religions

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# Alterity, Alacrity, and Excess: Continental Philosophical Interpretations of the Figure of Abraham According to Franz Rosenzweig, Emmanuel Levinas, Jacques Derrida and Jean-Luc Marion

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**Abstract:** I propose a new reading of a selection of continental philosophical interpretations of the nature of existentialism after the dialogical turn. This analysis will focus on the particular case study of the biblical character of Abraham as a case in point. Philosophical treatments thereof allow for a consideration of different but connected approaches through the study and re-readings of the character of Abraham, which begin with Kierkegaard's well-known rendition of the sacrifice of Isaac. This study will focus on interpretations *since* Kierkegaard, with attention to the continental philosophical trend. The four thinkers I bring, all offered critiques, and even rejections of, a purely existential position. These positions are well-known in the field. However, Existentialism is never actually overcome despite these four critiques of Kierkegaard's model of Abraham. I will demonstrate this through an analysis of the case of interpretations of the biblical figure of Abraham, showing the ways in which Kierkegaard remains present in dialogical philosophy and even deconstructionism. For Franz Rosenzweig, his stance is relational and thus is fascinated yet ambivalent towards the readiness of Abraham to sacrifice; Emmanuel Levinas admires Kierkegaard's emphasis on the subject/ivity (Proper Names and Difficult Freedom); Jacques Derrida admires Abraham's passion (Gift of Death and Abraham as Other); and for Jean-Luc Marion, Abraham's sacrifice does not present a relinquishing of self, but rather, the phenomenological act symbolises returning a *Gift*.

**Keywords:** modern philosophy; religious existentialism; continental philosophical theology; Franz Rosenzweig; Emmanuel Levinas; Jacques Derrida; Jean-Luc Marion



**Citation:** Feldmann Kaye, Miriam. 2022. Alterity, Alacrity, and Excess: Continental Philosophical Interpretations of the Figure of Abraham According to Franz Rosenzweig, Emmanuel Levinas, Jacques Derrida and Jean-Luc Marion. *Religions* 13: 438. https://doi.org/10.3390/rel13050438

Academic Editor: Paul Mendes-Flohr

Received: 25 February 2022
Accepted: 5 May 2022
Published: 13 May 2022



## 1. Introduction

I propose a new reading of a selection of continental philosophical interpretations of the nature of existentialism after the dialogical turn.[1] This analysis will focus on the particular case study of the biblical character of Abraham as a case in point. Philosophical treatments thereof allow for a consideration of different but connected approaches through the study and re-readings of the character of Abraham, which begin with Kierkegaard's well-known rendition of the sacrifice of Isaac. This study will focus on interpretations *since* Kierkegaard, with attention to the continental philosophical trend. I have selected these four thinkers, as each of them offer critiques, and even rejections of, a purely existential position. These positions are well-known in the field. However, Existentialism is never actually overcome despite these four critiques of Kierkegaard's model of Abraham. I will demonstrate this through an analysis of the case of interpretations of the biblical figure of Abraham, showing the ways in which Kierkegaard remains present in dialogical philosophy and even deconstructionism. I propose that resistance to aspects of existentialism, in which Nietzsche also plays a significant role, is also coupled with admiration for Kierkegaard's Abraham and, thus, his existentialist stance.

For Franz Rosenzweig, his stance is relational and thus is fascinated yet ambivalent towards the readiness of Abraham to sacrifice; Emmanuel Levinas admires Kierkegaard's emphasis on the subject/ivity (Proper Names and Difficult Freedom); Jacques Derrida admires Abraham's passion (Gift of Death and Abraham as Other); and for Jean-Luc Marion, Abraham's sacrifice does not present a relinquishing of self, but rather, the phenomenological act symbolises returning a *Gift*.

The thinkers I study who stress a relational element can be, at the least for the sake of this article, considered in a dialogical framework. All point to the fact that the sacrifice did not happen—and that this is the high point of the story and focus for interpretation. Others propound an Abraham at other points in biblical literature other than the sacrifice of Isaac to avoid the problem of veneration of sacrifice. In these ways, the story is re-framed not as sacrifice of Isaac, but dialogue of Abraham, or the Gift of Isaac.

I take into account the important caveat too often ignored, that Kierkegaard's own position is not as purely existentialist, or as Nietzschean, as it seems: he too venerates the Abraham of the desert in dialogue with guests; he too desires a dialogic relationship. Perhaps Christian readings of his account emphasise specific lines of thought he took—of (Christ's) sacrifice in the name of divinity.

This study, in turn, leads to certain questions: Does this say something greater about continental philosophical re-interpretations of existentialism in Jewish and Christian interpretations? In which ways does a turn to dialogical and interpretative forms imply that certain elements of religion—passion, fervour—are lost?

## 2. Søren Kierkegaard: "The Seal of the Discoursing Divine Mouth"

It could be argued that the theological commentary on the sacrifice of Isaac of Søren Kierkegaard, the Danish Christian religious existentialist of the nineteenth century, forms the bedrock of religious existentialist thinking in Jewish and Christian philosophical thought. Although this is somewhat of an overstatement, one is hard-pressed to find a work that does not relate to Kierkegaard at all, in works of ethics and philosophy in religious thought. One could even pose a provocative question as follows: Would it be plausible to conceive of the character of Abraham in the sacrifice of Isaac, in modern times, without *an* interpretation of Kierkegaard? Although an extreme question, it encourages us to recognize the role of Kierkegaard's theological and philosophical exposition, even in the rejections of ethicists, philosophers and theologians thereof. The reasons for this are complex—and in some ways based on more basic readings, or generalized interpretations of 'what Kierkegaard said' when in fact a thorough reading of Kierkegaard shows that his supposedly 'purist' existentialism was itself riddled with doubt and uncertainty. Notwithstanding, the writings of Kierkegaard, if not only on this particular subject, have become somewhat mythologized. I will show throughout this paper how his reading of the sacrifice of Isaac, while resembling certain qualities of what became known as 'existentialism' in the early twentieth century, was in fact more complex than sometimes construed. The philosophers I explore in this paper, as cases in point, offer readings of Kierkegaard, which also in certain ways mirror this occupation with his thought, and show different responses and critiques of Kierkegaard. Then I ask, how far is it actually possible to escape from Kierkegaard? And if not, then why not? I will posit that the existentialist elements that the Kierkegaardian position does portray serve to imbue religious thought with significance, even after dialogical and hermeneutical theological shifts, as I show through Rosenzweig and Levinas. Derrida and Marion will allow for more contemporary reflections of this feat.

Kierkegaard illustrates the biblical narrative of the Sacrifice of Isaac[2] through a fictional–literary–philosophical reading, setting out some of his major ideas. Kierkegaard praised Abraham for his irrational religiosity:

> "Abraham had faith and did not doubt; he believed the preposterous." (Kierkegaard 1983, p. 20)

Accordingly, Abraham is the 'Knight of Faith' who is extolled by the necessary 'teleological suspension of the ethical' (Kierkegaard 1985, pp. 44–48). Indeed, many cite Kierkegaard's rendition of the sacrifice of Isaac as the ultimate expression of the "teleological suspension of the ethical" (Kierkegaard 1988). Herein, the role of the self is sacrificial: it is at centre but must give itself over to the divine.

> "He who loved himself became great by virtue of himself, and he who loved other men became great by the virtue of his devotedness, but he who loved God became the greatest of all". (Kierkegaard 1983, p. 16)

The existentialist and individualistic position of Kierkegaard in his portrayal of Abraham was in some ways expressed in the later Nietzschean existentialist qualities. Ephraim Meir explicates Nietzsche's idea of the "pure man"—who, in essence, is an individual of praxis, creativity, and even of majesty (see Nietzsche 1995, p. 17)—and then relates this to the existentialist reading of Kierkegaard. Humanity's existence on earth, according to Nietzsche, was essentially meaningless and so had to be brought, through the '*Will to Power*', to meaning:

> 'What is man for, actually?'—was a question without an answer; there was no *will* for man and earth; behind every great human destiny sounded the even louder refrain 'in vain!'. *This* is what the ascetic ideal meant: something was *missing*, there was an immense *lacuna* around man,—he himself could think of no justification or explanation or affirmation, he *suffered* from the problem of what he meant. (Nietzsche 1995, p. 129)

This thinking came to define existentialism—a rejection of static modes of 'being' in favour of a subject or individual and their experience of the world. I concur with scholars who have argued that Nietzsche's mode of thought, often branded as highly atheist, certainly has some characteristics applicable to religion—perhaps because much of their inspiration came from a devout religious theologian: Kierkegaard. What will be of interest to us now is the turn away from pure existentialism towards a dialogical method, as exemplified by Franz Rosenzweig, Martin Buber, Emmanuel Levinas, and others. We will first address Rosenzweig, whom, although one might have thought would have immediately rejected Kierkegaard, retains an admiration for him at several levels. In this way, the turn to dialogical thought as in clear rejection of existentialism, I claim, should be re-visited. Indeed, as we shall see, the dialogical philosopher Franz Rosenzweig (surprisingly?) found affinity with him.[3]

### 3. Franz Rosenzweig: The Readiness of Abraham

Franz Rosenzweig admired Kierkegaard for several reasons: as the arbiter of religious existentialism, and for his recognition of the significance of experience over rationality.

A significant case in point is his reverence for the fervour of Abraham—the alacrity, the presenting of oneself—resonates strongly:

> "Here is the I, the individual human I, as yet wholly receptive, as yet only unlocked, only empty, without content come out without nature, pure readiness, pure obedience, or is. The commandment is the first content to drop into this attentive hearing. The summons to hear, the address by the given name, the seal of the discoursing divine mouth—all these are but preface to every commandment."[4]

Rosenzweig's idealisation of Abraham is described by Steven Kepnes as one who:

> "breaks the mold and opens himself to God's question and love when he stands up openly . . . and says *Heneni*—Here I am". (Kepnes 2007, p. 93)

The notion of speech is significant here too—which is framed in the conversation of the Sacrifice of Isaac, but ultimately allows for a 'conversation' which allows for dialogue. Herein, the model of Abraham can too be regarded in terms of the shift from existential and individualistic towards a collective: indeed, only later Rosenzweig's approach becomes

more dialogical. Judaism and Christianity here are distinguished by Rosenzweig as follows: Jesus sacrificed himself; Abraham sacrificed his future [his offspring].

> "Rosenzweig's focal point is not the individual, but it is the community. Abraham is not the 'individual' standing before God, but rather the father of the Jewish people, who is called in the name of the nations in his own particularity"[5]

Rosenzweig's notion of sacrifice as lauded closely resembles an existentialist position, in some ways reminiscent of the Abraham of Kierkegaard. Moreover, in Rosenzweig's writings, there is an appreciation for the sacrificial aspect of Abraham's willingness to give up all in the name of God. Rosenzweig regards the figure of Abraham as emblematic not of the individual, but of the collective—the Jewish people.

However, in parallel, according to Rosenzweig, Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his son determines him as the father of the Jewish nation. Rosenzweig, like Martin Buber, depicts the Abraham figure in the Sacrifice of Isaac, *not only* as an individual, but as representative of the Jewish people. Due to this act of faith, the Jewish nation is awarded a special relationship with God. The notion of nationhood, according to Rosenzweig, signifies a collective element which marks a departure from Kierkegaard's individualism. In fact, his portrayal of Abraham as collective enables Rosenzweig to make a shift to the idea of community.

However, there is a certain juxtaposition between Rosenzweig with the Nietzschean approach; this life of praxis, creativity and majesty, must be accompanied with the idea of dialogue (Meir 2003, p. 89). Rosenzweig's appreciation of Nietzsche was one of ambivalence. Within the Star of Redemption alone, Rosenzweig references Nietzsche's *Zarathustra*, pointing to a sense of the zeal in the way an individual lives and perceives himself, but ultimately as an individual as a "a tyrant who overpowers his neighbor", here signalling the significance of what was to become a fuller dialogical position (Rosenzweig 1985, pp. 286–87). Another example of this ambivalence is Rosenzweig's response to Nietzsche's '*God is dead*' pronouncement, that "God neither lives nor is he dead", a position which leads Rosenzweig to put forward some of his monumental concepts, such as time, and redemption (Rosenzweig 1985, p. 380). One distinction, borne out of Rosenzweig's ambivalence, is the resistance to the Nietzschean focus on the 'self'. Rosenzweig critiques prior ways of doing philosophy which, in his view, has been pre-occupied with tracing and "reducing everything back to *the self*" (Glatzer 1953, p. 191). Indeed, for Rosenzweig, this consecrates the seminal task of philosophy which, from hereon in, must insist upon "discovering something entirely different" (Glatzer 1953, p. 191). The dialogical aspect of Rosenzweig's thought can be perceived through a consideration of what he proposes as intrinsic interconnections between God, world, and humanity. The connections are reflected in their interlinking amalgamations: creation, revelation and redemption. This presents a theology of dialogue between God, humanity and world. In this sense, the "I" is rescued from its own egoism as it is thrust into their world outside. What are the permutations of this in exploring a Rosenzweigian approach to the Sacrifice of Isaac? For Rosenzweig:

> "that which is distant can be reached only through that which is nearest at the moment. Any 'plan' is wrong to begin with—simply because it is a plan. The highest things cannot be planned. For them, readiness is everything"

For Abraham, the characteristic of readiness is, indeed, "everything"—it is what is admired by the plethora of philosophers in this study. Rosenzweig too values to a great extent an ability to be impulsive in a religious sense, to have a conscious readiness for what will happen, for what the other will say:

> 'I do not know in advance what the other person will say to me, because I do not even know what I myself am going to say. I do not even know whether I am going to say anything at all. Perhaps the other person will say the first word, for in a true conversation this is usually the case . . . '[6]

And for this reason 'speech is bound to time and nourished by time'.[7] This dialogical thrust—of speech and its unpredictability—will, we will see, be expressed in an illustration of the character of Abraham.

I will explicate this move, and later show how the Sacrifice of Isaac has been 'revised' or 're-visited' in light of Jacques Derrida and Jean-Luc Marion and their response to Levinas.

## 4. Emmanuel Levinas: The Call to *Alterity*

What is the Levinasian view of Kierkegaard's portrayal of Abraham at the sacrifice of Isaac? What does it tell us about his relation to existentialism? How might some of Levinas' major concepts be read into such a story and not simply pose a rejection to it.

Levinas takes issue with the subject that Kierkegaard idolises in Abraham:

> The subjectivity of the Subject is an identification of the Same in its care for the Same. It is egotism. Subjectivity is a *Me*. (Levinas 1996a, p. 68)

Even though Kierkegaard focuses on the subject, his end result is a 'totalization' of thought, to which Levinas is opposed, as it demonstrates the "passing of subjectivity into philosophy" (Levinas 1996a, p. 68). He emphasises Kierkegaard's Christianity in developing his Knight of Faith, as a "deeply Protestant protest against systems", therefore offering a strong critique of Kierkegaard.

More acutely, Levinas questions what would happen if violence were taken up by anyone who believed that call to be a demand of God. Abraham possesses "communication and solitude, and hence violence and passion" a move for which he also "blames" Nietzsche, who laid the path for immoral philosophy (Levinas 1996a, p. 72). Levinas writes that "It is Kierkegaard's violence that shocks me" (Levinas 1996a, p. 77). For violence and passion to give expression to religion is a religion rejected by Levinas.

"Truth" in Kierkegaard's vision, notes Levinas, is one that suffers (Levinas 1996a, p. 69), whereas for Levinas, the truth is what is ethical in a given encounter. Kierkegaard's is a "crucified truth" (Levinas 1996a, p. 69), like an "open wound" (Levinas 1996a, p. 72). In the interior world, the Sacrifice makes sense to Abraham. However, "in the eyes of the outer world it is Indiscretion, scandal" (Levinas 1996a, p. 70), claimed Levinas. So, the "egotism" sacrifices everything for the sake of an interior veneration of sacrifice, which, for the collective, is a disgrace. This, for Levinas, cannot and must not be the crux of idealisation of the story of the Sacrifice of Isaac.

This prelude of critiques leads to Levinas' central critique of Kierkegaard's model of the Sacrifice of Isaac parable, and proposes a revision of it:

> Perhaps Abraham's ear for hearing the voice that brought him back to the ethical order was the highest moment in this drama. (Levinas 1996a, p. 74)

Levinas then turns the focus to another aspect of critique of Abraham's religion—which is why the parable of the sacrifice of Isaac seems to remain paramount in a philosophical reading of Abraham. Why is it, asks Levinas, that according to the Kierkegaardian reading, other characteristics of Abraham often ignored?

> " . . . Kierkegaard never speaks of the situation in which Abraham enters into dialogue with God to intercede in favor of Sodom and Gomorrah in the name of the just who may be present there.[8]

Levinas provides several examples of such parables, responding to Kierkegaard:

> "Abraham, the father of believers, was the son of a seller of idols, according to one apologist. Profiting from the absence of Tereh, he apparently broke them all, saving the largest in order that it could assume, in the eyes of his father, responsibility for the massacre. But when Tereh came back he could not accept this incredible version, knowing that there is no idol in the world which can destroy the other idols. Monotheism marks a break with a certain conception of the Sacred. It neither unifies nor hierarchizes the numerous and numinous gods; instead it denies them". (Levinas 1990a, pp. 14–15)

Herein, another model of Abraham emerges—who is beyond the existentialist and sacrificial Abraham—but one who is ready and willing to challenge the values of the world around him. However, herein there is also a resemblance to Nietzsche's call to individualist values, which calls into question how far Abraham as iconoclast is quite different from the existentialist Abraham. Indeed, Meir draws on Levinas to depict a distinct portrayal of the Abrahamic figure in this instance as representative of a:

> "Demystifying attitude that broke with Pagan idols and recognising the divine word in the ethical call of the other human being". (Meir in Lin 2014, p. 21)

In addition, a further Abrahamic figure is presented by Levinas, offering a commentary focused on the notion of being a stranger in a foreign land—a consciousness of exile.[9] In this instance, the divine call to leave the homeland forces himself into a confrontation with himself and in so doing:

> "makes him a stranger to himself... His land is a promised one and his dwelling in it is not natural, but rather justified through his turn to the other. Abraham dwells in a de-mystified land, a land of milk and honey". (Meir in Lin 2014, p. 21)

This model of Abraham is also emphasised by Meir in his analysis of Levinas, that of Abraham as fundamentally "[r]esponsible for humanity and its sense of justice, in the image of Abraham interceding on behalf of Sodom".[10] A dialogical approach to this portrayal of Abraham can also be seen in Rosenzweig. Indeed, Rosenzweig addresses the role of Abraham in Sodom, in particular the moral development of one's character when in dialogue with God (see, Nisenbaum 2018, p. 234).

However, in parallel, Levinas retains an explicit admiration for Kierkegaard, one which is at best glossed over, and at worst omitted. Indeed, for Levinas, Kierkegaard helped pave the way for "maintaining human subjectivity—and the dimension of interiority it opens—as absolute, separated . . . " (Levinas 1996a, p. 67). Levinas also recognised Kierkegaard as having saved the "irreducible position of the subject against idealism" (Levinas 1996a, p. 66). Herein, we see Levinas' resistance to Heideggerian and Husserlian notions of the Being of the subject. Kierkegaard also, in Levinas' view, "denied that Being was the correlate of thought" (Levinas 1996a, p. 67).

Further, Levinas admires Kierkegaard's emphasis on the possibility of doubt within a religious outlook (Levinas 1996a, p. 77). Levinas believes that Kierkegaard values the humility, rather than an overstated power and authority, over transcendence. That transcendence can be sensed in the inner self, as a sign of humility, rather than creating universal theories based on an exteriorised religious belief—religion in a private enclave, rather than as part of a monolithic ideology (Levinas 1996a, pp. 78–79).

The call to alterity, precisely at the moment of realisation, offers the quintessential significance of the parable for Levinas (See Levinas 1996b, pp. 73–75). The ethical and collective view of the Sacrifice of Isaac is, in contrast to Kierkegaardian reverence for the willingness of Abraham to sacrifice his child, for Levinas, the height of philosophical significance.

Actually, in considering Levinas' discussion on the sacrifice of Isaac, it can also be suggested that Kierkegaard was aware of these innate critiques, and also of the claim that the sacrifice itself did not happen, i.e., in the veneration of the zeal of Abraham, the actual sacrifice is not accomplished.

Nonetheless, praised Abraham for his will:

> Abraham was to take leave of everything he held dear, when he once more would raise his venerable head, when his face would shine as the Lord's, when he would concentrate all his soul upon a blessing that would be so powerful it would bless Isaac all his days—this hour was not to come! (Kierkegaard 1983, p. 20)

For Kierkegaard, it was not to be. However, Levinas interprets it differently, highlighting an ethical call to the Other amidst what might appear as a divine call.

A further model is that of Abraham as "host" whose tent is open at all sides, and who welcomes the stranger: through this, the divine.[11] This is religion for Levinas and Rosenzweig: the dialogic element, continually aware of the encounter. The individual—now paralleled by the collective—symbolises a resistance to the Kierkegaardian model of religious existentialism, an affinity with the Levinasian concept of 'hospitality':

> "For Levinas, as for Buber, Abraham is not the knight of faith, unconditionally submitting to God's commandments, teleologically suspending the ethical, but the one who runs towards the three Arabs, calling them "Your Lordships" and *extending hospitality to them*"[12]

The idealised Abrahamic character is not the individual at the centre, but as the one who is called to leave the centre—to *de-centre*. This is the model of Abraham who leaves, as one who is commanded to *know oneself*:[13]

> "The command to "go", *Lekh Lekha* of Gen. 12:1, decrees a movement with no return to the own and the known. To be a follower of Abraham is therefore to shape one's life around the unknown and the otherness that shapes the self. The construction of a life around the unknown and unseen implies and openness towards any other, without idolatrous focus on the same, for which all otherness is neutralized in a mirror that only reflects what is one's own". (Meir 2018, p. 154)

However, Kierkegaard too lauds the exilic Abrahamic figure. Kierkegaard praises the role of the biblical character in his difference, and in his being a stranger:

> "By faith Abraham emigrated from the land of his fathers and became an alien in the promised land . . . ". (Kierkegaard 1983, p. 16)

This is exemplified not through the Sacrifice of Isaac parable, but by his departure. The figure of Abraham in this view is the one who is called to leave. This forms part of the thinking around home and exile according to Rosenzweig. Abraham is held up as the ancestral protagonist who resides as a foreigner in exile, and yet remains hospitable.

In the Star of Redemption, Rosenzweig describes Abraham in light of exiles. Abraham's story, writes Rosenzweig:

> begins with God's command to leave the land of his birth and go to a land God will point out to him. Thus ends the dawn of its earliest beginnings, as well as later in the bright light of history, this people is a people in exile, in the Egyptian exile and subsequently in that of Babylonia. (Rosenzweig 1985, p. 300)

The significance of space and place is particularist, and not based on a specific land, since " . . . the will to be a people does not cling to any mechanical means; the will can realise its end only through the people itself" (Rosenzweig 1985, p. 300). This idea of the ideal of Abraham can be referred to as the *Hineni*—of the presence and willingness and openness. Abraham is not exiled only to rid the focus on ownership or land. It is to place him in a context of dependency and dialogue. This resonates with certain biblical scenes, such as Hagar who is exiled, to a desert, and her desperation for help allows for a place where she then has the awareness of divine revelation. Jonah is, too, in a place of the desert and receives divine revelation. And the crucial example is that the Torah itself was received in a desert. The context of non-site gains significance in the awareness it causes in the exiled one/s to enter a mindset of dialogue.

However, Rosenzweig's position on Abraham as host has been called into question. This is expressed in several ways, but in deconstructionist thought, the breakdown of the Levinasian concept of 'hospitality' is prominent. Nevertheless, in terms of the character of Abraham and his readiness to sacrifice his son, Kierkegaard's existentialist reading of the parable remains preeminent and is seemingly never 'overcome'. On the contrary, his view is manifested broadly in theology of religions and philosophy, and extends to concepts such as the meaning of sacrifice in religion.

An enriching study has been undertaken by the Polish scholar Adam Lipscyz, who traces Kierkegaardian elements of interpretations of the Sacrifice of Isaac in Rosenzweig,

Buber and Derrida, despite their resistance to accepting his theological reading thereof (Lipszyc 2011). Having noted Rosenzweig's admiration for Kierkegaard's Abraham, Lipscyz highlights parallel contrasts:

> Kierkegaard offers us a model in which we start from the universal ethical and linguistic order to reach the silent peak of religious existence, whereas Rosenzweig suggests a reverse scheme in which the silence of the tragic hero, cut off from the community and God, is superseded by the communal, ethical life of the speaking, religious soul. (Lipszyc 2011, p. 108)

In this sense, the Kierkegaardian interpretative motif claims a universal relevance. However, Rosenzweig's dialogical approach sees the lonely individuality of Abraham as overcome by a life of dialogue as part of a definition of religion in modern times. According to Lipscyz's reading, one must ask, how far does the Kierkegaardian existentialist character of Abraham need to be rejected in order to accommodate a dialogical reading? And in which senses does the Levinasian critique of Kierkegaard feature in such a reading?

I will propose that *the move beyond existentialism is never fully realised*. I seek to show how and why this is the case.

## 5. Existentialist Aspects of Abraham in Jacques Derrida and Jean-Luc Marion

What is the premise for claiming that the existentialist position is not surpassed by dialogical philosophy? The over-emphasis on being forms the critique, and a new emphasis on dialogue is emphasised—as mastered by Levinas which came to influence Derrida and Marion—but only to a certain extent, as certain elements of existentialism remain. I will propose this is the case through examining their readings of the Sacrifice of Isaac, and offer reasons as to why this might be the case. This in turn will offer a broader philosophical perspective as to the extent to which dialogical philosophy—in this study, via Rosenzweig and those he influenced—has or will become the preeminent continental philosophical theology. One reason for this, I will propose, is that dialogical philosophy remains devoid of some key elements of religious faith that are brought back, in a sense, in late modern times.

I will argue this through an analysis of two thinkers in continental schools of modern philosophy and theology: Jacques Derrida of the school of deconstructionism, and his student and contemporary, Jean-Luc Marion, of the schools of phenomenology and deconstructionism.

This warrants much conjecture, and I will suggest reasons why existentialist elements of religion remain in portrayals of Abraham. I will claim that a move to dialogue, and relationality, left in its wake questions around the nature of the Self, which remain unresolved. In addition, certain specific elements of the existentialist Abraham remain celebrated even in Derrida and Marion, as I will now show. In this sense, Rosenzweig's admiration for and simultaneous resistance towards an existentialist reading of Abraham offers an opportunity to consider Rosenzweig's position as perhaps one which retains its relevance for this field in the twenty-first century.

## 6. Jacques Derrida—"Absolute Responsibility and Absolute Passion"

Let us re-visit the Sacrifice of Isaac, from a deconstructive and Derridean perspective. And let us ask to what extent later philosophy, notably deconstructionism, alters our reading of the figure of Abraham. I will claim that an existentialist approach to the character of Abraham in the sacrifice of Isaac, which had been read by Derrida's teacher and colleague Levinas as intrinsically problematic, is imbued with certain elements, which I show are highly reminiscent of existentialism.

Derrida, like Rosenzweig, finds a certain affinity in the nature of the sacrifice of Isaac. Derrida is enthralled by the notion of "trembling", and holds Abraham up as an individual of "a secret truth of faith as absolute responsibility and as absolute passion" (Derrida 1995, p. 80). Derrida, in another essay, notes that " . . . the thought of Emmanuel Levinas can make us tremble".[14] Does or should this signal that Derrida's reading of Abraham in some senses pays homage to the ethical, hermeneutical reading given by

Levinas? Could it be that Derrida is reading Levinas? (see Derrida 1999). The link here to Abraham in the desert is immersed in Levinas:

> At the heart of the desert, in the growing wasteland, this thought, which fundamentally no longer seeks to be a thought of Being and phenomenality, makes us dream of an inconceivable process of dismantling and dispossession.[15]

We shall address his treatment of the Levinasian resistance of existentialism below. Suffice it to say that, as Sarah Hammerschlag has pointed out, Derrida's reading of Abraham exemplifies "a figure both for Judaism and the call of the Other".[16]

For Derrida, Abraham is an individual who possesses the qualities of alacrity—and immediate acceptance of justice. Derrida discusses justice as a concept that must be addressed 'now' in the present. It must be attended to at once. Derrida finds it remarkable that Abraham was willing to say 'yes' without supposedly the foreknowledge of what he was being called to do:

> Yes, it is a matter, once again, of responding. And yes, of responding "yes." Without even naming Abraham, prior to daring to issue a summons toward the immense figure of the patriarch presumed to respond to the calling of his name, "yes, here I am," "I am here," "I am ready," one must know (and this is the first Abrahamic teaching, prior to any other) that if everything begins for us with the response, if everything begins with the "yes" implied in all responses ("yes, I respond," "yes, here I am," even if the response is "no"), then any response, even the most modest, the most mundane, of responses, remains an acquiescence given to some self-presentation. (Derrida 2007, p. 3)

This coincides with the idea of violence, happening as a moment of force—which must cancel itself out through a correction—of justice. Derrida is enthralled by such a figure who is ready to venture outside of their regular spheres for a greater purpose. Up until this point, we could be reading Derrida's acceptance both of Kierkegaard's and/or Levinas' position on the Sacrifice of Isaac! His readiness to sacrifice and rise up are reminiscent of a Kierkegaardian oeuvre, and so is the expectation or idealism of Levinas—to give up all in the face of the ethical. In this way, it can be argued that Derrida re-visits Kierkegaard through a Levinasian perspective.

John Caputo goes further, and argues that Derrida's position on Abraham encapsulates his own ambivalent approach towards religion. Caputo claims that for Derrida, Abraham is "the real thing": Abraham who, at the time of the sacrifice, "responded without a moment's hesitation, without expecting any payback" (Caputo 1997, p. 188). Caputo points to Derrida's respect for Abraham's "passion of the faith in the impossible". In this way, Derrida praises the "impossible leap of faith in the face of the impossible" (Caputo 1997, p. 189). Further, Caputo notes Derrida's admiration for the ability of Abraham to face the call of death, as one who "courts death without flinching" (Caputo 1997, p. 179). Is then, Derrida creating some sort of *neo*-existentialism? Caputo would likely respond in the negative, as, for Caputo, this move is decidedly deconstructionist:

> "Everything that Derrida has to say, especially in the most recent work, about the invention of the wholly other, about the passion for the impossible, about a hospitality toward something to come that explodes out of the horizon of expectation, about the promise, the yes, yes, the gift . . . about the justice to come—all that is charged with a religious and messianic force, like a certain Judaism without rabbis and religion, transparently and audibly so, I would say. On this accounting, deconstruction is a certain religion without religion, a non-dogmatic doublet of Judaism . . . ". (Caputo 1997, p. 195)

In Caputo's reading, living with this 'passion for the impossible', the hospitality, the sacrifice, are innately religious features. Unfortunately, Rosenzweig features little in this discussion, whereas Heidegger's place is more prominent—and on this note of a discussion of death, it would have been interesting to see how Caputo would have framed this. Be

that as it may, it links Derrida's portrayal of Abraham as an issue at the heart of his relation to Judaism.[17]

The question then arises as to how far Levinas plays a part in Derrida's commendation of Abraham. Derrida's praise for the trembling Abraham is not devoid in any sense, or obstructive towards, a Levinasian impression of the Sacrifice of Isaac. On the contrary, he is aware of the Levinasian critique throughout his praise of Kierkegaard:

> Absolute responsibility . . . needs to be exceptional, or extraordinary, and it needs to be that absolutely and par excellence . . . The ethical can therefore end up making us irresponsible. (Derrida 1995, p. 60)

Levinas' critique is herein implicit in Derrida's understanding of the Sacrifice of Isaac. The Levinasian critique, Derrida would claim, sheds new light on Abraham's experience in his very transgression of the *Hineni* that Levinas calls for repeatedly:

> The simple concepts of alterity and of singularity constitute the concepts of duty as much as that of responsibility. As a result, the concepts of responsibility, of decision, or of duty, are condemned a priori to paradox, scandal, and aporia. Paradox, scandal, and aporia are themselves nothing other than sacrifice, the revelation of conceptual thinking at its limit, at its death and finitude. (Derrida 1995, p. 68)

Abraham operates in a realm "beyond human responsibility, beyond the universal concept of duty [which] is a response to duty" (Derrida 1995, p. 63). This would also be true in considering Abraham as host—who welcomes guests—which rests upon similar individual characteristics, than offering up one's child for sacrifice; both depend on a strong element of "martyrdom"—a sacrifice of one's own comfort—for the sake of a higher idea: in this case, hospitality. Lipscyz has convincingly linked the idea of 'duty' in the existentialist Abraham with a Levinasian notion of responsibility towards the other. In other words, a strict contradiction between these two positions is inappropriate, because certain ideas of sacrifice, and martyrdom, manifest themselves as qualities inherent both in Kierkegaard, and in Levinas. In this sense, claims Lipscyz:

> "Derrida inscribes the moment of silence, characteristic of true religious existence for Kierkegaard, into the dense texture of the linguistic and communal order envisioned by Rosenzweig. In other words, while belonging to the tradition of Jewish criticism of Kierkegaard, Derrida uses Kierkegaard to balance certain inadequacies". (Lipszyc 2011, p. 102)

I would go further and say that Kierkegaard may even be integral to the deconstructionist reading in this case. I would concur however, with Lipscyz, that Derrida offers an approach combining different modern methodologies in his analysis.

Caputo's analysis even suggests a metaphorical link between Derrida's venture between these methodologies, and the Abrahamic plight. Caputo correlates Derrida with Abraham and claims that "Derrida is trying to head out into the desert". In this space of emptiness and all that the desert represents in biblical imagery, the best one can do is be in check with one's duties and transgressions using Levinas as a compass, wherein deconstructionism would serve as a more fitting categorisation for the Sacrifice in its understanding of giving, duty, and the nature of existence:

> "for deconstruction represents a certain desert-ification of Abraham, of Kierkegaard's Abraham . . . For the religious is the movement of exceeding and transcending ethics". (Caputo 1997, p. 191)

However, what happens out there, in a world of sacrifice, depends on a life of impulse and passion, which are bound up in our very interpretation of such biblical texts. Deconstructionism, accordingly, has a certain resemblance to the Abrahamic plight, insofar as it deals with multiple obligations to thinkers, schools of thought, and methodologies, at the heart of which lies an appreciation for a hermeneutic approach to the study of philosophy. Derrida's justice is innately connected to hermeneutics. It is part of the mediation of exter-

nal "texts" and the impossibility of going beyond or behind or around them. The reader of the text, like Abraham, possesses a certain similarity to "commentary", as he claims:

In the style of commentary, we will try to remain faithful to the themes and audacities of a thought.

And herein I propose that it is possible to read Derrida's hermeneutical community as Abrahamic.[18] Abraham is the pinnacle of the characteristics of collective interpretation, which is:

> Faithful also to its history, whose patience and anxiety capitulate and carry within themselves the reciprocal interrogation of which we wish to speak.[19]

In this sense Abraham can be considered not only as possessing the characteristics of a reader—but Abraham can also be personified as the reader of the text. From this approach, Abraham is a "reader". He 'reads' the sacrificial situation hermeneutically, wherein the guests in the desert, and acts with a justice of alacrity. This is the crux of the Derridean Abraham.

Yet at the heart of this, Derrida's admiration is based on a collective, herein similar to Rosenzweig. The alacrity of Abraham should be collective, in its drive towards justice. He speaks of a "community of the question", and a "community of decision, of initiative, of absolute, of absolute initiality".[20] In this way, Derrida's Abraham rests on an interface between different philosophical methodologies, and as Kutash has suggested:

> In the revelatory moment of the Akedah, the reader of Derrida may think he has heard Derrida's own voice on this matter, but in fact it is Kierkegaard that is the narrative voice. (Kutash 2014)

As Derrida himself writes, there is no understanding the Sacrifice of Isaac without Kierkegaard. However, if another parable of Abraham, such as that in the desert, is taken to be paramount, then perhaps Derrida's call for justice might be heard farther away. As Suzie Gibson has noted, the actual sacrifice as physical encounter is less important for Derrida, as the "secret interior realm of conscience (and consciousness) had already been given up" (Gibson 2009, p. 130).

## 7. Jean-Luc Marion: "Sacrifice Re-Doubles the Gift"

We now turn to address the approach of Jean-Luc Marion. Marion is a Roman Catholic theologian and French Christian theologian and phenomenologist. He was a contemporary of Levinas, and a student of Derrida. Informed by mystical and Patristic scholarship, he came to probe Husserl and Heidegger's phenomenological works, and essentially works to integrate the two. Marion has probed the role of the figural Abraham in his theological phenomenology. The link between Abraham and the phenomenological aspect of the gift, I wish to further pronounce.

A substantial element of Marion's thought is devoted to 'exceeding metaphysics'[21]: a move which seeks to move beyond 'being' as the focus. Marion's 'Saturated phenomenon' constitutes an excess of metaphysics, and thus lends itself to givenness. A resistance to being is expressed in Marion less so as beyond being, but more so as over-being—as exceeding being—which serves as an impetus for reconceptualising being itself, as *relationality.*

Thus, in his analysis of givenness, Marion seeks to re-capture the act of coming forward in visibility.[22] An aesthetic, impressionist, fluid interpretation of what is visible to humanity is, and must be, 'iconic'—for images must be iconic, and not, as he has claimed 'idolatrous' in the wake of elements of the Western metaphysical tradition. As a base position, Marion's project thus far has been to question and overturn empiricist presumptions as wholly unsuitable to theology, since the very discursive methodology of the divine is referred to in terms of 'being-in-the-World'. It has therefore continually been reduced to and objectified as a "concept", thus creating an 'idol' of God.[23] He therefore shifts from the notion of 'God as mathematician' and towards one of 'the God of love'. His precise question is that of "Do you love me?". Such a question, he believes, 'liberates' God from the constrictions of metaphysics and brings theological discourse into the far more suitable arena of gift and

relational. In the God or the humanity of love, relationships stumble and fall, they rise and abate, and as he has noted, "The possibility of loving God admits a condition of possibility: ontological self-mediation (identified with Christ)[24]."

Marion re-interprets theology through a shift in thinking from the scientific notion of "God as mathematician" to "the God of love"[25]—emblematic of a *relational approach to theology*:

> "Such incomprehensible infinity remains accessible only to love; any attempt to grasp it through other means, through conceptual knowledge in particular, will fail".[26]

Planning for the future is mistaken at the outset, as with the nature of human relationships, in their ideal of reciprocity as the highest ideal. In contrast, for Rosenzweig—the divine manifests in the course of life without becoming an object of knowledge. Nevertheless, love, given and received, through relationality and conversation, comprises a move beyond metaphysics.

Marion's approach, like Kierkegaard's, is distinctly Christian. What Marion offers, more so than Derrida, is a relational element to understanding Abraham. Indeed, one could tease out several commonalities between his relational approach and the dialogic thinking of Rosenzweig.

For Marion, as with Levinas and Derrida, there is a strong resistance to the emphasis on given to 'being' in the language of Heidegger and Husserl. The resistance to being is also in common with Rosenzweig—and especially Marion's theological approach based upon this resistance—relationality. Relationality, although quite distinct from Dialogical philosophy, does share certain characteristics with it. We shall pose the question as to how far the relational aspect of the Sacrifice of Isaac, as emphasised by Marion, might express a similar oeuvre to that of dialogical thought. Reciprocity, for Jean-Luc Marion, is an act of self-donation, and thus, a manifestation of the 'command' of love, as Rosenzweig puts it. A reading of this idea will afford a further glimpse into a dialogical approach towards the character of Abraham (Rosenzweig 1985, pp. 176–77).

Marion has his own theory of the Sacrifice of Isaac, drawn from Catholic sources and interpretative perspectives. Marion proposes a phenomenological discussion of sacrifice. He seeks to overcome the dynamics involved in exchange from a *philosophical* perspective. In his critique of exchange, something is given up or relinquished, for the sake of something else. Even, speaking is an act of sacrifice. Further, the meaning of sacrifice in exchange theory changes its meaning to that of a gift. His phenomenological gift theory allows for a different path of considering Abraham. In this way, the sacrifice of Isaac is understood by Marion as a "phenomenology of the gift" (Marion 2011). According to Marion's rendition of the parable, the idea of sacrifice as exchange is cancelled out, and replaced by the phenomenology of the gift.

The question we asked of Derrida, as to the depth of the Levinasian influence, we shall ask too of Marion concurrently. Marion rests upon certain Levinasian ideas in general, and this study is another case in point. However, I suggest a commonality here between Marion and Rosenzweig. Whilst it is unknown to what extent Marion had read Rosenzweig, the move between being and relationality will be explored in light of the sacrifice of Isaac.

Marion claims that in the parable, essentially, many speak of a sacrifice when in fact a sacrifice did not occur.[27] The supposed sacrifice "does not take place, at least if one confines oneself to the common determination of sacrifice . . . " (Marion 2011, p. 51). How does a 'sacrifice not-given' bring into effect a phenomenology of gift?

> Now this is possible only if we grant that this account does not follow the common determination of sacrifice, but instead follows its phenomenological concept—that of sacrifice conceived on the basis of the gift, and of the gift reduced to givenness. It is here that we must therefore locate the concept. (Marion 2011, p. 51)

In a radical move, Marion explains this 'not-sacrifice' as precisely in line with a phenomenology of gift. Isaac had already been given to Abraham and Sarah as a "gift", and

was understood by Abraham to be "the principal among the gifts given by God" (Marion 2011, p. 52). The divine command of God to sacrifice his son was not a demand to relinquish, but rather, a request to take back the gift (Isaac) that had been given;

> Do we have here a sacrifice according to the common concept? Precisely not, because God asks nothing out of the ordinary of Abraham, nor does he enter into any contractual agreement with him; he simply and justifiably takes back Isaac, who already belongs to him . . . . (Marion 2011, p. 51)

Previous ways of thinking about sacrifice, and here Kierkegaard should be kept in mind, must be read with a striking difference. The role of the gift here is crucial. If Isaac was a gift, then a sacrifice as such did not take place. The crux of such a position is developed further by Marion, who argues that God:

> cancels the gift given in a possession, the most original right of the giver to have his gift acknowledged as a gift given, which is to say, simply acknowledged as an always provisional, transferable, and alienable usufruct. (Marion 2011, p. 51)

However, if no sacrifice took place, then one would ask whether such theological attention is due to such a parable. What might be the significance of the parable, without an element of sacrifice? Herein, the idea of re-doubled gift is brought to the fore:

> By sparing Isaac, henceforth recognized (by Abraham) as a gift (from God), *God re-gives Isaac* to him, gives him a second time, presenting a gift by a redounding (*don par une redondance*), which consecrates it definitively as a gift henceforth held in common and, ultimately, transparently between the giver and the recipient. The sacrifice redoubles the gift and confirms it as such for the first time.

Theological attention must be paid to this passage, in terms of the donative relations at work between the divine and the human. The readiness of Abraham to perform the gesture of giving could be understood as an interpretation of humankind as being created in God's image.

The nature of the gift for Marion is constant. We give when we speak, we give "without ceasing" (Marion 2005, p. 105). A particular point of comparison with Rosenzweig would be this continual and unexpected nature of giving as dialogue, and giving through dialogue. Gift in conversation is "unconditional possibility". It resembles, according to Marion, "fatherhood" which he describes as not a simply biological effort (Marion 2005, p. 117). It is a phenomenon of an unmerited gift of grace—it is "an exemplary role among all given phenomena: that of the given that itself gives" (Marion 2005, pp. 118–19). This reading, according to Marion, of Abraham is similar in certain senses to Rosenzweig—through a stress on relationality.

## 8. Conclusions

I have traced elements of philosophical trajectories of religious existentialism in its partial shift towards Dialogical Philosophy, according to the case study of treatments of the biblical character of Abraham. It has been proposed that the move from existentialism to dialogical thought, as illuminated by Rosenzweig, portrays Abraham as a figure of dialogue. As such, his dialogic characteristics are highlighted over and above those of a Kierkegaardian Knight of Faith. So far this is the case. It is also true that the turn to the other of Levinas and others comes to be held up as the dialogical philosophy, in many respects a continuation of Rosenzweig's thought. It is apparent in Rosenzweig that he admires the passionate religious fervour of Kierkegaard, even though he makes a turn to dialogue. For Levinas, he admires Kierkegaard's resistance to Being, and in a sense, his Abraham is Levinas' ultimate figure of *Hineni*—of alacrity. Conversely, Levinas is repulsed by the violence invoked by religion, and argues that the height of the story is when Abraham turns to the idea of the potential victim and corrects the unethical order. Derrida also draws on Kierkegaardian elements of the Abraham of the Sacrifice of Isaac. In so doing, Derrida portrays a more complex picture, complicating the move from existentialism towards a dialogical mode. Derrida wishes to hold both the passion of Abraham, and the ethical

pull, in the same hand, for a contemporary philosophical engagement with Abraham. Marion's conception of Gift in this instance too, in a sense relaying Rosenzweigian themes of relationality, further complexifies a strict move from existentialism to dialogue. As part of this, theological understandings of the significance of the sacrifice of Isaac are re-claimed in a sense from a phenomenological perspective.

According to this philosophical trajectory, it has been shown that elements of existentialism have either remained, or have been re-claimed. These ideas certainly can be construed in treatments of the Abrahamic figure of this study. We seem to have come far from the original Kierkegaard. Or have we not? It has been shown that Kierkegaardian thought *itself* was not completely 'at one' with the existentialism it is claimed to have put forward. Perhaps interpretations of Kierkegaard have focused on particular elements of existentialism which have, in some ways, rendered readers somewhat blind to the discrepancies in *Fear and Trembling*. Does this present some sort of revivification of existentialism in later philosophical interpretation? This study calls for a more nuanced reading of continental philosophical trends, which often place existentialism at a certain point in history. Additionally, religious existentialism must now be re-visited with an original search for dialogical philosophical elements.

**Funding:** This research received no external funding.

**Institutional Review Board Statement:** Not applicable.

**Informed Consent Statement:** Not applicable.

**Data Availability Statement:** Not applicable.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The author declares no conflict of interest.

## Notes

1 An earlier version of this paper was presented at the conference: Wir wissen auch jetzt noch nichts von Gott: Transcendence and Revelation on the centenary of Franz Rosenzweig's Star of Redemption at the University of Coimbra, Portugal, in 2021, and at the International Conference for Franz Rosenzweig, Jerusalem, in 2019.

2 Genesis 22: 1–19.

3 For a parallel discussion on the influence of Nietzsche on modern Jewish thinkers, see Rynhold and Harris (2018), where the Nietzschean effects on Joseph Dov Soloveitchik are explored. See also a review of the book by Miriam Feldmann Kaye, suggesting that the method of seeking Jewish responses to Nietzsche might be applied more broadly, DAAT: A Journal of Jewish Philosophy & Kabbalah 90 (2020), pp. XXXI–XXXV. This article could perhaps be expanding on such an approach.

4 Franz Rosenzweig, Star of Redemption, p. 176.

5 Ephraim Meir, Existentialist Figures in Dialogue, p. 92.

6 Rosenzweig—199.

7 See notes 6 above.

8 Levinas (1996a), p. 74 and repeated on p. 77.

9 Specifically on the idea of Abraham as exiled vis a vis hospitality. Edith Wyschogrod notes that "the aporias of the Abrahamic narrative require further exploration". She continues to a critique of hosting and hospitality in relation to Abraham as host. See Edith Wyschogrod, Autochthony and Welcome: Discourses of Exile in Lévinas and Derrida in Sherwood and Hart (2004), pp. 53–61.

10 Referring to Genesis 18: 20–33. Meir cited in Lin (2014), p. 26. Rosenzweig also addresses the role of Abraham in Sodom, in particular the moral development of one's character when in dialogue with God.

11 Genesis 18: 1–16.

12 My italics. The connection here to Levinas (1990b) is cited in Ephraim Meir, Faith in the Plural, p. 124.

13 This could well be compared to philosophical approaches to the figure of Moses, who too, is an outsider, and is given the task of leadership. On the point of an existential 'I' who undergoes transformation, see Miriam Feldmann Kaye, "The Bush Burned with Fire and the Bush Was Not Consumed" "Anatheism" from a Jewish Theological Perspective: A Dialogic Study of Richard Kearney's Critique of the Burning Bush (Exodus 3) Journal of Religion and Theology, Vol. 28 (Leiden: Brill), 2021, pp. 125–52.

14 Jacques Derrida, Violence and Metaphysics, Writing and Difference, p. 101.

15 See note 14 above.

16 "Derrida is already implicitly in dialogue with Levinas. Abraham is classically the iconic figure for ethical subjectivity in Levinas's work, . . . the figure of Abraham represents a true exteriority", Sarah Hammerschlag, Another, Other Abraham: Derrida's Figuring of Levinas's Judaism, p. 78.

17 For an excellent discussion of Derrida's Jewish identity and deconstructionism, see the study which also draws upon the Sacrifice of Isaac: Emilie Kutash, Journal for Scriptural Reasoning The Teshuvah of Jacques Derrida: Judaism Hors-texte | Journal of Textual Reasoning (virginia.edu).

18 One could potentially bring in his writing on Gift as an amalgamation of some of these methodologies, see Derrida (1992), esp. 6–33.

19 Jacques Derrida, Violence and Metaphysics, Writing and Difference, p. 104.

20 Jacques Derrida, Violence and Metaphysics, Writing and Difference, p. 98.

21 Gschwandtner provides an overview of critiques of Marion's theology such as that of John Milbank (4), in pp. 5–9, Gschwandtner, 2007. See also Graham Ward in The Theological Project of Jean-Luc Marion' pp. 229–39 in Blond, 1998.

22 Nielsen (2005), p. 5. Cynthia R. Nielsen: 'Review of Being Given: Towards a Phenomenology of Givenness the spectacle', 49.

23 Carlson, in Vanhoozer, p. 64.

24 11, Marion, 2008 in 'The Possible and Revelation'.

25 163, Marion, 2007 'On the Ego and On God'.

26 169, Marion, 2007. Ego.

27 Levinas also stated this, as mentioned above; however, his intent was different: it was to highlight the victimhood of Isaac, and to exemplify the turn to the Other.

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