on that too as a good anathete “Catholic.” It is in that sense of potential inclusivism that I want to say that the ecclesial sacrament of baptism expresses an ontological predisposition. Anathesism is not saying something like: you are born a pagan nobody, then you are instituted into the church, then you lose that faith and then you discover God anew. No, anathete is the prefrom the beginning. The ana is not just what comes afterward, but, equiprimordially, what goes back to the very start. In that sense, anathete knowledge (connaissance) starts with birth (naissance). Eros is what Christians have in common with the Greeks, the atheists, and so-called pagans. A sort of erotic lumière naturelle.

EF: This reminds me of Nicodemus’s question in the gospels. How can a man reenter the womb of his mother and be born again? Indeed, you have to develop a phenomenology of natality in order to be able to develop a phenomenology of resurrection. It is very interesting what you are suggesting, that birth is already a kenosis. I completely agree with you. But we are not obliged, in a first step, to speak about birth in terms of kenosis or about eros in terms of agape. Our first experience is only a human one because God became human. So, there is no way to speak about God outside of our humanity.
RK: I agree with your last sentence, but would add that precisely as human, the first cry of the child is the cry of abandonment and loss, of kenotic emptying and exposure (Nancy's ex-peau-sure); a primal natal cry which finds its Christian culmination in "my God, my God, why have you abandoned me?" Which reminds me of Joyce's line in Ulysses "What's God? A cry in the street."

EF: How true.

IV

RK: Let's turn to another question central to atheism and your own work—the role of the body and animality in all of this.

EF: This point is important and more difficult. In The Metamorphosis of Finitude I developed the hypothesis that the resurrection of the flesh is the resurrection of life, of the experience of the flesh. But it was not enough, and that is why I then wrote The Wedding Feast of the Lamb about the Eucharist and the organic body. Of course, it is not so easy to defend today the idea that we will be resurrected with our organs without using them. This is what Thomas says in the last part of his Summa Contra Gentiles after Augustine in his City of God. But we have lost the sense of the organic body, even in phenomenology, by talking too much about the "lived body." If Augustine or Thomas Aquinas supported the idea that we have to be resurrected with our organic bodies, it doesn't mean, of course, that we will use our stomachs or sexual organs in eternity. But they wanted to affirm that nothing is lost in the act of resurrection. Everything is assumed and saved by God, as Gregory of Nyssa said. So we have to link resurrection and Eucharist in theology as we have to link the lived body and the organic body in phenomenology—even if French phenomenology has always favored the lived body over the organic body, because of a certain interpretation of Husserl.

RK: Husserl, as you note, says that we are not only objective Körper but also subjective Leib. That raises the important question of animality. You have previously written about the priority of the flesh over the body, the priority of the experience of the flesh. Phenomenology has traditionally given priority to sense over nonsense. But now you seem to be going in the opposite direction by raising the issue of organic matter?

EF: Here we have to pass from The Metamorphosis of Finitude: Birth and Resurrection to The Wedding Feast of the Lamb: Eros, Body and Eucharist. In a course given on Nietzsche and Heidegger in 1936 in Freiburg, he asks of Kant, what happens if matter can't be subsumed under a concept? One option is the intuition of the sublime, of saturation. The other possibility is that this experience is unassignable. It cannot even be constructed. The sublime is always already constructed—the saturated phenomenon of Marion surpasses me because of its excess of sense. It is not the absence of sense, or the outside of sense. But what if we find ourselves confronted with the radical impossibility of meaning, what Kant is calling in his Critic of Pure Reason the "mass of sensation"? Following this path, Merleau-Ponty asks the very same question. He speaks of brute nature (nature brute) of the wild world (monde sauvage), echoing Husserl who, in Cartesian Meditations §6, mentions the first, pure, silent experience, still waiting to arrive at its proper sense. But the difference between Husserl and Merleau-Ponty is the fact that for the latter, the silent experience is not necessarily waiting for sense. So, the question becomes: what if sense does not arrive? Should we believe that passions, desires always find their meaning? In this respect, I criticize the priority of sense over nonsense.

RK: This reminds me of Jean Vanier when he talks of the disabled as wounded beings who have a lot to offer us and teach us, outside our habitual understanding of mental normality or conceptual sense. A sense before sense as it were.

EF: Indeed. I would like to add a third prioritization often claimed in phenomenology—after the priority of flesh over body, and the priority of sense over nonsense—namely, the priority of passivity over activity. In reality, we see that the moment we speak of phenomenology, what really counts is passivity. The passive synthesis in Husserl and so forth. And when there is some activity in phenomenology—for instance the authentic Dasein—all French phenomenology rejects it as being an idolatry of the subject. But in prioritizing passivity over activity, we have lost, in my eyes, the sense of a phenomenology of power. Not that I dismiss the importance of talking about vulnerability, the face, hospitality toward the other. But I think we forget the sense of the struggle in life—not only the vulnerability or the welcome of the other but also the necessity to offer a true resistance, because of our irreducible differences. It is like the combat of Jacob with the angel in Genesis. Jacob needs the combat to test himself, to know who he is. That's why he asks to continue the combat. There are some "good combats"—the "combats to achieve victory" as St. Paul said.

RK: Who understood the fact that life is a struggle better than Levinas? Not the struggle for life, as Darwin would have it; but a struggle inside of life. Existence is agonistic, a wrestle, violence. In the accusative I exist, says Beckett. Levinas might well have added, "In the dative, in the persecuted, in the solicited I exist." And, of course, we also have Marion's notion of the
adonné (the gifted or addicted recipient of saturation). All of the above link struggle with radical passivity.

EF: Yes, but there is a difference between being responsible for the other (Levinas) or being an adonné (Marion), and being in a true combat. Phenomenology doesn’t deny a certain sense of force or strength, but it always prefers passivity to activity, weakness to force. We have to retrieve a philosophy of force, and a theology of force, that is of the Holy Spirit.

RK: So it seems you are proposing a theological reinterpretation of power in a positive fashion. Do you mean the power of the powerless as a call for action? A bit like what Dorothy Day did with the Catholic worker movement in the United States, opening hospitality houses to those down and out in the city centers of America? Or, like Vanier and Teresa of Calcutta when they speak of vulnerability and build shelters for the poor and disabled—empowering others to do likewise?

EF: Jean Vanier is not at all supine or Irenic—neither is Levinas. He starts *Totality and Infinity* with war! But we have a tendency to sentimentalize their vision. The question is not Levinas himself or Jean Vanier himself, but the use of their work today in theology, medical care, education, and so forth. In fact, there is, in my eyes, a profound difference between the first Levinas of *De l’existence à l’existant ou Le temps et l’autre*, during and after the war, and the later Levinas of *Totality and Infinity*. The primacy of the face of the other in *Totality and Infinity* has led us forgetting the importance of the “Il y a” or of the “hypermateriality of the body” in *Le temps et l’autre*. The experience of insomnia is absolutely foundational for Levinas, because the experience of the other—in this case myself—is the one I never welcome. I am encumbered by my own body. I am an object to myself.

RK: Ricoeur understood this with his key notion of the “conflict of interpretations.” He spoke of democracy as a debating place for multiply competing interests. *Un combat amoureux*. I think we find this view strongly expressed in his reading of the “tragic” in his sketch of a “little ethics” in *Oneself as Another*.

EF: Yes, I use the same term—Le combat amoureux—as title for my book on French phenomenologists from Merleau-Ponty and Derrida to Jean-Luc Marion and Jean-Louis Chretien. Ricoeur is probably one of the only French philosophers who never abandoned this dimension of conflict and struggle in his work.

RK: In interreligious dialogue there is also a combat amoureux. It is not just about agreeing with one another. I am struck by your acknowledgment of specific hermeneutic differences and *différarend* in the opening section of *Crossing the Rubicon*. You speak of Ricoeur’s Protestant hermeneutic, Levinas’s Jewish hermeneutic, and your own Catholic hermeneutic. It is very unusual to see that kind of admission in contemporary phenomenology and hermeneutics.

EF: Yes, but I never wanted to open a war of religion or confession by this type of argument. It is just to say that nobody can think and speak outside of his or her own experience. Catholicism is not for me an identity against Protestantism or Orthodoxy—and the context is, on this point, completely different in France than in the United States. Christianity is no longer considered to be against Judaism or Islam. I am not first a Catholic because I want to defend a position, or out of a dogmatic conviction, but because it is where I am spiritually rooted, as Levinas is rooted in Judaism and Ricoeur in Protestantism. We can learn more from our differences. And my astonishment is that the Catholic tradition, at least in France, always needs the Jewish (Levinas) or the Protestant (Ricoeur) to define itself. About those differences, for instance, as a Catholic, I both admire and disagree with Levinas, a Jew, and with Ricoeur, a Protestant. There is no incarnation in Levinas. How could there be? And how could we not disagree on such a fundamental issue? Ricoeur offers a hermeneutic of the text. Catholicism does not primarily rely on the text, but on body and world (the “book of the world” rather than the book of scripture). Ricoeur says, “Enough of this referring back to sources. What counts is that the text can transform us.” If the critical-literary method has worked on the letter of the text, Ricoeur’s hermeneutics has specifically developed the moral sense of the text: the transformation of the reader. But I emphasize the allegorical or analogical sense of the text. What counts is not that the text talks to me, but that it does not talk to me. The text speaks of Christ and for that reason it remains a stranger. I think it is important for Catholicism to develop a phenomenology on the basis of its tradition, a phenomenology of the body and the voice. Why the voice? Because the voice is not the text. A text exists independently of its author. That is what allows Ricoeur to talk about “distanciation.” The voice never exists without a body. Even if you don’t see the body, you need a body to hear a voice (behind the door for example, or on the phone). The voice of the word is for us today what the flesh was for Christ’s disciples as magnificently observed by Hughes of Saint-Victor in his essay, *The Word of God* (Verbum Dei). That’s why we have to develop a “hermeneutic of the body and the voice” in the Catholic tradition that is not the same as the “hermeneutic of the sense of the text” in the Protestant one (Ricoeur) and of “the body of the text” in the Jewish one (Levinas). And that is why in Catholicism the liturgy of the Word (voice) is born in the liturgy of the Eucharist (body).
RK: So you want to reintroduce the force in activity, the nonsense in phenomenality, the body in the flesh. On the latter point, do you want to challenge the traditional phenomenological prioritizing of Leib over Körper, as Derrida does in Le Toucher and Nancy in Corpus?

EF: Let me put it like this. Just as Descartes thought that the soul was easier to know than the body, I would say that the Leib is easier to know than the Körper. The experience of the flesh is relatively simple and direct. I talk from within as a gnostic. So the real problem today is not the flesh but the body. In Ideas II, Husserl is faced with the problem of the body. But when he writes Cartesian Meditations, he uses the word Leib in the fifth meditation, the second reduction. Levinas translates this as corps organique. He doesn't say flesh chair. Why? Because he translates Leib as we always do in French. For instance: Nietzsche's der Leib philosophiert, we had never thought of translating i: with chair. Afterward, Ricoeur writes his commentary on the fifth meditation and he speaks about chair. Merleau-Ponty, in the Phenomenology of Perception, speaks constantly about Leib as chair. Since then, all French philosophers say that the central problem is the experience of the body as flesh chair. But I would ask, what do we do with the natality of the body? That is a philosophical question. It is also a theological one. It is what I call the backlash. Why? Because this is the problem of Michel Henry. I assed in my book Le combat amoureux, "Is there flesh without body?" When Henry interprets the fathers of the church in particular Ireneus and Tertullian on the subject of the Incarnation, he makes Tertullian into something that Tertullian is not. He is looking for the flesh experience in Tertullian. But what does Tertullian say in the passage about the incarnation? He says, "Christ is not an angel"—this is against Valentinus:"He has had a body like us, bones likes us, hair like us, a stomach like us." So, because of the backlash of theology against phenomenology, we cannot remain at the level of the flesh as lived-body [Leib] unless we root it in a material or organic body. Christ, in his incarnation, assumed a true body, an organic objective body and not only an experience of his body as a subjective chair. To avoid gnosticism, we have to challenge and critique the primacy of the flesh over the body in phenomenology.

V

RK: Does Tertullian talk about the sex of Christ? I found during a recent visit to Rome artistic representations in which the adults around the infant Christ are inspecting and touching his sex. It is to show that he is fully human. They are all looking at his genital organs. He is not an angel.
—that there is someone who has had the experience of being that body—I can only say that I see it as a human body. The same thing happens when we observe another person sleeping, as Proust magnificently describes Albertine sleeping in La prisonnière. Where is the other? He or she has gone. But where? The body is there—as a plant or flower that would have been deposited there," writes Proust.

RK: Your emphasis on the corporal body resonates with me. The anatheist sense of the stranger is also deeply rooted in carnal hermeneutics—that is a sensing of the other through our primary sensations, taste, touch, and smell. Sense as sensibility. This is witnessed not just in our existential and phenomenological experience of others as both flesh (chair) and body (corps), but also in the primal scenes of most wisdom traditions—Abraham and Sarah sense the divine strangers at Mamre in the sharing of food, Baucis and Philemon sense the disguised Hermes and Zeus in the tasting of herbs, the disciples recognize the risen Christ in the sharing of bread (Emmaus) and fish (Galilee), Jacob encounters God in the body-to-body wrestling with the stranger at night—that is, by touch. And this is replicated in many other spiritual traditions. The radical alterity of the other is revealed not first as text or thought, as idea or concept, or as doctrine or dogma, but as carnal sensation, corporeal experience. Eros also combines the physical and metaphysical in its reaching out toward the other, in its hunger for connection and bonding, for new life (as Freud also recognizes in Beyond the Pleasure Principle). How does the notion of the sensing and desiring body relate to your idea of the "spread body" (le corps épandu)?

EF: Michel Henry speaks of éros as the "act" that I feel what the other feels, just as Merleau-Ponty speaks of the touchant touché. But I think that éros is also on the side of the organic, and not only of the "lived experienced" of myself or of the other. Jouissance is psychic and organic, not only psychic. It is a resistance of bodies, as we spoke before about a "good combat" or a "good struggle." That's why éros is never fusion, but always opposition or differentiation, hand to hand, body to body. This common experience of éros is one of the reasons I tried to invent an intermediary concept between Descartes's corps étendu and Husserl's corps vécu. Once we accept this, we must leave behind the angelic sphere of phenomenology, the gnosticism of theological phenomenology. To come back to the question of animality, the question is not just to speak about animals but to reach a part of myself that is precisely prior to any verbal formulation. As the angel is a limit hypothesis of "a consciousness without body," the animal is a limit hypothesis of "a body without consciousness." So animality is everything in us that is of the order of passions, impulses, digestions. It is through the "organic" that we are in the world. But the problem is that we do not have access to this organic realm because we always already give sense to everything. That's why we have to first recognize this part of animality in us. This is also, theologically, the sense of the Eucharist. The formula "this is my body" has first to designate a true body, or a body that is truly human, even though it is not a form of cannibalism. The Eucharist is not only the passage from humanity to divinity, but also the passage from animality to humanity. Christ came to inhabit our chaos of passions and drives, to remain in them, and to convert them in him.

RK: So in a way, you are bringing back the theme of hospitality into your reflection, precisely the primal experience that for me is fundamental to anatheism—and indeed a hospitality that is not some sort of conscious decision about the stranger but a willingness to transform and be transformed. This is what we are trying to do in the Guestbook Project, "Hosting the Stranger." For you, the "animal" is a word for the "stranger" in all of us, no? But if that is the case, why then has animality not received more attention in theology?

EF: I think it is because we need a concept to distinguish between animality and bestiality. The essential point is that there are two motives for the Incarnation. The motive of solidarity—Jesus died with and for all humanity—and the motive of redemption—Jesus died to save us from our sins. The first has to do with animality, which is good in itself. So Christ, by assuming humanity and thus animality, has become an animal himself. Don't forget that the first representations of Christ are images of animals: the lamb, the lion, the fish. Somewhere along the way, the animal as representative of Christ was lost (except, perhaps, in the Franciscan tradition). To be able to retrieve this tradition, it is necessary to distinguish animality from bestiality. What is bestiality? It is the unique possibility of humans to fall beneath the level of their animality. The word bête in French can be applied to human beings. You say, for instance, sale bête. Man is a beast in so far as he does not accept the animal in him. Sin is not the fall from humanity into animality, but the fall from animality into bestiality. Bestial behavior, pornography, or torture, for example, is something only humans are capable of. But Christ takes residence in our animality, and he rescues us from bestiality. Salvation is not Christ's attempt to bring order into disorder. Salvation is Christ being present with me in my disorder. Salvation is the fact that it is no longer me who lives but Chrst who lives in me. It is Christ's inhabitation of who and what I am. As Pascal says, nobody knows himself except through Jesus Christ. He knows my animality better than I do.
VI

RK: That brings me to the next point: resurrection. You seem to want to exclude animality or corporality from the resurrected self, but isn’t that a tacit return to some kind of neo-Platonism, even gnosticism—the very move you critique in Marion and Henry? Why shouldn’t resurrected bodies use their digestive and sexual organs? Eat and have carnal pleasure?

EF: The question of the status of the organic body in the resurrection is a very complicated one, not only for me, but for all believers and for Christianity in general. I have just published a paper entitled “The Three Bodies or the Unity of the Philosophical Triduum.” I tried to understand the unity of the three corpses in the resurrection. Everything—singularity and alterity—will be resurrected. The problem for Thomas is the organic. Today, we have a completely different image and experience of the body. My proposal is to reintegrate Körper into Leib. The resurrection of the flesh is the resurrection of the body. The body is, however, the pathos-bound experience of my organs. Because I am recognized by my organic body today, I have to think about the status of my organic body at the end of time. “Returning to the body after the flesh” must be a central concern for the resurrection. But what exactly is the sense or the consistency of this organic body in resurrection? We have to think it, but it is not easy to imagine.

RK: Why not? Why shouldn’t all our organs and carnal capacities be resurrected? Agamben has a great essay, “The Glorious Body,” about the visible attempt by certain theologians to exclude certain bodily and genital functions from the risen body—of Christ and of the rest of us. I believe there is nothing genuinely carnal that escapes the resurrection. It is the integration, the recapitulation of everything—what Greek fathers like Irenaeus called anakaphalaousis. (Again, the ana of anathem). It is what Thomas also suggests: you can’t have the resurrection of form alone. It also involves matter. The corporal particularity and singularity of each material self is equally resurrected. The unique thisness of each person, their materiality (Thomas), their hecaty (Scotus). Nothing human—or “humanimal”—is ineligible for the divine. That is the basic message of the ancient notion of theopoiesis: the becoming human of the divine and the becoming divine of the human. Theopoiesis is recapitulation of every body, and every part of every body without remainder. Theopoiesis promises the resurrection of everything good in creation—or it is not worthy of the name. Nothing is lost in the kingdom, neither word nor flesh. Neither body nor soul.