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A PHENOMENOLOGICAL APPROACH TO SKEPTICAL THEISM

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ABSTRACT. The purpose of the present essay is to present a version of the evidential argument from evil and to propose a 'skeptical theistic' response from a phenomenological point of view. In a word, the problem with the evidential argument from evil is that it attempts to put forth as justified an interpretation of the moral significance of historical events which actually exceeds the limits of human knowledge and which is based on a misinterpretation of experience. The essay also corrects certain analytic-philosophical notions regarding the nature of appearance, terminating with a discussion of the familiar critiques of analytic skeptical theism and the question of whether the belief in the existence of God might not be affected by the apparent skepticism implied by the phenomenological approach to knowledge in general.

Keywords: *existence of God, argument from evil, skeptical theism, phenomenology, analytic philosophy*

The purpose of the present essay is to present a simple version of the evidential argument from evil and to propose a 'skeptical theistic' response from a phenomenological point of view. Such an approach is arguably superior to the more familiar analytic varieties of skeptical theism insofar as it proceeds on the basis of an elucidation of the transcendental structure of world-experience in general and clarifies how it is that the supposed gratuity of an evil event within the world strictly cannot appear in experience. In a word, the problem with the evidential argument from evil is that it attempts to put forth as justified an interpretation of the moral significance of historical events which actually exceeds the limits of human knowledge and which is based on a misinterpretation of experience. The essay also critiques and corrects certain analytic-philosophical notions regarding the nature of appearance. It terminates with an explanation of how the phenomenological approach does not fall victim to many of the familiar critiques of analytic skeptical

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theism and demonstrates how the question of the existence of God is not affected by the apparent skepticism implied by the phenomenological approach to knowledge in general.

An initial statement of an evidential argument from evil

Begin with the definition of 'God' as an all-powerful, all-knowing, and perfectly good being who is the creator of the world. Being all-powerful, He would have the raw ability to prevent the occurrence of evil. Being all-knowing, He would certainly also possess the necessary knowledge to prevent the occurrence of evil. Being perfectly good, He would presumably be disposed always to prevent evil. If one grants these definitions, it will then seem to follow that the existence of God would logically exclude the reality of evil.[1] So goes the 'logical problem of evil'. But the logical tension can be resolved through a revision of the concept of God. For present purposes, the most interesting possible revision would have to do with the notion of His perfect goodness. Suppose one suggested that the perfect goodness of God would not entail His unconditional opposition to all evil, but only that He does not permit evil unless there is a sufficient or adequate reason to do so. In this case, there would no longer be a contradiction.[2] God and evil could co-exist *so long as God had a sufficient or adequate reason to permit the existence of evil*. It does not matter for present purposes what that reason might be.

But even if there is no logical contradiction between the existence of God and the reality of evil, there may nevertheless be a further argument to make. One could distinguish between justified and unjustified evils. Suppose that an evil is 'gratuitous' if either (i) nothing at all justifies its occurrence, or else (ii) it is excessive for the purpose it serves. One could grant the theoretical possibility of justified evils while still insisting that the existence of God does exclude the reality of gratuitous evils. And it may be that a closer consideration of at least some evils which actually occur motivates the conclusion that they are gratuitous. This is a version of the so-called 'evidential argument from evil', initially proposed in a powerful way by William L. Rowe.[3] A basic formulation of the argument can be given as follows:

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[1] J. L. Mackie, *The Miracle of Theism*, Oxford University Press, 1982, 150-176; David Hume, *Dialogues concerning Natural Religion* 10.25, in David Hume, *Dialogues concerning Natural Religion and Other Writings*, ed. Dorothy Coleman, Cambridge University Press, 2007, 74.

[2] See Daniel Howard-Snyder, 'Introduction: The Evidential Argument from Evil', in Daniel Howard-Snyder, ed., *The Evidential Argument from Evil*, Indiana University Press, 1996, xii-xiv.

[3] See William L. Rowe, 'The Argument from Evil and Some Varieties of Atheism', in *The Evidential Argument from Evil*, 1-11.

(1) If God exists, then there are no gratuitous evils.
(2) Probably, some evils are gratuitous.
(3) Therefore, probably, God does not exist.[4]

This formulation of the argument does not attempt a logical demonstration. After all, the conclusion can only be as strong as the weakest premise. It only attempts to show that the nonexistence of God is as probable as that some evils are gratuitous.

Some philosophers attempt to deny premise (1), claiming that the existence of God is in fact compatible with the reality of gratuitous evils.[5] The present essay, however, is sooner concerned with premise (2), which asserts the probable gratuity of some evils. This premise could be justified in something like the following way:

(i) Some evils appear to be gratuitous.
(ii) Therefore, probably, they are gratuitous.[6]

The basic assumption of this line of reasoning is that *appearance provides probable grounds for concluding that something is a reality*. The more persistent the appearance, the more probable the reality of the appearance. If a person briefly does something to suggest drunkenness, the grounds for concluding that he or she is drunk are slim. But if the person very persistently appears to be drunk – for example, in what he or she says and does, in the way that he or she walks, etc. – then the conclusion of drunkenness correspondingly grows in probability. In the same way, certain evils which take place in the world are such that a closer 'inspection' does not reveal anything that justifies them. For example, it is not clear what purpose is served by the prolongated suffering of animals in nature or by the evil some human beings cause others. Even if there were a purpose served by them, one could certainly imagine that it could be served by a quantitatively lesser amount of evil and suffering. The more one considers some evils, the more they appear to be gratuitous as defined above. *To that extent*, one might consider oneself justified in concluding that probably they are gratuitous.

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[4] This could be considered a version of what Paul Draper calls a 'modus tollens' argument from evil. Other philosophers propose different versions of evidential arguments from evil. For example, Draper argues that the actual distribution of pain and suffering in the universe is more likely given the thesis of naturalism rather than the thesis of theism. See the discussion in Paul Draper, 'The Problem of Evil', in Thomas Flint and Michael C. Rea, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophical Theology*, Oxford University Press, 2009, 332-351. A phenomenological approach to this specific argument would involve a greater discussion than can be undertaken in the present context. For example, it would question the very possibility of naturalism itself.

[5] See the discussions in Klaas Kraay, Jr., 'God and gratuitous evil (Part I)', *Philosophy Compass* 11/2016, 905-912; 'God and gratuitous evils (Part II)', *Philosophy Compass* 11/2016, 913-922.

[6] Cf. Perry Hendricks, 'Skeptical Theism Proved', *Journal of the American Philosophical Association* 6/2020, 265.

Analytic skeptical theism and the prospect of a phenomenological approach

One very common line of response to the evidential argument from evil is called 'skeptical theism'.[7] It is concerned to undermine confidence in the assertion of the gratuity of some evils. Many analytic philosophers of religion pursue the skeptical theistic project by proposing epistemic 'principles' or 'theses' regarding the conditions for the rationality of certain inferences. For example, Stephen Wykstra proposes a principle called 'Condition Of Reasonable Epistemic Access', or 'CORNEA', according to which 'we can argue from 'we see no X' to 'there is no X' only when X has 'reasonable seeability', that is, is the sort of thing which, if it exists, we can reasonably expect to see in the situation'.[8] Paul Draper summarizes the essential thesis of the skeptical theistic position as consisting in the assertion that 'Humans are in no position to judge directly that an omnipotent and omniscient being would be unlikely to have a morally sufficient reason to permit the evils we find in the world'.[9] And Michael Bergmann considers the 'skepticism' of the skeptical theist to amount to a skepticism regarding the representational adequacy of the human grasp of (i) all possible goods, (ii) all possible evils, (iii) all the relations of entailment which obtain between possible goods and the possible evils which might justifiably be permitted on the basis of the former, and (iv) the total moral (dis)value of various states of affairs.[10] But other philosophers think that these skeptical theistic theses lend themselves to other, more unsavory forms of skepticism. For example, Stephen Law says that, for all the skeptical theist knows, perhaps God has a sufficient or adequate reason for deceiving him or her with respect to the belief that the external world is real or that it has a past.[11] Skeptical theism thus threatens to open a 'Pandora's box'.[12] William Hasker argues that skeptical theism of the sort proposed by Michael Bergmann leads to skepticism about whether anything one considers to be *prima facie* good is in fact good, all things considered. This terminates in a kind of moral paralysis in which one no longer knows how to

[7] See Trent Dougherty and Justin McBrayer, eds., *Skeptical Theism: New Essays*, Oxford University Press, 2014.

[8] Stephen Wykstra, 'Rowe's Noseeum Arguments from Evil', in *The Evidential Argument from Evil*, 126.

[9] Paul Draper, 'The Skeptical Theist', in *The Evidential Argument from Evil*, 176. See also Jonathan D. Matheson, 'Phenomenal Conservatism and Skeptical Theism', in *Skeptical Theism: New Essays*, 3-20.

[10] Michael Bergmann, 'Skeptical Theism and the Problem of Evil', in Flint and Rea, eds., *Oxford Handbook of Philosophical Theology*, 375, 379.

[11] Stephen Law, 'Skeptical Theism and Skepticism About the External World and Past', *Royal Institute of Philosophy Supplement* 81/2017, 55-70.

[12] Stephen Law, 'The Pandora's box objection to skeptical theism', *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 78/2015, 285-299.

judge things or what to do.[13] A similar argument is also put forth by Scott Sehon.[14] Scott Coley suggests that skeptical theism is incompatible with the endorsement of any particular theodicy.[15] Mark Piper suggests that skeptical theism is incompatible with theism itself.[16] Erik Wielenberg argues that the 'parent-child analogy' which is so prominent in Christian theology for describing the relation which obtains between God and human beings itself militates against the skeptical theses of the skeptical theists.[17] And there are still further responses to these arguments.[18]

Whereas the discussion about skeptical theism and the evidential argument from evil has for the most part been taking place within the analytic-philosophical context, the present essay seeks to pursue an interpretation of skeptical theism from the point of view of phenomenological philosophy. Such an approach is arguably very desirable and promising. After all, one of the critical premises of the evidential argument from evil deals with the apparent gratuity of evils experienced in the world, and phenomenology is concerned precisely with appearance and experience.[19] But more than that, phenomenology is eidetic and descriptive rather than being hypothetical or speculative. It does not put forth theses for consideration but rather seeks to describe things exactly as they show themselves to be in experience.[20] A phenomenological approach to skeptical theism would not proceed by way of the proposal of theses or hypotheses but rather by means of the eidetic analysis of the relevant structures of intentionality involved in the experience of evil. It would proceed on the basis of a demonstration of what it is to see as such, then drawing conclusions for what it means to see evil. There would therefore be in principle no contesting or protesting its successful conclusions, since it would have produced its results in virtue of a return 'to the things themselves' in order to allow them to

[13] William Hasker, 'All too skeptical theism', *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 68/2010, 15-29.

[14] Scott Sehon, 'The problem of evil: skeptical theism leads to moral paralysis', *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 67/2010, 67-80.

[15] Scott Coley, 'Skeptical theism is incompatible with theodicy', *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 77/2015, 53-63.

[16] Mark Piper, 'Why Theists Cannot Accept Skeptical Theism', *Sophia* 47/2008, 129-148.

[17] Erik J. Wielenberg, 'The parent-child analogy and the limits of skeptical theism', *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 78/2015, 301-314.

[18] For example, see Perry Hendricks, 'Skeptical Theism Unscathed: Why Skeptical Objections to Skeptical Theism Fail', *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* 101/2020, 43-73.

[19] Robert Sokolowski, *Introduction to Phenomenology*, Cambridge University Press, 2000, 2: 'Phenomenology is the study of human experience and of the ways things present themselves to us in and through such experiences.'

[20] Martin Heidegger, *History of the Concept of Time*, trans. Theodore Kisiel, Indiana University Press, 1985, 76ff.

show themselves from themselves.[21] In this way, a phenomenological skeptical theism would be *stronger* than its analytic counterpart, both with respect to the manner in which it is argued, as well as the options it opens up for responding to the objections of critics.

The transcendental structure of world-experience

Because the evidential argument from evil deals with the matter of the *apparent* gratuity of evil things that happen in the world, it would be well to begin with the more general question of *what appears and how*. Because the evidential argument from evil proceeds on the basis of evils which take place *in the world* and of the apparent gratuity of these, it is evident that the mode of appearance relevant to this discussion is that of *the world*.[22] And if there is something like a transcendental structure of world-experience, a structure which characterizes all experiences of the world whatsoever, if this can be discerned phenomenologically by reflection upon experience itself, then this will prove applicable in the case of the experience of evil events or happenings as well. One can therefore proceed from the general conditions of world-appearance to the specific case of the appearance of evils within the world.

The first thing a person typically notices in experience is (i) *a particular external world-object* which captures his or her attention for whatever reason. Thus, one sees a cat. In this spirit, Edmund Husserl defines 'the concept of experience in the broadest sense' as 'the self-evident givenness of individuals'.[23] But a moment's reflection reveals that the individual world-object only ever appears *among many other world-objects*, all of which inhabit the same shared 'milieu' or 'environment', each influencing the appearance of the others. For example, one does not simply see a cat, but rather a cat lying upon the floor of one's apartment, shadows being cast upon her fur as the light of the setting sun penetrates into the room through the half-closed blinds blocking the window. The appearance of the cat is 'affected' or 'interpreted' by all the other world-objects which themselves appear on the same 'stage' as it, such that if these were different, – e.g., if it were midday or night rather

[21] Cf. Edmund Husserl, *Logical Investigations* I, trans. J.N. Findlay, Routledge, 2001, 168; Heidegger, *History of the Concept of Time*, 85.

[22] The principle contribution of Michel Henry to phenomenology is that of distinguishing the mode of appearance of the world (ekstatic, intentional) from that of life (enstatic, non-intentional), and of founding the former upon the latter. For example, see the discussion in *Incarnation: A Philosophy of Flesh*, trans. Karl Hefty, Northwestern University Press, 2015.

[23] Edmund Husserl, *Experience and Judgment*, trans. James S. Churchill and Karl Ameriks, Northwestern University Press, 1973, 27.

than sunset, or if the blinds were open rather than half-closed, and so on, – the cat would also appear differently. An even more trivial example suffices: a pencil appears bent and thicker when it is submerged in water. It is thus clear that what appears in experience is not merely a single external world-object, but rather one such object among many, all of which inhabit the same shared 'space' or 'environment', each influencing in some way the appearance of the others. (ii) From within the 'natural attitude', which really consists in a kind of outward-oriented preoccupation with objects, a person is likely to take his or her access to external world-objects for granted.[24] Thus, Husserl characterizes this attitude by saying that the external objects are 'simply there for me'.[25] But the truth is that the access to the world is mediated by *one's lived body*, even if one is not always aware of this.[26] And yet sometimes the contribution of the lived body becomes apparent. For example, the cat may look blurry, though this is not because it is blurry, but rather because one is not wearing glasses. So also, the cat looks small, though not because it is small, but rather because its body is much smaller than one's own. If one were the size of a mouse, the cat would appear massive, just as if one were the size of an atom, the cat would be undetectably immense. And if one's body were considerably different, – if one had eyes like a falcon or a sense of smell like a dog, – then the world would appear quite differently. (iii) There is still a further contributing factor of the appearance of the world, though its contribution is far subtler than that of the external world-object or the lived body. It is *the thought-life*, i.e. a person's habits of thinking about and interpreting things. One can think of the study of the contribution of the thought-life to the appearance of the world as hermeneutics.[27] Thus, consider how a man married to a twin would experience his wife and his sister-in-law quite differently. This difference would not owe to a difference in the sisters considered as visible world-objects, nor to a difference that takes place in his lived body, but rather to the fact that he thinks of one as his wife and not the other. Or consider how a woman would experience her parents quite differently after learning that she was adopted. They appear to her differently, not because they have changed as visible external world-objects, nor because of a change in her body, but because of a change in how she

[24] Sokolowski, *Introduction to Phenomenology*, 42-47.

[25] Edmund Husserl, *Ideas for a Pure Phenomenology and Phenomenological Philosophy: First Book: General Introduction to Pure Phenomenology*, trans. Daniel O. Dahlstrom, Hackett Publishing Company, 2014, 48.

[26] The classic discussion of the lived body is in Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Donald A. Landes, Routledge, 2014. See also Dan Zahavi, *Self-Awareness and Alterity: A Phenomenological Investigation*, Northwestern University Press, 1999, ch. 6, as well as the discussion of the 'transcendental body' in Henry, *Incarnation*, 108ff.

[27] See John D. Caputo, *Hermeneutics: Facts and Interpretation in the Age of Information*, Pelican Books, 2018. See also Jean-Luc Marion, *Hermeneutics and Givenness*, trans. Jean-Pierre Lafouge, Marquette University Press, 2013.

thinks about them, i.e. because of a change at the level of thought-life. (iv) At the opposite pole of the structure of world-experience lies *the living self*.[28] This is the 'to whom' of the appearance of the world, i.e. its 'dative of disclosure'.[29]

The preceding reflections have thus revealed the fourfold transcendental structure of world-experience, which may be formalized as follows:

living self ← *thought-life* + *lived body* + one external world-object among many.

The left-pointing arrow (←) can be interpreted as '*appears to*'. Everything to the right of this arrow is a contributing factor to the appearance of things, listed in ascending order according to the evidence of its contribution. The contribution of the external world-object is more evident than that of the lived body, which is in turn more evident than that of the thought-life. What appears in world-experience is therefore (i) one external world-object among many, all appearing in the same 'environment' or 'stage', each influencing in some way the appearance of the others, such as these are experienced through the dual 'filter' of the (ii) lived body and (iii) thought-life of the (iv) living self.[30]

This analysis clarifies in a very helpful manner how it is that what appears in world-experience is *not merely an individual world-object, but rather everything and all at once, oneself included*. It is thus more accurate to say, not that the cat appears to be white, but that it appears to one to be white, such as one finds oneself to be in the conditions in which this appearance takes place. A person does not merely experience the world *tout court*, but rather the world such as he or she receives it, given what and how he or she is. This analysis also makes it possible to see how it is that *there can be no such thing as a 'false' appearance while it is nevertheless possible to make false judgments about what appears*.[31] On the one hand, every appearance is true insofar as what appears is not first and foremost the individual object, but rather the whole, oneself included, and all at once. A pencil placed into a half-full glass of water appears thicker at one end than at the other. This is not a false appearance, since what appears is *not the pencil*, first and foremost, *but rather the whole*: the pencil, the water, the immediate surrounding environment, as well as one's own lived body and thought-life. *Under precisely*

[28] It is called here the 'living self', rather than the 'transcendental ego', following the critique of Michel Henry. See Michel Henry, 'Four Principles of Phenomenology', in Scott Davidson and Frédéric Seyler, eds., *The Michel Henry Reader*, Northwestern University Press, 2019, 5-28.

[29] Cf. Sokolowski, *Introduction to Phenomenology*, 4, 58, 112ff., 154.

[30] A similar fourfold structure is recognized in Vedanta. See Swami Nikhilananda, *Drg-Drśya Vivéka: An Inquiry into the Nature of the 'Seer' and the 'Seen'*, Sri Ramakrishna Asrama, 1931, 1: 'The form is perceived and the eye is its perceiver. It (eye) is perceived and the mind is its perceiver. The mind with its modifications is perceived and the Witness (the Self) is verily the perceiver. But It (the Witness) is not perceived (by any other)'.

[31] In general, appearance is the precondition of judgment. See Husserl, *Experience and Judgment*, 19.

these conditions, the pencil is such as to appear thicker at the submerged end than at the other. This appearance is reflective of the being of the pencil, so that it is not false. If the pencil is to appear differently, then the conditions of appearance must themselves be changed, e.g. the glass must be emptied of water. On the other hand, *false judgments can arise because one ignores or misidentifies the principal contributing factor in an experience*. For example, a person might not realize that the apparently offensive quality of another's words owe not to the intention of this other, nor to the words themselves, but rather to his or her own insecure or anxious disposition, i.e. to the contribution of the thought-life. Of course, the words in question are such as to be offensive when heard in precisely the conditions in which this anxious person heard them, these conditions including the anxious person him- or herself, together with his or her peculiar habits of interpretation. The mistake arises only when the offensiveness is thought to belong to the words themselves as they were meant by their speaker, rather than originating in the hermeneutic contribution brought by the insecurity or anxiety of the one to whom they are addressed. In this way, *every appearance is a true one, once the conditions in which it takes place are specified, and yet this does not preclude the possibility of forming a false judgment about what is experienced, especially when the contributing factor principally responsible for a particular aspect of the experience has been misidentified*.

Phenomenological statement of skeptical theism

With these remarks in mind, it is possible to turn now to the question of what it would mean for some evil within the world to appear to be gratuitous. To say that an evil is gratuitous is to say that nothing that comes with it, before it, or after it in time justifies its presence in history. *The gratuity of an evil event is thus a relation that it bears to all other events in time*. From the phenomenological point of view, it must therefore be asked: what are the conditions of the appearance of this state of affairs? Is it possible for the gratuity of an evil so defined to appear to human beings? Consider what Maurice Merleau-Ponty famously wrote:

> For each object, just as for each painting in an art gallery, there is an optimal distance from which it asks to be seen – an orientation through which it presents more of itself – beneath or beyond which we merely have a confused perception due to excess or lack. Hence, we tend toward the maximum of visibility and we seek, just as when using a microscope, a better focus point, which is obtained through a certain equilibrium between the interior and the exterior horizons.[32]

[32] Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 315-316.

So also, adapting the insight of Merleau-Ponty to the present context, it would seem that the 'optimal distance' from which the gratuity of an evil event asks to be seen demands a position *outside of all time and history*. Only from such a vantage point could the gratuity of an evil event be discerned, since the gratuity of an event is a matter of the way in which it is related to other things that take place in history, and a relation cannot be perceived unless the relata are all given. This is how the *gratuity* of an evil event is distinct from its *evil*. The evil itself could perhaps be thought of as a 'monadic' property which is perceptible in its own right, like one might also think about the color or shape of a cat. It is enough to have the thing present, and one can perceive its monadic properties. But the appearing of the relation it bears to other things requires that these other things also be given. Thus, one cannot see that one cat is fatter than another unless both are given, just as one could not see that $x > 100$ unless the value of x is given.[33] In the same way, the *gratuity* of an evil event, which is a relation it bears to all other events in history in virtue of which it may or may not be justified in its occurrence, cannot be perceptible or visible unless all these other events are visible as well. This is the condition in which this appearance must take place.

It is obvious that such conditions of appearance are unrealizable and impossible for the human being. *It is not possible to accede to a position of atemporal omniscience, beyond all time and history, in order to see the way in which some evil event relates to all other events in history*. This is because of the lived body of the human being. All world-experience is mediated through this body which is itself subject to the passing of time and limited in its vision. Jean-Luc Marion poignantly comments on the subjection of the body to time by noting how 'the weight of time is accumulated there where my flesh is the most openly visible — on my face'.[34] This condition is furthermore inescapable because the lived body is not akin to a pair of sunglasses which one may set to the side when they prove to be obstructive. It is rather what one is: 'I can take neither leave nor distance from my flesh, because I do not have it, but I am it'.[35] Consider how one cannot see from within a train car what might lie 'just around the bend', so to speak, nor what the path was like which the train took to arrive at the station at which one boarded. To see all that, it is necessary to leave the train and to assume a position from outside of it, e.g. in a helicopter or an airplane. But it is *not* possible to assume a position outside of the

[33] See Steven Nemes, '*Claritas Scripturae*, Theological Epistemology, and the Phenomenology of Christian Faith', *Journal of Analytic Theology* 7/2019, 199-218.

[34] Jean-Luc Marion, *In Excess: Studies of Saturated Phenomena*, trans. Robyn Horner and Vincent Berraud, Fordham University Press, 2002, 95.

[35] Marion, *In Excess*, 92.

limited, temporal perspective afforded by the lived body, since *this lived body is exactly what one is*. And so, because the gratuity of an evil can only become an apparent from a position outside of all time and history, from which its relation to all other events becomes transparent, and because such a position is impossible for the human being owing to the limitations imposed by the lived body, it follows that the gratuity of an evil cannot become apparent to a human being as a matter of principle.

But even if it were possible for a human being to assume such an impossible position, that would not suffice for establishing the premise that some evil event in history is truly gratuitous. Here a second limiting factor makes itself felt, namely the *thought-life*. The evidential argument from evil suggests that some events take place in history which God would have prevented if He truly existed. But even if, *per impossibile*, it were possible for a human being to assume the transhistorical position of God, so that he or she could see the connections which some event bears to every other happening in history, and even if the human being were to judge in such conditions that the event in question is unjustified, *it would still not be shown that it is truly gratuitous*. It is one thing for *a human being* to judge that something need not or should not have happened, and it is another for *God* to share that judgment. One cannot simply take for granted that the way one would judge a thing in some set of conditions is the way God would judge the thing in the same circumstances, i.e. one cannot take for granted the closeness of one's own thought-life to that of God. And who can claim to think like God? In Christianity, this is absurd: 'My thoughts are not your thoughts, nor as your ways my ways, says the Lord' (Isa. 55:8). Indeed, Christian theology has asserted the unknowability of God from its very beginnings.[36] For all one knows, if one were to assume the thought-life of God, the evil event in question would no longer appear unjustified but perhaps even necessary. Thus, the lived body makes it impossible for a human being to appreciate the connections of historical events with one another, and even if this were not so, there would still be the problem that a person cannot claim to be able to judge things as God does.

Phenomenological critique of the analytic notion of 'appearance'

This line of argument suggests that the language of analytic philosophers of religion with respect to the 'apparent' gratuity of evil needs to be corrected. Wykstra notably objected to Rowe's first formulations of the evidential argument from evil

[36] See Marion, *In Excess*, ch. 6: 'In the Name: How to Avoid Speaking of It'.

on the grounds that he moves too quickly from (a) not seeing a good reason for why God would allow some evil to (b) there appearing to be no good reason for which God would allow some evil.[37] This is a very good objection to make from a phenomenological point of view. Wykstra then goes on to formulate the CORNEA principle as a way of clarifying the conditions under which the fact of not seeing something can justify the claim that something appears not to be there: only if the thing in question is something such that, if it were there, one would be likely to see it. But CORNEA is very controversial, and a number of philosophers object to it, the arguments surrounding the principle quickly becoming quite abstract with the introduction of Bayesian probability theory.[38] Wykstra and Perrine then complicate matters even further by supposing that the predictable 'invisibility' of the reasons for which evil things occur owe to the fact that God 'often acts with a view to goods of such ontological depth as to be beyond our ken'.[39] Why should one speak about the 'ontological depth' of the goods for the sake of which God acts? What benefit is brought by making this stipulation? As with Bergmann's proposal that human beings cannot take for granted the representative adequacy of their grasp of what is possibly good, what is possibly evil, what evil may be permitted for the sake of what good, and of the total moral (dis)value of some states of affairs, the discussion is needlessly complicated and new avenues of attack are opened up to the opponents of skeptical theism. Most importantly, from a phenomenological point of view, it seems that the true crux of the matter is being missed. The essential problem is not that of discerning the conditions in which seeing or not seeing something justifies the conclusion that something appears to be or not, since this is trivially easy to do, nor is it a matter of supposing that perhaps there is some other unheard of good which may be served by some particular evil event taking place. From the phenomenological point of view, *the real problem with the evidential argument from evil is that it consists in the attempt to make a justified global interpretation of the moral significance of some historical event (when in fact this is impossible) on the basis of an experience that has been misunderstood phenomenologically*.

Consider a person who fails in an attempt to lift an object of a certain weight. On the basis of this experience of the object itself, this person takes him- or herself to be justified in concluding that it is at least probably unliftable. Such a person draws a mistaken conclusion on the basis of a certain lack of phenomenological

[37] Wykstra, 'Rowe's Noseeum Arguments from Evil', 127.

[38] See the essays by Kenneth Boyce, M.J. Almeida, Paul Draper, Timothy Perrine, Stephen J. Wykstra, and Lara Buchak in Dougherty and McBrayer, eds., *Skeptical Theism*, chs. 8-13.

[39] Timothy Perrine and Stephen J. Wykstra, 'Skeptical Theism, Abductive Atheology, and Theory Versioning', in Dougherty and McBrayer, eds., *Skeptical Theism*, 143.

awareness. Phenomenological reflection reveals that one does not merely experience the world-object on its own but rather *the world-object in relation to oneself*. World-experience is simultaneously an experience of oneself. The 'liftability' of the object is not an intrinsic property of it, but rather a property it bears in relation to the person who attempts to lift it. It may be liftable to one person and not to another. What such a person experiences in the failed attempt to lift the weight is not merely a property of the object considered on its own, but more so his or her own inability to lift it. It is clear that if he or she were stronger, the weight would be 'liftable'. At the same time, the experience he or she has of the object is a true one. It is truly unliftable to him or her, such as he or she is in the conditions in which the experience takes place. *There is no falsity in the experience, but only in the judgment made about the object*. This false judgment owes to the fact that the hypothetical person is oblivious to the contribution of the lived body to his or her world-experience. That is why he or she draws unwarranted modal-ontological conclusions about the weight in question. In the same way, a proponent of the evidential argument from evil may find him- or herself unable to make sense of the moral meaning of some evil event which takes place in the world. It is not clear what purpose the evil in question serves, nor is it clear that, even if there were some such purpose, it could not be served by a quantitatively lesser evil. Thus described, this is a true experience and not a false one. The evil in question truly is inscrutable to him or her. But it would be a mistake to interpret this as an experience of the apparent gratuity of the evil event in question, since *this is not in fact what appears*, but only the person's own inability to make sense of what has happened. To claim that the evil is gratuitous is to claim that it bears a certain relation to everything else in history that comes before it, with it, or after it, and it is clear that *such a relation cannot become visible due to the limitations imposed by the lived body.* And if it cannot become visible in principle, then *neither is it what appears in the experience of the inscrutability of the evil*. For this reason, it is a fundamental phenomenological mistake to say that any evil event is apparently gratuitous.

One of the contributing factors to this confusion is the way in which analytic philosophers talk about appearances, 'seemings', and 'intuitions'.[40] For example, the doctrine of Phenomenal Conservatism maintains that 'if it seems to S that P, then, in the absence of defeaters, S thereby has justification for believing P'.[41] The very

[40] See Chris Tucker, ed., *Seemings and Justification: New Essays on Dogmatism and Phenomenal Conservatism*, Oxford University Press, 2013.

[41] Chris Tucker, 'Seemings and Justification: An Introduction', in Tucker, ed., *Seemings and Justification*, 2. See also Michael Huemer, *Skepticism and the Veil of Perception*, Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2001, 99; 'Phenomenal Conservatism and the Internalist Intuition', *American Philosophical Quarterly* 43/2006, 147-158; 'Compassionate Phenomenal Conservatism', *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 74/2007, 30-55; and 'Phenomenal Conservatism Über Alles', in Tucker, ed., *Seemings and Justification*, 328-350.

language one typically uses to describe these states suggests a measure of passivity on the part of the person to whom something appears: 'It seems that there is a cup on the table… It seems that I had eggs for breakfast… It seems that 2 + 2 = 4… It seems that torture for fun is wrong.'[42] One merely receives what 'seems' to be the case. But phenomenology teaches that the 'seeming' or 'appearing' of a state of affairs which can be expressed categorially, i.e. in a propositional form, is itself an accomplishment of consciousness that implies a certain activity on the part of the person who is to achieve it. This accomplishment is called a 'categorial intuition'. Robert Sokolowski describes the way in which one attains to a categorial intuition as follows.[43] First, an object is given in experience in a manifold of appearances, aspects, profiles: its size, its position relative to one's own body, the texture or color of its surface, and so on. Second, one focuses on a particular aspect of the object in question in isolation from the rest. Third, one then registers the particular aspect as belonging to the object in the manner that a part belongs to a whole. It is in this third stage that one then intuits a categorial object capable of being expressed in a proposition of the form '*x* is *F*'. One therefore is not merely presented with the 'propositional' or 'categorial' object from the beginning but rather attains to it through a specific act of categorial consciousness in which one must engage actively, otherwise known as 'constitution'.[44] And the success or failure of the categorial intuition is not a matter of its *prima facie* justification, but rather its conformity to the object itself. This is the first mistake of analytic philosophy in the matter of 'seemings' – *ignoring the activity required to attain to the consciousness of a categorial object*.

But it is further obvious from what Sokolowski says that the categorial object cannot be intuited or appear unless it is first given in experience and then adequately 'conceptualized' or 'interpreted'. Another way of putting the same point, as Husserl appreciates in *Experience and Judgment*: the evidence or clarity of the truth of the judgment one forms about something presupposes the prior and more fundamental evidence or clarity with which the world-object referent of that judgment itself appears in experience.[45] The 'seeming true' of a proposition is epistemically worthless in the absence to consciousness of what the proposition describes, since anything could 'seem true' to a person even if it is in fact false.[46] It is possible to return once more to an argument given earlier. Because the truth of a proposition is a relation it bears to that which it purports to describe, this relation cannot itself be perceived unless both relata are given: the proposition and its

[42] Andrew Cullison, 'Seemings and Semantics', in Tucker, ed., *Seemings and Justification*, 33.
[43] Sokolowski, *Introduction to Phenomenology*, 89-90.
[44] Sokolowski, *Introduction to Phenomenology*, 92.
[45] Husserl, *Experience and Judgment*, 19.
[46] Dan Zahavi, *Husserl's Phenomenology*, Stanford University Press, 2003, 32.

world-object referent together. This means that it is impossible to perceive the truth of a proposition in the absence to consciousness of its world-object referent, just as it is impossible to perceive that one cat is fatter than another unless both are visible.[47] Once more, it would seem that the analytic-philosophical experience of 'seeming' must be reinterpreted in a phenomenologically more adequate way. What is actually being experienced in the case of an 'intuition' that some proposition is true in the absence to consciousness of its world-object referent is not the 'apparent truth' of the proposition, but rather an inclination one feels to believe it or at least assent to it, perhaps owing to its fundamental coherence or 'fit' with what one already believes or takes oneself to know. This is the second mistake of analytic philosophy in the matter of 'seemings' – *confusing the inclination to believe a proposition with its appearing to be true.*

Responding to common objections to skeptical theism

The phenomenological approach to skeptical theism proceeds on the basis of an elucidation of the transcendental structure of world-experience as such and of the limitations imposed on the possibilities of appearance by the exigencies of the lived body and the thought-life. It critiques the claim that the evils of the world appear to be gratuitous by specifying the conditions in which such an appearance would actually take place and demonstrating that they are unattainable for human beings. It also critiques the notions of 'appearance' and 'seeming' that much analytic philosophy takes for granted, explaining how it is that the experience of the inscrutability of evil has come to be misinterpreted as an appearance of gratuity. It would be well now, by way of conclusion, to consider how it fares against some of the more important objections brought against the analytic versions of skeptical theism.

For example, some skeptical theists propose a certain skepticism about the representational adequacy of the grasp human beings have of all possible goods, all possible evils, and the relations of entailment which obtain between them such that the latter can justifiably be permitted on the basis of the former.[48] Stephen Maitzen, following Graham Oppy and Michael Almeida, argues that such a conception of things leads to moral skepticism and undermines the ordinary sense of moral obligation to prevent or intervene in the case of evils which God purportedly had a

[47] Compare the discussion in Walter Hopp, 'Phenomenal Conservatism and the Principle of All Principles', in Daniel O. Dahlstrom, Andreas Elpidorou, and Walter Hopp, eds., *Philosophy of Mind and Phenomenology: Conceptual and Empirical Approaches*, Routledge, 2016, 180-202.

[48] E.g., Bergmann, 'Skeptical Theism and the Problem of Evil'. See also Michael Bergmann and Michael Rea, 'In defence of skeptical theism: A reply to Almeida and Oppy', *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 83/2005, 241-251.

reason to permit.[49] One would lose confidence that what one does is in fact good or that what one acts to prevent is in fact evil. It is worth noting that the present essay does not commit itself to any such skepticism about value and for that reason does not fall victim to the objection in question. From the phenomenological point of view, this is a red herring. The argument of the present essay has to do rather with the claim that an evil event can appear to be gratuitous. It disputes this claim on the grounds that the transcendental conditions of world-experience for human beings – namely, the lived body and the thought-life – make it impossible for such a thing actually to appear to anyone. *The global-historical ethical interpretation of an event, which is precisely at stake in the claim that an evil event is gratuitous, exceeds the powers of the human being*. What is felt in the experience of some evils is not their gratuity but their inscrutability. Their inscrutability is the felt manifestation of one's own inability to make sense of them, not of their proper senselessness *per se*. Nothing in the experience of the inscrutability of evil justifies one in concluding that the evils are themselves senseless, *not because one does not know what is really evil or good*, *but because this is to make a claim about their connection with everything else in history*, a relation to which one can have no access. Someone might object that the gratuity of the evil can be inferred inductively on the basis of its apparent senselessness with reference to all those goods and evils with which one is familiar. But one could contest this without resorting to the moral skepticism of Bergmann and Rea, as well as without positing unheard of goods like Wykstra. One needs only to point out the obvious and indisputable fact that the whole of history is not revealed to any one presently participating in its flow and flux, and that the justification of the evil in question is a matter of its relation to other events which either already have or will take place in time. One could admit that the evil in question does and even must relate in some way to the goods with which human beings are already familiar. It is just that this relation is historical, and the historical sphere is such that one cannot plausibly claim to possess the access to it necessary for judging that an evil event is gratuitous.

Other critics of skeptical theism argue in something like the following way: if God can have an adequate or justifying reason for permitting evils which seem otherwise impermissible, then it would seem that He could have a reason for deceiving or at least allowing human beings to be deceived about various things, from the real existence of the external world and the history of the universe to the promise of eternal life in the Gospel.[50] But there are in fact two issues here.

[49] Stephen Maitzen, 'Skeptical theism and moral obligation', *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 65/2009, 93-103.

[50] See Bruce Russell, 'Defenseless', in Howard-Snyder, ed., *The Evidential Argument from Evil*, 193-205; Law, 'The Pandora's box objection'; and Erik J. Wielenberg, 'Divine Deception', in Dougherty and McBrayer, eds., *Skeptical Theism*, 236-249.

(i) On the one hand, there is the conception of the way in which God relates to the events in history implicit in the antecedent of the conditional. Suppose one man sees that another is suffering. From the fact that God, from His position beyond all space and time, did no wrong in bringing about a world in which this suffering takes place, it does not follow that the one man is permitted to ignore the suffering of the other. And if the one man reasons that the suffering of his neighbor must be alleviated, it does not follow that he has come to a conclusion which implies that God was unjust in creating a world in which this suffering takes place. Their situations are radically different: the man is in the world at a certain time and place, with limited knowledge, whereas God, in His omniscience, creates the entire world, all times and all places. Nothing available to the man justifies him in drawing the conclusion that, because it would be impermissible *for him*, *where he is and given what he knows*, to permit the suffering of his neighbor to continue, it would therefore have been impermissible *for God* to allow it in the first place. This is because the man does not have unmediated access to the whole domain of moral truth, but rather such access as is made possible by who and where and how he is. God is radically different from the man and in a radically different situation, whence it follows that the man cannot draw conclusions about God to the extent of that difference.

(ii) As for the question of the existence of the external world: this is itself an interesting problem for phenomenology, and it would seem that in this matter there will be inevitable differences between the analytic philosophers and the phenomenologists. It is a matter too complicated and involved to be resolved easily here, but it would be well nevertheless to return once more to the suggestion made earlier that there is no falsehood in appearances, even if there may be falsehood in the judgments one makes about what appears. Phenomenologically understood, the 'world' is this itself-appearing 'milieu' of appearance which Michel Henry names the 'Outside', within which things project representations of themselves to the intentional gaze of consciousness.[51] Thus, it is enough for one to enjoy intentional consciousness of any sort and one is in direct contact with the 'world' so understood.[52] To the extent that one limits one's judgments about things to their appearance, one runs no risk of deception, because (according to some interpreters of Husserl) the thing itself is given in its appearance.[53] This is in fact the goal of the phenomenological

[51] Henry, *Incarnation*, 39-40.

[52] Phenomenologists reject the 'representationalist' notion of consciousness according to which one is conscious not of the things themselves, but rather of representations produced as a result of imperceptible causal processes realized by the interactions between physical bodies. See Sokolowski, *Introduction to Phenomenology*, 9ff.; and Dan Zahavi, *Phenomenology: The Basics*, Routledge, 2016, 20f.

[53] See Dan Zahavi, 'Husserl's Noema and the Internalism-Externalism Debate', *Inquiry* 47/2004, 42-66.

reduction proposed by Husserl: to bring back (*re-ducere*) one's conception of things to the precise ways in which these things show themselves in experience.[54] In this way, phenomenology can be understood as proposing a pathway to knowledge which sidesteps the skeptical worry about the 'real existence of the external world'. The world is precisely what appears. To that extent, a phenomenological approach to skeptical theism would seem to find nothing uniquely hazardous or troubling in the supposition that God may have reasons for doing or permitting things which normally would be impermissible for human beings in their own contexts and situations.

At the same time, the 'commonsenseism' of much analytic philosophy of religion with respect to the knowledge of the external world and the reliability of world-experience may be subjected to critique from the phenomenological point of view. Michel Henry especially makes much of the fact that the flow of time makes it impossible to seize upon some apparent reality with any certainty.[55] Whatever one purports to think about or to perceive, whatever one focuses one's consciousness on in an attempt to see it and describe it as it is, immediately slips away into the past and, for better or for worse, becomes inaccessible except as a memory. As Husserl puts it, world-experience reveals a 'perpetual Heraclitean flux' in which 'all experiences flow away'.[56] This applies as much in the case of concrete external realities (*a posteriori*) as also in that of abstract or ideal ones (*a priori*). If knowledge of the categorial object – i.e., of the state of affairs or proposition – demands the presence to consciousness of the world-object referent, and if experience of an object both temporally and epistemically precedes the achievement of a categorial intuition, then it strictly follows that, with respect to one's opinions about the world and the things that appear within it in time beyond the fact of their appearing, *one is at best left with beliefs and hermeneutical judgments which are impossible to fulfill in principle and which one judges as probable or not relative to one's own convictions about what is likely true*. In other words, nothing to which one gains access by means of world-experience can be known in its 'presence' but only as a memory or as an expectation, i.e. *as absent*. For this reason, one typically does not spend every moment trying to judge things exactly as they appear in that precise moment, but rather goes on one's way on the basis of a presumed general picture of the world which makes it possible to pursue one's purposes and goals, even though one never manages strictly to confirm the adequacy of this picture of the world in an experience. This general picture is rarely if ever 'shattered' by some

[54] Henry, *Incarnation*, 28.

[55] Henry, *Incarnation*, 51-55.

[56] Edmund Husserl, *On the Phenomenology of the Consciousness of Internal Time*, trans. John Barrett Brough, Kluwer, 1991, 360.

experience, so that one takes it for granted insofar as it 'works'. But it is not *skeptical theism* which leads to this conclusion, but rather *the temporal-phenomenological structure of world-experience itself*. For this reason, these considerations cannot simply be ignored or swept to the side. Neither will it do to retreat to the 'phenomenal conservatism' proposed by some analytic philosophers, since it was already argued that this conception of things is oblivious to the active contribution which a person makes in achieving an intuition of a categorial object. It also goes without saying that the mere 'seeming true' of a proposition whose world-object referent is absent in fact has nothing to do with its truth as such.

Suppose, then, that someone responds as follows: 'Your arguments are not as plausible to me as the conviction that I genuinely possess the relevant knowledge of at least some external realities, for example the gratuity of some evil events. For this reason, I am within my rights to reject your arguments and to maintain my prior convictions'. But this is not true. In virtue of what is this hypothetical interlocutor confident that he or she possesses the relevant knowledge? The thing itself about which he or she believes something is not itself present to him or her, nor can it be made present, as phenomenological analysis reveals, and the 'seeming true' of the proposition he or she believes has nothing to do with the actual truth of the proposition so long as its world-object referent is not itself given. The counter-argument therefore would seem to amount to the suggestion that the phenomenological objection being proposed here can be rejected on the grounds that one finds it incredible, which is to say that one is not inclined to believe it. In the light of all that has been said thus far, this cannot be considered a convincing argument. It amounts to a confusion of one's own (dis)inclination to believe with a reason to think that the contrary thesis is false. In this sense, it makes the same phenomenological mistake as the evidential argument from evil: it considers something apparent to be a quality of some external world-object (the gratuity of an evil, the falsehood of the phenomenological thesis) when it is really an experience of oneself (one's inability to understand an evil, one's indisposition to believe the thesis).

But there is a final objection to consider: 'Would not this phenomenological sort of external-world "skepticism" undermine the very arguments and reasons one has to believe that God exists in the first place?' By way of response, it would be well once more to return to the philosophy of Michel Henry and especially his interpretation of Christianity in the light of his phenomenology of life.[57] The essence

[57] See Michel Henry, *I Am the Truth: Toward a Philosophy of Christianity*, trans. Susan Emanuel, Stanford University Press, 2003); *Incarnation*; *Words of Christ*, trans. Christina M. Gschwandtner, Eerdmans, 2012; and the essays collected in Scott Davidson and Frédéric Seyler, eds., *The Michel Henry Reader*. See also Michael O'Sullivan, *Michel Henry: Incarnation, Barbarism and Belief*, Peter Lang, 2006; Joseph Rivera, *The Contemplative Self after Michel Henry: A Phenomenological Theology*, Notre

of Henry's contribution to the phenomenological tradition consists in the distinction between two modes of appearance: that of *the world* and that of *life*. On the one hand, there is the mode of appearance which belongs to the world and its things, which show themselves as objects to the ek-static intentional gaze of consciousness in the 'Outside'.[58] What appears in the world appears outside oneself, so that there is a 'distance' and 'difference' between the object and the subject to whom it appears. The 'world', phenomenologically understood, is this itself-appearing 'milieu' or 'stage' of appearance in which things appear. On the other hand, there is life, which Henry defines as the en-static, non-intentional experience of oneself in a certain immediacy and transparency. In the world appear objects: this cat, that dog, this person, that event. In life one appears to oneself in one's affective states: joy, despair, pleasure, suffering, boredom, and the like. Life understood as the experience of oneself does not appear in the world. It is not a biological phenomenon, nor is it an object of intentional experience at all. It is that invisible quality of things which experience themselves immediately, invisibly, in a form of non-intentional consciousness. Henry argues that life is more foundational than the world insofar as (i) the world is an appearing and (ii) nothing could appear unless there were a life which could feel itself being appeared to.[59] The world is defined with reference to life, whereas life is defined with reference to itself.[60] And Henry further understands Christianity to define God as absolute Life. This implies that He does not appear in the world at all. He is not an intentional object of ek-static consciousness. To that extent, God is also not something known by means of an argument about things that appear in the world.[61] He is rather that Life in which each living being feels itself to be alive, on which their status as a living being constantly depends, a condition they did not choose for themselves and for which they could not act so as to secure it for themselves for even a second more, since every action they might perform presupposes that they are already alive.[62] Life as that which can experience itself is therefore the prior condition of the world, which is an appearing, and one's own condition as a living being is itself received from the absolute Life which is immanently present as the basis for one's own condition as a finite living being. That is why Michel Henry can

Dame University Press, 2015; and the discussions in Bruce Ellis Benson and Norman Wirzba, eds., *Words of Life: New Theological Turns in French Phenomenology*, Fordham University Press, 2010, and J. Aaron Simmons and Bruce Ellis Benson, *The New Phenomenology: A Philosophical Introduction*, Bloomsbury, 2013.

58 Henry, *Incarnation*, 39-40.

59 Cf. Henry, *Incarnation*, 110.

60 Michel Henry, *Material Phenomenology*, trans. Scott Davidson, Fordham University Press, 2008, 3.

61 Henry, *I Am the Truth*, 54.

62 Henry, *Incarnation*, 122.

write: 'The invisible comes before every conceivable visible… If in him it is a question of Life, God is far more certain than the world. So are we.'[63] And he cites from Meister Eckhart the idea that the human being is *ein Gott wissender mensch* – a human being that knows God.[64] This is because the true essence of the human being is life, phenomenologically understood as something which experiences itself, and God is that absolute Life in which each living being feels itself to have arrived 'without their contribution or consent, which was not their own and which nevertheless became theirs'.[65] This is how the question of the existence of God, appropriately understood, is not affected by the phenomenological skepticism being proposed in the present essay: the skepticism has to do with the domain of appearance of the world and its things, whereas God is found in the domain of life.[66]

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[63] Henry, *Incarnation*, 92.

[64] Henry, *Words of Christ*, 82.

[65] Henry, *Incarnation*, 122.

[66] A number of authors object to Michel Henry's conception of the 'world' on the grounds that it does not seem to cohere nicely with the Christian doctrine of creation. But there is no space to enter into this issue here. See the discussion in Joseph M. Rivera, 'Generation, interiority and the phenomenology of Christianity in Michel Henry', *Continental Philosophy Review* 44/2011, 205-235.

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