

# Translating God: Derrida, Ricoeur, Kearney

**Sebastian Purcell**

## Abstract

The purpose of the present essay is to defend two related notions. The more specific notion that I seek to defend is Richard Kearney's conception of God as *posse*, of God as a possible God. His position has recently been criticized for three separate reasons: that it is not radical enough, that it is crypto-metaphysical, and that it forecloses the most profound aims of ethics. At a broader level what seems to be at stake is the opposition between partisans of radical finitude, those who hold that the most profound questions are encountered at the limits of thought, and an alternative "infinite" conception that Kearney shares with Paul Ricoeur, which maintains that fidelity to unpredictable events opens the way to what is most profound about the human condition. In response, I argue that the criticisms fail to hit their mark because they presuppose a broadly Derridean or post-modern position in order to make their argument, when it is just those presuppositions that are in question.

## Keywords

deconstruction, Derrida, ethics, eros, events, finitude, God, hermeneutics, infinity, Kearney, Ricoeur, translation

Whether one chooses to lead one's life by means of a belief in a god or not, and how one does so in light of such commitments, is a central existential and practical matter for anyone's life. This question orients our sense of what goals we deem worthy of pursuing, what codes of conduct - at least in part - we deem necessary to observe, and above all it provides a distinct sense of our human place in the universe. Perhaps it is for these reasons that one finds a broad public interest in question of religious belief in our modern world. Richard Dawkins and

Stephen Hawking are but two of the most well-known of many recent authors to have engaged this topic.<sup>1</sup> Yet philosophy as a discipline has stood at some distance from this discussion, despite the clear public interest in it. The reason for this is that philosophical discussions on God tend to suffer from a fatal defect: they deadlock almost immediately. Atheists are likely never to accept any proof for God's existence, and theists are likely

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### Corresponding Author:

Sebastian Purcell, PhD  
Assistant Professor of Philosophy  
SUNY Cortland, NY  
Email: Sebastian.Purcell@cortland.edu

never to accept that their proofs are incorrect. It would seem, as a result, that despite the public interest in the matter, there is little scholarly interest in it. As intense, personal, and practical as the discussion might be, it would appear that philosophy has almost nothing new to say about the topic.

It is in light of this deadlock that Continental philosophy as a whole, and hermeneutics in particular, has something of specific value to contribute. This tradition of thought has followed a path that Søren Kierkegaard and Friedrich Nietzsche opened. Rather than pursue the question “does God exist?” it has instead pursued “what kind of god would be worth believing in, would be worth hoping for, should such a being exist?” This is the sort of question that theists and atheists alike can pursue, so that it does not result in an immediate deadlock, and it has equally proven to be of both scholarly and public value. Charles Taylor’s *A Secular Age* (2007), for example, has renewed this scholarly discussion, and Hubert Dreyfus and Sean Kelly’s *All Things Shining* (2011), which pursues a defense of polytheism on existentialist grounds, has become a national best seller.

The key problem, when one takes up this approach, is what has come to be known as the problem “nihilism.” Nietzsche’s (in)famous statement that “God is dead. God remains dead. And we have killed him.” compresses the two related aspects of this matter (1974, p. 181). One aspect concerns the annihilation of Christian values, the fact that the Christian God does not provide meaning for “Western” culture as He did around 1500. The other concerns the distinct possibility that all our lives are but much sound and fury signifying nothing - a total annihilation of meaning - which might be termed the problem of absurdity. Nietzsche and the tradition of Continental philosophy

following him, further linked both of these aspects to a metaphysical view on the world. The metaphysics of presence is a view on the world that is taken to be exemplified in the works of Plato, Aristotle, and St. Thomas Aquinas, and which at the same time gave rise to the scientific approach to reality that denies any place to existential meaning.<sup>2</sup> It maintains that being is to be defined in terms of its presence, in terms of what it is here and now, in its actuality, and thus allows one to manipulate it maximally according to one’s best use of instrumental reason - as one finds, for example in cost-benefit analysis. Such a view on reality has no place for existential meaning. The implication for the philosophy of religion, then, is that even if one were to believe in God’s existence, one would have to do so within a framework that did not draw upon the traditional metaphysical accounts, on the metaphysics of presence, since it is just those accounts that resulted in both the secularization of our contemporary culture and the broader problem of absurdity in modern life.

Two of the most robust accounts of God that have been provided in response to the problem of nihilism are those by Jacques Derrida and Richard Kearney, though they have not thus far seen eye-to-eye. My specific aim of the present essay, then, is to provide a defense of two related philosophical notions. At one level, I seek to defend Richard Kearney’s conception of a possible God, God understood as “*posse*,” the God who may be, from some recent Derridean criticisms, notably John Caputo’s and Mark Dooley’s, which suggest that his conception belongs to the tradition of the metaphysics of presence. At a more general level, because the criticism Kearney’s work has received is of a distinctively Derridean kind, what is at stake in this defense concerns the viability of an alternative to Derridean thought, the viability of a program of

thought that is not committed to radical finitude in the way that he is. Insofar as Derrida's commitment to radical finitude may be understood to be shared by Giorgio Agamben, Martin Heidegger, even Slavoj Žižek, and insofar as Kearney's commitment to an alternative, one could call it: the program of infinite thought, is shared by thinkers as diverse as Alain Badiou and Paul Ricoeur, the stakes of this opposition are significant for Continental philosophy as a whole, and not only the philosophy of religion.<sup>3</sup>

The argument that I pursue in what follows, then, makes the case both *that* there is a viable alternative to the program of radical finitude, and *that* Kearney's conception of God as "*posse*" is part of that alternative. One result of this argument is thus to suggest that it is not possible, as Derrideans have done, simply to assume that because Kearney does not share their basic philosophical commitments that his conclusions are misguided. A second result is that it might be possible to lead one's life meaningfully if guided by a conception of God as *posse*, which, following Kearney, entails an ethical task for human living, a kind of ethics of translation.

Because exegetical points have in some ways resulted in the current disagreement, the present investigation will be served well by proceeding slowly and with clarity. I begin, then, with a thorough review of the three charges that Derrideans have leveled against Kearney, specifically, and Ricoeur, from whom he draws, more generally.

### 1. The Three Charges

Although Kearney's work has been discussed by other groups than Derrideans or Continental philosophers generally, to my mind it is the Derridean critique that poses the most serious challenge.<sup>4</sup> John Caputo

and Mark Dooley, while always friendly and appreciative in their responses, have made the strongest case in this regard. Taken together, one finds that they have leveled three separate charges: that Kearney's work is Not Radical Enough, that it is Crypto-Metaphysical, and that it Forecloses Ethics, or at least the most profound point of ethical responsibility. I take up these charges each in turn.

### The First Charge: Not Radical Enough

Caputo has argued in a number of essays and in several presentations that Kearney's diacritical hermeneutics, along with Ricoeur's reflective hermeneutics, is simply not radical enough to twist free from the metaphysics of presence. He has made his case against Ricoeur as early as *Radical Hermeneutics* (Caputo, 1984) and has expanded it to include Kearney in his more recent work (Caputo, 2006, 2010, 2011). Incidentally, I note that he is not the only Derridean to argue that Ricoeur failed to meet the challenge posed by the metaphysics of presence. To mention but one other prominent scholar on Derrida who has addressed the relation of Ricoeur and Derrida one could look to Leonard Lawlor's work (1992).<sup>5</sup> This line of critique, then, broaches a deep tension between Derrida and Ricoeur, indeed to my mind, it broaches one of the most fundamental disagreements in contemporary Continental philosophy, and I shall gesture in that direction below (section 3). Nevertheless, I begin with the Derridean criticism.

Caputo's most recent argument is that the structure of Kearney and Ricoeur's hermeneutics, whether diacritical or reflective, is too Hegelian to countenance the possibility of events, and this is important because if correct, this means that Kearney and Ricoeur alike are committed to the metaphysics of presence.<sup>6</sup> To recall, should that commit-

ment turn out to be correct, then their proposed solutions to the problem of nihilism, and in particular their conceptions of God, would turn out to be part of that same problematic history. Specifically, in response to Kearney's most recent attempt to find a way to mediate between theism and atheism in *Anatheism* (Kearney, 2010) Caputo wrote:

Of course, Richard Kearney is interested in hermeneutics, not Hegelian metaphysics, but the question is whether [Kearney's] diacritical hermeneutics does not have a Hegelian imprint. Are not Hegel and Kearney both writing their own *de Trinitate*? In a hermeneutics more radically conceived [i.e., Caputo's own], where things are deeply at risk, belief and unbelief are not parts or moments in or in any way contributors to a third position one step removed. Their momentum is never allowed to unfold or even get off the ground. ... Instead of 1,2,3 we encounter the innumerable. The binary of theism and atheism is displaced, has not earned the right to reconciliation....this is not simply a "negative" operation, for the displacement of these "positions" exposes a more radical "affirmation," a risky affirmation, a hope against hope, which is inscribed in a more fundamental undecidability that bests both of them. (Caputo, 2011, p. 62)

Caputo's argument is thus that Kearney and Ricoeur both retain a certain Hegelian structure in their thought, that they are "closet Hegelian[s]" (Caputo, 2011, p. 61). Caputo's own Derridean position, by contrast, avoids the metaphysics of presence because it remains open to a "risky" possibility; it is open to the notion that being/reality is not to be understood entirely in terms of presence, but also in terms of events, or radically unpredictable reconfigurations of being.

Kearney and Ricoeur's Hegelianism is problematic not because it forecloses certain risks - why should one value riskiness for its own sake? - but because in that foreclosure of risk, this structure of thinking has no place for events, no place for the "perhaps" that escapes the metaphysics of presence, the "perhaps" that "is the necessary condition of possibility of every experience which is truly an 'experience,' which means that it arises from the unpredictable otherness of the future and shatters our horizons of expectation, which is what [Derrida] means by the possibility of the impossible" (Caputo, 2011, p. 59). This "perhaps," this possibility of impossibility, is just the Derridean concept of event: "[t]here the word *peut-être* cuts deeply into the name of God, so that God is in the very element of the *peut-être*, the 'event' of the promise which is no less a promise/threat, of the maybe which is also a maybe not" (Caputo, 2011, p. 59).

In short, Kearney and Ricoeur are not radical enough for the following reasons: they retain a Hegelian structure to their thought, and that structure forecloses the possibility of the event, yet one must remain open to the event, because it is only in this way that one can avoid commitment to the metaphysics of presence.

### **The Second Charge: Crypto-Metaphysics**

The charge that Kearney and Ricoeur are closet Hegelians might be one way to argue that they are crypto-metaphysicians, but when Caputo levels this charge against Kearney in particular, he has something more specific in mind. In *The God Who May Be* (Kearney, 2001), Kearney's goal is to mediate between the metaphysical conception of God understood, as Aquinas wrote, as *ipsum esse per se subsistens*, and the more personal, eschatological God of the prophets in the Bible, the God of Abraham

and Issac, even Jesus, who seems to be little encumbered with metaphysical terminology. He does this by reconceiving God in terms of a sense of possibility beyond, or more profound than, the metaphysical alternatives of potency and act, that is to say, he reconceives God in terms of *posse*. Given this aim, Caputo argues that there is no real incompatibility between the two conceptions, and that Kearney's "*posse*" thus turns out to do no more than "update" traditional scholastic accounts of God. Caputo wrote:

It seems to me that there is no real incompatibility between the eschatological and the metaphysical concepts of God which Richard distinguishes. There is no reason that God as such, God *quoad se*, as Aquinas would put it, or God "*an sich*," as Kant would put it, could not also be pure act, *actus purus*, the God who "is" through and through without a trace of potency, while God *quoad nos*, or *für uns*, God in terms of our experience of God in time and history, is the God who may be. .... Exactly how far is diacritical from dialectical? (Caputo, 2011, p. 59)

For Caputo, none of Kearney's ideas are open to the maybe/maybe not, the *peut-être* of God as event, as *khora*. As a result, when Kearney proposes a new concept, such as "*posse*," he is not twisting free from a metaphysical approach to God, from the metaphysics of presence, he is simply "updating it," by providing another list of qualities that would presumably stand alongside Thomas's categories. Even though he claims to be going beyond metaphysics, then, he is really just doing a more modern form of it.

### **The Third Charge: Foreclosing Ethics**

The final charge, which one finds in both Caputo and Dooley's essays, is that the way in which Kearney attempts to mediate posi-

tions, his call for ethical discernment, forecloses the more radical ethics to which deconstruction remains open, to which any philosophy that escapes the metaphysics of presence must remain open. Caputo put it as follows:

Richard takes up this question of the "monstrous" name of *khora* in *Strangers, Gods, and Monsters*, where I think his complaint is that when all is said and done *khora* cannot be trusted. But that I think is precisely what the poetics of the im/possible implies, that the conditions under which we trust also undermine our trust, so that trust is trust in a radical "perhaps," a God who may or may not be, who may or may not be trusted, which is after all what "perhaps" must surely mean, even as a trust that is completely trustworthy is no trust at all but a surety. (Caputo, 2011, p. 60)

Dooley understands Kearney in a similar way. He characterizes Kearney's criticism of postmodernism, of deconstruction, in this way: when "one opts for the postmodern suspension of the 'appearance-reality distinction,' one leaves oneself without scope to judge between good and bad. Once, in other words, one abolishes all notions of reference and representation, one succumbs to 'narrative irresponsibility' since one cannot differentiate good from bad narratives" (Dooley, 2007, p. 161). Yet, like Caputo, Dooley argues that by remaining committed to ideas such as "reference" or "representation" Kearney "remains captive, in spite of himself, to a view of the self and the world that is residually 'foundational'" (Dooley, 2007, p. 166). The foundation in this case ought to be understood as some form of ethical presence, a certainty, an unriskey, uneventful, definitely the case and not a perhaps/perhaps not.

To sum up: Kearney's ethical imagination remains ethical only in the pale, bland, metaphysical way, along with all the other concepts he has developed, and though he has tried to think beyond the metaphysics of presence, despite himself, he always ends up slipping back into it. Furthermore, it is precisely his idea (the very idea) of ethical discernment between good and bad that prevents him from recognizing the more radical demands of a possible ethics beyond, or at the limits of the metaphysics of presence.

## 2. Ricoeur's Reflective Hermeneutics

My basic point is that Derrideans have simply failed to understand Kearney and the Ricoeurian pattern of thought (not Hegelian) that is present in his work. Once that pattern is illuminated, once it is understood on its own terms and not Derridean ones, it seems to me that the multiple ways in which their criticisms beg the question will be rather clear. I begin my defense, then, with a reconstruction of Ricoeur's thought and the pattern at work in it in order to illuminate what Kearney draws from his thought.

In his late exchange with the neuroscientist Jean-Pierre Changeaux, Ricoeur gives us the key to understanding the continuity of his thought. There, he suggests that phenomenology and hermeneutics form only two parts of his three-part method, stating: "I want to make my position clear at the outset. I am a partisan of a current of European philosophy that contains three distinctive approaches, typically referred to as 'reflective philosophy,' 'phenomenology,' and 'hermeneutics'" (Ricoeur, 2000, p. 4). In fact, it is Ricoeur's commitment to reflective philosophy that enables him to unify phenomenology and hermeneutics, to graft the branch of the latter onto the tree of the former. It is because philosophical reflection plays this unifying role that I believe his

kind of hermeneutics is most aptly titled a reflective hermeneutics.

When viewed in this light, one sees that Ricoeur's central methodological piece is one on the philosophy of reflection, specifically his essay "Nabert on Act and Sign" (Ricoeur 1972). The central points for Ricoeur's thought are the following. Nabert argues (at least as Ricoeur interprets him) that there is a distinction between conscious acts and the representation of those conscious acts in signs. There is a difference between, for example, perceiving the coffee mug on my desk and stating: "there is a coffee mug on my desk." The latter case represents the conscious act by way of signs. Nabert, however, does not understand this representation of conscious acts in signs as an impediment to knowledge, since they rather complete (*aufhebet*) the conscious acts, enriching them with a sense they did not and could not have on their own. Representation by signs, then, becomes a necessary form of mediation on the way to knowledge, rather than an impediment. At this point, when one recognizes the productive role of the signifying representation of conscious acts, one has begun on the arc of philosophical reflection. Signs call out for interpretation; they are not always self-evident. Hermeneutics, understood as the art of interpretation, thus becomes constitutive of reflective philosophy. In this way it is elevated from a regional discipline, which addressed sacred texts, to one of general philosophical import.

This approach makes Ricoeur's hermeneutics fundamentally different from either Heidegger's or Gadamer's insofar as he does not attempt to "dig under" the ontical disciplines, such as logic, mathematics, or science - in particular linguistics - but instead attempts to traverse them. His reflective hermeneutics is not about a fundamental pre-understanding, a horizon or back-drop

of understanding that needs to be in place in order to make sense of those sciences. Reflective hermeneutics is instead *posterior* to the sciences, rather than prior, for it is the conflict of interpretations among these regional disciplines that gives rise to the need for hermeneutics. One reflects on these conflicts in order to complete one's intentional conscious experience. How that interpretation is to be carried out, and how it is to be related, tested, with respect to the original phenomenological evidence are the questions that formed the task of Ricoeur's intellectual career.

A caveat is necessary at this point in order to understand one of Kearney's more significant departures from Ricoeur. Ricoeur's understanding of phenomenology was such that he never agreed with Levinas that the Other, the experience of the second-person intention, maintained priority over one's first-person conscious experience. In his late *The Course of Recognition*, Ricoeur addresses the relation of Husserl to Levinas as follows:

One version, that of Husserl in his *Cartesian Meditations*, remains a phenomenology of perception. In this sense, his approach is theoretical. The other, that of Levinas, in *Totality and Infinity* and *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, is straightforwardly ethical and, by implication, anti-ontological. Both approaches have their legitimacy, and my argument here does not require us to decide in favor of one or the other of them. (Ricoeur, 2005, p. 154)

For Ricoeur, the opposition is one that results from a choice about methodological origin, and could not be decided simply by averting to the phenomena. Below I review Kearney's significant departure from Ricoeur on this matter.

Returning to the general schema of Ricoeur's thought, one notes that the result of these methodological commitments is that the hermeneutic arc of any of Ricoeur's investigations is sustained by reflecting on a specific kind of meaning, and in the course of his career he provided three specific models of such meaning: the symbol, the text, and translation. I shall not here pursue the details of all these models, because it is only the model of translation that is necessary for understanding Kearney's sense of a possible God - God as *posse*.

In his brief work entitled *On Translation*, Ricoeur stated that the problem of translation may be taken in two ways: "either take the term 'translation' in the strict sense of the transfer of a spoken message from one language to another *or* take it in the broad sense as synonymous with the interpretation of any meaningful whole within the same speech community" (Ricoeur, 2006, p. 11). There is a specific point concerning translation in the narrow sense that is pertinent to translation in the wider sense, namely the "construction of comparables" (Ricoeur, 2006, p. 34). After one gives up the Romantic ideal of perfect translation, it is possible to recognize that it is the work of translation that establishes the equivalent terms between languages. Ricoeur's paradigm case in this regard is established by reflecting on the French sinologist François Jullien, who argues "that Chinese is the absolute *other* of Greek - that knowledge of the inside of Chinese amounts to a deconstruction of what is outside, of what is exterior, i.e. thinking and speaking Greek" (Ricoeur, 2006, p. 36). Ricoeur does not dispute Jullien's point, but rather points out that in order to make his case, Jullien must engage in a construction of equivalent but not identical terms, especially with regard to the tenses (or lack thereof) of Chinese verbs. This construction is just what Ricoeur means by the construc-

tion of comparables. Moving across (*translatum*) from one untranslatable language to another is made practically possible by the construction of comparable, though not identical, terms, by an equivalence without identity. Ricoeur takes this as a general hermeneutic method of reflection for relating, without equating, two mutually incompatible domains of sense, such as cultural and personal memory, or (as Kearney pursues) Christian and Hindu conceptions of God.

This traversal through the conflict of interpretations, especially by means of the model of translation, sets up Ricoeur's approach to metaphysics. This terminal point in Ricoeur's hermeneutic arc is import, since I need to demonstrate that Ricoeur was in fact a metaphysical philosopher and not just a philosopher of language in order to respond to the Derridean charge that Ricoeur and Kearney could not avoid being metaphysicians of presence, since they only ever discuss linguistic meaning. Ricoeur always maintained that in order to complete the arc of hermeneutical reflection it was necessary not only to traverse the existing conflicts of interpretation, but to take the results back to their ontological root, to follow the referent of the symbols, metaphors, texts, and translations back to being itself. In principle, this sort of project could address any form of being, so that the arc of reflection could be completed by returning to the being indicated by physical or mathematical equations. Don Ihde has, for example, shown how Ricoeur's approach to hermeneutics lends itself quite fruitfully to an analysis of contemporary science and technology (see Ihde, 1993, 1998). That domain of investigation, however, was not Ricoeur's concern. Rather, since the very beginning of his work, he was concerned with the ontology of human beings, with elaborating a philosophical anthropology. It is for this reason that the kind

of being Ricoeur was interested in was being as capability. In *Memory, History, Forgetting* he puts it thus:

as we read in Aristotle's well-known declaration in *Metaphysics* 4.2: "There are many sense in which a thing may be said to be." I have argued elsewhere on the basis of this Aristotelian warning in exploring the resources of the interpretation that, among the various acceptations, privileges that being as act and as power on the plane of a philosophical anthropology: it is in this way that I propose in the course of the present chapter to hold "the power to remember" (*le pouvoir faire mémoire*) to be one of these powers - along with the power to speak, the power to act, the power to recount, the power to be imputable with respect to one's actions as their genuine author. (Ricoeur, 2004, p. 343-344)

In his work on recognition, Ricoeur adds a sixth power to the list: the power to recognize and be recognized. This last is a sort of meta-capability, since it is by mutually recognizing one another that one in fact develops capacities. "[I]t is a question," Ricoeur writes, "of seeking in the development of conflictual interactions the source for a parallel enlarging of the individual capacities" (Ricoeur, 2005, p. 187). This six-fold list is Ricoeur's response to Heidegger's existentials in *Being and Time* and his correction of the Kantian categories, since in the former case, Ricoeur maintains that Heidegger's account remains untested by the conflict of interpretations, and in the latter, one must note that none of these capacities may be understood to apply to natural beings, such as rocks or trees, so that Kant's categories prove to be far too broad to correctly explicate the human condition. They thus stand as a significant contribution to the ontology of our human condition, and prove equally that



Ricoeur's reflective hermeneutics does address being and not just language. I now turn to develop how this ontology escapes the legacy of the metaphysics of presence.

### 3. Not Radical Enough?

One of the basic criticisms of Ricoeur and Kearney's hermeneutics is that it is not radical enough, that it is not open to the event, the unforeseeable, unpredictable, impossible possibility. This charge, then, amounts to the point that any hermeneutics following a Ricoeurian structure is too Hegelian (which is a point of contact I have provocatively courted in the foregoing) to twist-free from the metaphysics of presence. Having presented the foregoing on Ricoeur, it seems to me that I could respond to this charge in either of two ways: by means of what might be called an Adequate Account Argument, or by means of a similar Adequate Inference Argument. By these arguments I intend the following.

*Adequate Account Argument:* This is the stronger of the two responses. It argues that in the contemporary discourse of Continental philosophy there are two broad accounts of events: one, the Derridean-Heideggerian account, has two parts, and one, which Ricoeur, Kearney and others (including most notably Alain Badiou) maintain, which has three parts. Next, it argues that the two-part account is unworkable, but the three-part account is not. This argument, in short, seeks both to establish what an adequate account of events would look like, and that the Derridean conception is inadequate given those criteria, while the Ricoeurian conception is adequate. Hence the title: it is an *argument* about which *account* of events is most *adequate*, given the shared aim of twisting-free from the metaphysics of presence.

*Adequate Inference Argument:* This is the weaker of the two responses. It argues that there are, in the contemporary discourse of Continental philosophy, two broad accounts of events. One of these, the Derridean-Heideggerian, has a two-part structure, while another, the Ricoeurian (and Kearneyan, and Badiouian), has a three-part structure. Next, rather than settle which side has a better conception of events, the argument moves to establish the weaker claim that it is unwarranted simply to presuppose that one account is correct and then charge the other side with failing to conform to one's presupposition. To do so would be to engage, rather straightforwardly, in begging the question. Yet, when Caputo, or Lawlor, or Dooley accuse Ricoeur or Kearney of failing to be sufficiently radical, their argument amounts just to the charge that Ricoeur and Kearney's conception of events does not conform to the two-part structure one finds in Derrida's thought. In doing so, as a result, they beg the question, since what needs to be established is *whether* that conception of events is the correct one. To sum up, this argument concerns the (in)adequacy of the Derridean's inferences, while the former is an argument about the (in)adequacy of the Derridean account of events.

While I maintain that the conclusions of the Adequate Account Argument are warranted,<sup>7</sup> establishing that claim is both more involved than the space I have available for the present essay, and it is something that I have already explored (to some extent at least) in some of my other pieces.<sup>8</sup> For the present essay, then, I think it is enough to make the case for the Adequate Inference Argument. The character of the present defense, as a result, leaves one with a choice between two approaches to events, to God

even, but I do not think that this decision is one that is groundless, or one that will remain unresolved. Rather it looks to me as though a new field for research is opened, and that some fruitful discussion is likely to follow. For the present, I content myself with making the case that there is a need for this discussion.

In order to make my case, I begin with the point that is common to both alternatives, namely that in the contemporary discourse of Continental philosophy there are two broad accounts of events. Since Derrideans have overlooked or misunderstood the alternative account, the one found in Ricoeur's thought, I begin with it.

In the conclusion to *The Symbolism of Evil* (Ricoeur 1967), a relatively early work, Ricoeur outlined a three part process for the recovery of symbols.

[i] I wager that I shall have a better understanding of man and of the bond between the being of man and the being of all beings if I follow the *indication* of symbolic thought. That wager then becomes [ii] the task of *verifying* my wager and saturating it, so to speak, with intelligibility. In return, the task [iii] transforms my wager: in betting *on* the significance of the symbolic world, I bet at the same time *that* my wager will be restored to me in the power of reflection, in the element of coherent discourse. (Ricoeur, 1967, p. 355)

To summarize, the process has three parts: a wager, verification, and transformation.

The wager itself is a wager on symbolic meaning, that is to say, meaning that is not present in the semantics of ordinary, dictionary sense. To use a little terminology from Alain Badiou, symbolic meaning “in-

exists” in the structure of sense; it exists in the structure of univocal semantics precisely as that which is excluded from it (Badiou, 2009, p. 153). Because it does not clearly exist as something literally meaningful, because one can imagine logical positivists dismissing the investigation of “evil” in the Bible as nonsense, one must wager that it does exist. Second, one must *act*, one must do something to bring about this meaning, and this is the process of verification. The long detour through the conflict of interpretations just is this process of verification, of truth-making. Finally, if successful, this process will have brought a new kind of meaning into existence, so that my wager is transformed, so that the world of dictionary sense is displaced. This is a structure that Ricoeur maintains for all his models of sense; it holds just as much for the new sense provided by symbols as it does for that provided by texts, or for that provided by translation. At the same time, because it is always possible to follow the referent of any sign to its ontological base, each of these ruptures in the established order of sense, (symbolically, textually, translatively) is at the same time a rupture in the order of being. In each case, utterly new and unpredictable forms of meaning and being are brought fourth. They are, in short, events. What this structure describes, then, is just how events occur and are completed. It is this three-part structure (wager, verification, and transformation), which moves through representations rather than trying to subvert, “dig under,” or displace them, that is intended by the “infinite” structure of events.

Derridean (radically finite) events, by contrast, have only two parts. The first of these is the recognition of an in-existent, the structure of included exclusion, Heidegger's no-thing, Derrida's supplement, in the structure of signification. Next one takes a step to the recognition of something “beyond,”

something “older” than the supplement, “‘older’ than presence and the system of truth, older than ‘history’” (Derrida 1973, p. 103). Or in Derrida’s later work, one comes to recognize the surprise of the incoming of the Other, of the unpredictable, im-possible, unforeseeable, radical break in meaning and being that is an event (Heidegger’s *Ereignis*). One does not verify the event, for Derrida, since to do so would be to presuppose what the event was, to reduce its riskiness by naming it, and thereby betraying its very character as an event.

Where Ricoeur’s account differs from the Derridean account of events concerns the role of agency. For Derrideans, Ricoeur’s (or Kearney’s, or Badiou’s) mediations are an attempt to gain control over the unpredictability of events, to lessen their riskiness. Yet for Ricoeur, events simply do not come into being on their own - or at least not all of them.<sup>9</sup> For human events, and for the assessing (the working-through) of non-human events, a certain kind of agency is necessary to foster their transformation - this is the process of verification, of truth-making. Mediation *completes* the events, not by bringing them into some higher dialectical synthesis, but by allowing them to happen - *this* is the Ricoeurian sense of “*Aufhebung*.” One might say, then, that *more* risk is involved in Ricoeur’s approach to events than Derrida’s, since in Ricoeur’s approach one must commit oneself to the fostering, to the be-coming of events, while in Derrida’s approach, one only tries to prepare the way to the recognition of the radical unpredictability of their occurrence - no agency is necessary to make them happen. To put it another way: for Derrida, the risk involved with events concerns their unknowability, in assenting to a radically unknown, for Ricoeur the risk involved with events concerns one’s own actions, concerns acting on behalf of an unknown.

One account of events has two parts, then, another three parts. Both are committed to the twisting-free from the metaphysics of presence, but each attempts to do so in different ways. I do think that Ricoeur’s approach is the only workable one, but the foregoing suggests a more modest conclusion: that Derrideans cannot charge Ricoeurians of being insufficiently radical, measured by their own standards, when it is the adequacy of their standard that is the point of contention. In a similar way, they cannot accuse Ricoeurians of shirking from risk, when the sense of “risk” is the point of contention. In short, their argument presupposes their point of view’s correctness in order to make its claim, but it is their presuppositions that have yet to be established. The charge of insufficient radicality, as a result, does not appear to be sustainable, either for Ricoeur or Kearney, since both are committed to this three-part structure.

#### 4. Diacritical Hermeneutics

While I have spent some time reviewing Ricoeur’s thought, with the intention of defending Kearney’s work, one should not understand Kearney to be engaged some sort of application of Ricoeur’s general principles. What Kearney accepts from Ricoeur is two-fold: a commitment to a three-fold structure for events (which he shares as much with Badiou as he does with Ricoeur), and the way that Ricoeur “grafts” hermeneutics onto phenomenology, namely by beginning with phenomenological consciousness, moving through a conflict of interpretations, and then returning to a refigured consciousness. His disagreements are at least three-fold: he entirely re-characterizes the arc of hermeneutic reflection, he broadens Ricoeur’s account of narrative, and he redresses Ricoeur’s *l’homme capable* by introducing the capacity for eros. Any of these points, I believe, put him rather deeply at odds with

Ricoeurians, and as one will note, they are mutually interdependent claims.

Kearney's general correction of Ricoeur's reflective hermeneutics consists in the argument that the choice between Levinas and Husserl on the priority of the Other is not merely a matter of methodological origin, as Ricoeur maintained.<sup>10</sup> For Kearney, Levinas was right in one capital sense: the presence of the Other disrupts first-person consciousness in an irreducible, irrecoverable way: "[t]he rejection of relative otherness in favor of absolute otherness, by Levinas and other thinkers of radical alterity, marks a decisive 'break' between thought and language" (Kearney, 2003, p. 16). Furthermore, once acknowledged, this break, this disruption of consciousness and language indicates that one has a responsibility to the Other, a capacity for ethical response. Kearney wrote: "[t]he basic aim of diacritical hermeneutics is, I suggest, to make us more hospitable to strangers, gods and monsters without succumbing to mystique or madness" (Kearney, 2003, p. 18). Ricoeur, of course, recognizes one's capacity for moral imputation as one of the basic capabilities of human beings, but Kearney draws a deeper lesson from Levinas. What Levinas' phenomenologies indicate for Kearney is that one does not begin only with phenomenological consciousness, which must then pass through the conflict of interpretations, so that it can finally return to some ontological dimension. Rather, one begins with an ethical, phenomenological consciousness, which gives rise to a conflict of interpretations, and returns to an ontology. The trajectory of hermeneutic reflection, then, is sustained from beginning to end by an ethical obligation. One cannot, as a result, mediate among conflicting interpretations by simple appeal to rational or logical criteria. Rather, such mediation must always pass by way of an ethically evaluative moment. The

criticism of dia-critical hermeneutics is sustained, is completed, only by averting to the demands of an original ethical intention.

This point has rather significant implications for the status of events for Kearney. While his thought still follows the "infinite" model of events by retaining a three-part structure, the agential aspect of events for Kearney is always ethical. Verification, what Ricoeur calls truth as attestation at certain points, is an ethical practice. One cannot divorce the most profound sense of truth from ethical activity. It is in this way that he maintains the Levinasian thesis that ethics is first philosophy, and he does so without the need to commit himself to some form of absolute asymmetry, or "madness" as he puts it. For Ricoeur, a kind of rational completion of events allows them to happen, while for Kearney this completion (*Aufhebung*) is always ethical.

My hope is that these points should clarify how Kearney could respond to Dooley's concern (the third charge) that Kearney is not open to the most profound call of ethics. Dooley sees a sort of "shrinking back from the abyss" in Kearney's insistence that mediation, that completion, of opposed positions in the conflict of interpretation always remain subordinated to an ethical intention. God might be monstrous after all, and so could the stranger, he seems to suggest. Yet, in making such an argument, Dooley is clearly presupposing the Derridean two-part account of events, wherein the greatest challenge, the greatest risk, concerns assenting to an utterly unknowable. For Kearney, the risk of response requires agency, and this agency is only possible by living together, by our responsibility, and so is only possible in a broadly ethical way. Kearney's ethics, then, in no way forecloses the most profound challenges of ethical response, but rather it opens a way to it.

Even with this rather substantial modification to Ricoeur's thought, Kearney innovates in other significant ways. To begin, his general correction of Ricoeur's hermeneutics results in a process of hermeneutical thought that at a more specific level acts *as if* it were a correction of Ricoeur's model of translation. I write that it acts "as if" it were a correction of the translative model, since Kearney developed his own account before Ricoeur completed his account of translation. The "correction" that I suggest, then, is for the sake of illustration, and so is warranted only by its ability to illuminate the significance of Kearney's departure Ricoeur. One may think of it in the following way. In both *The God Who May Be* and *Anatheism*, Kearney undertakes to mediate hermeneutically (diacritically) between two seemingly untranslatable poles: in the former case, he mediates between the scholastic conception of God as *ipsum esse subsistens* (Thomas Aquinas' interpretation of Exodus 3:14 - "I am who am") and new eschatological conceptions, while in the latter case, he mediates between a naïve theism and a postmodern atheism. The work of these works consists in something like the construction of comparables, in the construction of an equivalence without identity. In the former case, the comparable term that Kearney constructs is God understood as *posse*, while in the latter it is, quite obviously, anatheism (Kearney, 2003, p. 98; Kearney, 2010, p. 6). Incidentally, one might note that Kearney has taken a similar approach in his *Hosting The Stranger* (Kearney & Taylor, 2011) collection, in which the Latin "*hostis*," meaning both guest and host, becomes the comparable term for translating between untranslatable and irreconcilable cultural differences, such as the opposition between Israelis and Palestinians.

This analogy with Ricoeur's thought, however, only carries one so far, since

Kearney is not content simply to construct a *term* that functions as an equivalence without identity. Although he does provide specific terms, such as *posse* or anatheism, to identify his projects, what Kearney in fact designates by these terms is a comparable narrative. Unlike Ricoeur, Kearney maintains that narratives are their own model of sense - they are not simply a form of textual meaning as Ricoeur thinks. It is just this point that Kearney explores in *On Stories* (Kearney 2002), which is part of the trilogy that includes *The God Who May Be* (Kearney 2001) and *Strangers, Gods, and Monsters* (Kearney 2003). It is by mediating irreconcilable narratives, by translating them, that Kearney undertakes to reconcile (without identifying or synthesizing) opposed religious traditions, or even theists and atheists. It is in this sense that Kearney's religious, diacritical hermeneutics, which consists of constructing comparable narratives between untranslatable positions, and which is always carried out by means of the ethical demand, may be considered a project that aims at translating God.

A third and final significant departure from Ricoeur's thought that I see in Kearney's work concerns the role of desire, of eros. It is a remarkable point that among Ricoeur's fundamental human capabilities he does not include the capacity for eros or love more generally. Yet, since Kearney is committed to the Levinasian point that the ethical intention fundamentally transforms one's phenomenal consciousness, and because Levinas maintained that eros was one of the ways to try to complete this ethical intention, it is perhaps unsurprising that Kearney would move to include eros as a fundamental feature of our ethical responsibility. The centrality of eros to Kearney's thought is something that Patrick Burke has identified (Burke, 2011), and it is a point with which Kearney has explicitly agreed

(Kearney, 2011a). Despite his commitments to Levinas, however, Kearney does not develop his account of eros in a Levinasian way.

While Kearney has explored the topic of eros in a number of ways, what I think is most important for the present essay is the way in which eros functions for him as a model for ethical discernment without formal criteria.<sup>11</sup> In the tradition of virtue ethics it is the *phronimos*, the man of practical wisdom, who is able to make discerning judgments without formal criteria. For Kearney, it is the lover. One of the more significant differences between these two sorts of person is the way in which the lover is open to excessive actions that the man of practical wisdom's moderation would not allow. Nowhere is this point clearer than in Kearney's analysis of the Shulamite woman in the *Song of Songs*. This biblical chant uses powerfully charged erotic imagery. Kearney wrote:

the amorous verses [defy] any purely allegorical interpretation: "his left arm is under my head and his right makes love to me (2:6 and 8:2); he "pastures his flock" among the lilies (6:3); his "fountain makes the garden fertile" (4:15); or "my beloved thrust his hand/through the hole in the door; / I trembled to the core of my being" (5:4). Doesn't get much hotter than that. ... This kind of language was, according to André LaCocque, almost unprecedented in the bible. And it was to prove so controversial in the later rabbinical and Christian monastic traditions as to be frequently laundered, chastened, or censored. (Kearney, 2003, p. 56)

Yet it is not only that the language is one that courts excess, nor is it even the case that this biblical chant is a woman's song, above

all Kearney argues: "the Shulamite's passion represents free love—she is faithful to her lover 'outside matrimonial bonds and social demands' (e.g., demands to remain a servant, wife, child-bearer, mother, or commercial exchange object)" (Kearney 2003, p. 57). The lover is thus a model for ethical discernment without formal criteria because in a loving relation one responds automatically, without thinking, to the needs, the demands of one's beloved. In the loving relation, one has no need either of deontological universalizing criteria or a list of Ten Commandments (love your beloved is not one of them!). At the same time, this kind of response knows no boundaries. It would seem to go against the very nature of love to require moderation in response to one's beloved. Love is an overflowing excess through and through, and this is why it may seem to be an appropriate model for a humans relation to God. Additionally, one notes, it is only this kind of excessive ethics, an ethics modeled on eros, that would seem to be appropriate to the agency required to complete an event of meaning - a moderate ethics, closed both to the excesses and fragility of love, would not appear to be up to the task of response to utterly new breaks in meaning and being.

These points, I believe, demonstrate why Kearney is not a crypto-metaphysician, why his account of God as *posse* is not a simple "update" to scholastic conceptions of God. Caputo was concerned that such a conception of God was not open to the horizon shattering possibility of the event, the riskiness of the "perhaps" of God. Yet this point again presupposes his Derridean commitments. Kearney's God as *posse* is possible in more than one sense, but I think most profoundly insofar as the meaning of this God as *posse* inexists in our contemporary (Christian) religious traditions. Kearney's *posse* is a mediating construction, a notion

of a God that he hopes to assist in bringing to completion, to articulate by translating the narratives on God in both metaphysical and postmodern conditions, even theists and atheists. Furthermore, the character of this God is one that is to be discerned ethically, following the model of erotic demand, following the way of the Shulamite woman - not following formal codes or moral rules. This is the God, probably, that he hopes for, and as a result this God remains only a possibility in just that sense. This is not the God *für uns*, as opposed to *an sich*. It is a God, perhaps - if we can make sense of Him/Her/It, if we can make this kind of existence meaningful (though perhaps we will fail, and that is always a risk!).

### 5. How to Life with/for a Possible God

At this point, I hope to have made it reasonably clear why none of the charges against Kearney's conception of God hit their mark. To argue, as the Derrideans do, that Kearney's thought is (1) not radical enough, that (2) it is crypto-metaphysical, or that (3) it is closed to the most profound possibilities of ethics, is simply to misconstrue the character of Kearney and Ricoeur's thought. Both of these thinkers maintain that hermeneutics is a response to events of meaning/being, and that this response has a three-part structure: wagering, verifying, transforming. This three-part structure is what I have been calling the structure of infinite thought, and I have opposed it to the structure of radical finitude, which the Derrideans defend. Their sense of radical finitude turns on a conception of events that consist in the identification of an inexistent, and the recognition of the unpredictable to-come (a decision on the undecidable). While I have not provided any grounds for evaluating the relative strengths of these competing conceptions, the mere identification of two rival approaches is enough to demonstrate that the

Derrideans' criticisms are unfounded. Their arguments must presuppose the accuracy of just those points that are objects of dispute.

A number of consequences follow for how one is to live in light of Kearney's conception of God as *posse*. The first of these connects with the broad concern of Continental philosophy: just how does this account respond to the problem of nihilism? Rather than assert that meaning enters the world through belief in some transcendent Being (the traditional, scholastic approach), Kearney's approach accepts straightforwardly that the realm of sense described by natural science proscribes existential meaning. The sense of "God as *posse*" inexists in the order of being so understood, so that one gains access to its meaning only insofar as one sub-jects oneself to the God-event. In wagering on the sense of "*posse*" then, one twists-free from the tradition of the metaphysics of presence by finding a space for existential meaning through the events of being. In short, being is not all there is, for there "are" also events, understood as the unpredictable shifts, happenings of being.

Yet this approach to God does more than restore a form of existential meaning to the universe, which is also something that the Derridean account contends that it is able to do. For the sense of God as *posse* also provides a means by which to live - an ethics if not a rule-bound morality - for one must also act in order to bring about the happening of the event. The exchanges between Kearney and Caputo have often centered on an analogy about opening doors. Caputo argues that his account of events is radical insofar as it recognizes that in the case of God, one's belief is like opening the door to one's house without knowing who stands on the other side - it might be a friend or a murderer. Living before this *mysterium tremendum et fascinans* constitutes the life of the reli-

gious believer, who cannot foreclose the possibility that God might be a monster. This analogy aptly characterizes the Derridean account of events, since it has two crucial parts: an inexistent, in this case represented by the door, and the incoming of an unforeseeable possibility, the person/beast standing on the other side. The Kearneyan response is to suggest that the opening of the door is not something one does alone, that Caputo's metaphor presupposes a kind of individualism. Events, he would respond, are only brought into being with others, so that when I open the door, I do so in relation to the other people in my household, those who have enabled me to live as I am. The opening itself, then, is a third part (the verification), without which the event does not happen. This basic difference concerning the character of events thus entails different ways of living.

The event of God as *posse*, Kearney suggests, is sustained by the practice of love, including even erotic love. At its most profound level, loving God as *posse* means that one must work actively to find better designations of God by translating incomparable narratives about God. This act of translation must be guided by an ethical commitment, since one only realizes an event with others and through one's responsibility to them. Unethical conceptions of God, monstrous conceptions, then, are proscribed because they arise from a conception of human living, human intentional consciousness, that is abstract - one that assumes that individuals exist prior to the communities in which they live. None of this suggests that the ethics of a commitment to God as *posse* follows rules, for the basic point that is underscored is the need to translate incommensurable conceptions of God, incommensurable conceptions of the highest goal for our lives, and this must follow the model of love, which operates excessively, without criteria. As a result,

the need for hermeneutic translation defines the basic ethical character of our lives. For Kearney, we live in and through our hermeneutic endeavors, in and through our attempts to construct comparables between incomparable narratives, in and through the dissenting stories that people tell both in our own cultures and in those of others.

I close these reflections with two brief indications for some further research that might follow from the foregoing. One of the more immediate consequences of the foregoing argument is that it suggests a new area for research in the philosophy of religion. It seems to me that the tactic of radical finitude has been explored rather thoroughly in contemporary thought, in the work of Derrideans, such as Caputo, in Jean-Luc Marion's conception of the doubly saturated phenomenon, or even those who have followed Heidegger, such as Jean-Yves Lacoste.<sup>12</sup> This alternative path, taking up the position of infinite thought, perhaps deserves more consideration. Kearney's way is one way to do so, but perhaps there are others.

A second consequence suggests that more work needs to be undertaken to evaluate the respective strengths of these positions. Given the shared aim of twisting-free from the metaphysics of presence, which account of events is most capable of achieving this aim? This point seems to me to be a general metaphysical problem, and one that concerns one of the most profound points of contention in that area. If the "theological turn" took place just for the reason that it seemed poised to test such points of profundity, then perhaps it will continue to serve our thought well on this explicitly metaphysical point. The other area that seems to be flourishing in contemporary Continental philosophy is this so-called "speculative turn," a field in which Badiou, Deleuze, and Žižek have established the existing contours. Per-



haps a point of contact between these two discourses, one metaphysical and one theological, would be salutary for both. At least for any theological conception motivated by conceptions of possibility, this “perhaps” is one that should not be missed.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> See for example (Dawkins 2008), and (Hawking & Mlodinow 2010).

<sup>2</sup> There is, of course, considerable disagreement concerning whether or not these specific thinkers ought to be included in this tradition, and if so, to what extent. I mention the matter here only because these thinkers have at various points been *understood* to partake of that tradition, and because they serve an illustrative purpose as a result.

<sup>3</sup> For the specific places where these thinkers endorse a sense of radical finitude, see the following. For Agamben see his (1999a) and (1999b). Heidegger's commitment to finitude is well-known. For what is one of the clearest essays on the character of his commitment see (Lawlor, 2004), and for a book-length study, one might look to (Stambaugh, 1992). For Žižek's straightforward commitment to finitude, see especially the "Introduction" to the co-authored (Gabriel & Žižek, 2009). For the character of Badiou's infinite thought, likely the best essays are included in (Badiou, 2008). For the way in which Ricoeur and Kearney are committed to infinite thought, clearly it is the point of the present essay to make this case.

<sup>4</sup> Patrick Masterson, for example, has criticized Kearney's thought from a more traditional, metaphysical side in (Masterson, 2008a; 2008b). This criticism deserves more consideration than it receives in the present essay, but it seems to me to be less serious than the Derridean critique, since it does not entirely to share the aim of overcoming the metaphysics of presence. To my mind, then, while it is a form of criticism, it is not entirely an immanent one.

<sup>5</sup> Lawlor makes a careful argument throughout the whole work, but the concluding chapter crystalizes what he takes to be the significant difference between the thinkers.

<sup>6</sup> It should be noted that Caputo is here assuming the traditional understanding of Hegel, as one finds explicated in Charles Taylor's account (Taylor, 1975). On this understanding, Hegel is *the metaphysician par excellence*, and so most culpable for contributing to the problem of nihilism.

<sup>7</sup> At least they seem to me to be warranted under the ordinary construals of Derrida on events, such as one finds in Caputo (1987, 2010) or Marder (2011). For a possible construal that might work given Badiou's recent criticisms, see Purcell (2012).

<sup>8</sup> See Purcell (2010) and (2011).

<sup>9</sup> In his exchange with Changeaux, Ricoeur seems to leave open the possibility that scientific occurrences just happen, though the sense of those occurrences is something that humans must process. See (Changeaux & Ricoeur, 2000, p. 4).

<sup>10</sup> I am not the first to suggest that Kearney's position is committed to a fundamental ethical moment. For another, more detailed account of Kearney's commitment to ethics, see (Gedney, 2007).

<sup>11</sup> Kearney has recently underscored this point in a recent essay, writing "[i]n contrast to deconstructive *sans-savoir*, diacritical hermeneutics practices a certain *savoir*, which goes beyond Derrida's maxim of 'reading in the dark'" (Kearney, 2011a, p. 4).

<sup>12</sup> For Caputo's Derridean-inspired work on the philosophy of religion see: (Caputo, 1997, 2006). For Jean-Yves Lacoste's

Heideggerian-esque work see (Lacoste, 2004). Marion outlines his account of saturated phenomena in (2002a) and updates it in (2002b) and (2007).