

Saying the Sacred: Notes Towards a Phenomenology of Prayer

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Oh Einsamkeit! Du meine Heimat Einsamkeit! Zu lange lebte ich wild
in wilder Fremde, als dass ich nicht mit Thränen zu dir heimkehrte!

Nietzsche, *Also sprach Zarathustra III*

Introduction

On the first page of Augustine's *Confessions*, the author turns to God in a gesture of prayer. "Great art though, O Lord, and greatly to be praised."¹ And a few lines further down he calls out the famous words: "Grant me, Lord, to know and understand what I ought first to do, whether to call upon thee, or to praise thee? and which ought to be first, to know thee, or to call upon thee?" Before he begins to speak of God and of the many questions and themes to which the *Confessions* are devoted, the writer calls out to the transcendent other, to grant him the power and ability to speak and to think. The premise here is that human finite reason cannot hope to grasp the nature of the divine, unless it has already been granted this ability by the very same divinity, in an event of grace. Before claiming to understand, reason must first open itself to the possibility of a gift of understanding, in an act of faith. This faith is manifested in an act of praise and of prayer, of a manifested devotion toward that same divinity, which reason is at the same time trying to understand. In an exemplary way Augustine thus establishes the configuration of faith and reason, as mutually implicative of one another, in a way that will resonate all throughout the philosophy of the middle ages.

1. St. Augustine's *Confessions*, trans. W. Watts, Loeb Library, London and Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1989, 3.

How can a speaker be sure that what he prays to and what he praises is indeed the true divinity, or indeed that there is such an addressee in the first place? This is the hermeneutic riddle and paradox of all belief, that the believer cannot simply claim to *know* God, what he or it is, and what a proper relation to the divinity amounts too. There can be no certainty on this territory, except in the hardened minds and eyes of dogmatic preachers. The believer must rely on and pray to a God, the nature of which he cannot be certain, but the relation to which is at the same time established in the very act of devotion and reliance. To show devotion in prayer is literally to seek a God, and to seek to establish a relation to this God, but without certainty that what is prayed to is indeed what the believer thinks it is, or that it is something at all. One could go even further and suggest, that the extent to which a God is present in a human life, is ultimately manifested in the praying act of devotion itself. For praying is an existential comportment in and through which man establishes a relation to what he holds to be divine, indeed, the mode in which this relation comes to presence, in all its precarious uncertainty. In all religious cultures, throughout their differing liturgies and metaphysical narratives, the presence of prayer, of devotional, vocative discourse appears to be a constant. The meaning of the divine, and thus the meaning of the relation between man and the divine can hardly be determined outside this space of lived devotion in prayer. To explore and explicate prayer, in a phenomenological spirit, thus appears to be a central issue for any phenomenology of religion.

Supposing we cannot hope to understand and articulate either the meaning of the sacred, nor what we commonly speak of as “a religious experience,” apart from the activity of prayer, then the phenomenology of prayer emerges as a key theme for anyone seeking to explore the meaning of religion. Its exploration does not, however, necessarily restrict us to what is commonly recognized as the sphere of the religious. In fact, it opens up a larger field of questions, concerned with what we could tentatively speak of as “devotional discourse,” but also “inspirational discourse,” in which the writing subjects turn from a descriptive to a vocative mode, in the search for its own voice and for expanded possibilities of articulation. In a beautiful passage in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, Book III, “Before sunrise,” Zarathustra calls out to

the “sky above me,” speaking to this sky: “and when I wandered alone. For whom was my soul yearning when it had gone astray in the night? And when I climbed the mountains, whom was I seeking, if not you.” In this discourse, Zarathustra is seeking to “fly into” that which can also permit him to become this sky, to be part of its blessing, as itself a blesser, whose message it is that “no eternal will wants something over and through them.” In this non-theistic discourse, the voice of the speaking subject seeks itself in and through a devotional gesture of praise and hope. Or more correctly, it drifts seamlessly between different discursive modes, between analysis, satire, reflection, narration, and praise.

The question of the *what* of prayer cannot be handled only within the confines of an economy of theology, nor of philosophy for that matter, but it carries over into the larger problem of poetic language as a whole. In a recent study, partly inspired by the new phenomenological theology of John Caputo, a scholar of eighteenth century literature, Lori Branch, explores the rise of the so-called movement of “free prayer” which followed upon the reformer’s dismantling of the traditional liturgy of the English church. She traces the emergence of a whole literature of methods of free prayer, in which the individual, spontaneous expression of communion with God is called upon by Christian reformers.² She explores this literature as the root of a more-literary-oriented culture of spontaneity, issuing from Shaftsbury, up

2. Lori Branch, *Rituals of Spontaneity*, Waco: Baylor University Press, 2006, 45 passim. Branch also has a good argument about how the so-called religious post-modernity, or the influence of post-modern thought on theology has opened up, not only a possibility to return to an intellectual exploration of religion, but also to the nature of the secular, implying that it is part of the critical-deconstructive approach, that it brings to awareness the situated and embedded nature of the secularism itself found in a Christian modernity. So it is from within the self-critique, and self-awareness that a new discourse and dialogue can emerge, as the exploration of and for the new, which is not a restoration, but a development of religious thinking. She sees Caputo’s work as a promise, in the sense that it tries to articulate a basic premise of belief, a kind of pre-religious, or rather pre-confessional belief, which has to do with having a future. This analysis, in many ways inspired by a phenomenological approach, destabilizes the idea of clearly demarcated space of secular reason and language.

to the romantics.³ The historical connection between free prayer and poetry had been explored already earlier, notably in Brémonds *Prière et Poésie*, from 1926, which took a more psychological perspective on this constellation.⁴ The more specific search for a phenomenology of prayer has also been explored recently, e.g., in an anthology from 2005, *The Phenomenology of Prayer*, building partly on the work of Jean-Louis Chrétien, but also on Derrida, Caputo, and Marion. I will return subsequently to several of the articles in this volume.

The movement of the present text runs as follows. It starts with discussing in broader terms the task of a phenomenology of religion, eventually focusing on Heidegger's lectures from 1920. The next section initiates a discussion of prayer in more general phenomenological terms, starting with Aristotle's distinction between propositional and non-propositional discourse, and the problem of truth. It leads over to an analysis of the specific disclosive comportment of the one who prays, which compares it to begging and trading. Eventually the analysis insists on the central role of praise in prayer, as a way toward a different kind of existential posture, whereby the subject turns him- or herself into a recipient. Through a discussion of an essay by Merold Westphal, praying is explored as a way toward a de-centering of the subject and of the self, a paradoxical receptivity through emptying, and an affirmation of an existential vulnerability. In the fourth and final section this argument is brought to bear on the experience of inspiration as articulated by Nietzsche in regard to the writing of *Zarathustra*.

3. From the perspective of this contextualization of the expressive poetry of romanticism, she can also challenge the inherited view of a discontinuity in the work of Wordsworth (as well as in several of the other romantics) between an early embrace of spontaneous expression of feeling and a later embrace of ritual and traditional liturgy. See *ibid.*, 177.

4. In Brémond's analysis, poetry, in a qualified sense, was seen as equivalent to the mystical experience, in a shared sense of catharsis. Brémond interpreted this equivalence in psychological and epistemological terms, inspired by both Jungian psychoanalysis and Bergson's philosophy of intuition. Poetry and mysticism is thus described as the practice of a certain psychological mechanism, which brings us intuitively in relation to the real through a fusion of the masculine and feminine spirit, the *animus* and *anima*.

I

Let me first formulate a few principal points concerning the general premises for a phenomenology of religion. I do not speak from a confessional standpoint. But neither do I speak from a clearly defined non-confessional, or principally atheist position, supposedly associated with the ethos of a modern rationality. Neither is the purpose one of trying to reintroduce religion, through phenomenology, into philosophy again. The analysis seeks to be true to the ethos of phenomenology, in trying to bring concrete experience to articulation, by following in thought the movement of life in a sympathetic hermeneutic-historical disclosure of its inherent meaning. The task of a phenomenological explication of experience is to access and follow it from within its lived concreteness. Phenomenology, as Heidegger writes in *Sein und Zeit*, is a *legen ta phainomena*, a speaking of that which shows itself from within itself. But the route to this experience is never guaranteed.⁵ Life is closest and at the same time furthest away from itself. This is the formulation of Heidegger, but it is already a profound lesson in Husserl, who calls us to practice a reduction in regard to inherited presuppositions in order to access the field of lived intentionality.

In the introductory remarks to his lecture course on the phenomenology of religious life from 1920, Heidegger emphasizes that the phenomenological question of method is not a question of an appropriate methodological system, but precisely of access, that passes through factual [*faktische*] life experience.⁶ A phenomenology of religious life is not a theory *about* the religious, conceived of as an object of study in the standard mode of a science of religion, but rather as a way of entering, in understanding, the religious as a type of meaning-fulfillment or enactment. It is not a psychological theory of religious experiences, but an explication of the meaning of religion, which therefore does not immediately need to take sides along confessional lines. Instead the confessional, as the meaning of devotion, is itself among the phenomena to be investigated. Nor does it take a definitive stance in regard to the distinction between rationality and irrationality, as if the

5. *Sein und Zeit*, [1927] Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1984, §7.

6. *Phänomenologie des religiösen Lebens*, Gesamtausgabe vol. 60, Frankfurt am Main: Klostermann, 1995.

religious, once and for all, could be located in the latter. The phenomenological understanding, as Heidegger rightly emphasizes, lies beyond this distinction.⁷ In a phenomenological analysis belongs the preparedness to allow that the basic, organizing concepts, remain undecided. This is the case not only of “reason,” or “rationality,” but also, of “the religious” as such. It is on the condition that we do not force a conceptuality onto a phenomenon that this phenomenon can begin to speak and have sense on its own terms. Such an explication can also permit the non-understandable to be understandable, precisely by letting-be [*belassen*] its non-understandability.⁸ Speaking in the terms of Husserl, we should try to investigate these phenomena in “bracketing” their realist, or metaphysical, implications.

Such a mode of analysis is of course very precarious. First of all, it can easily be equated with simply a psychological theory, just as phenomenology was and is still often misunderstood only to constitute a theory of psychic life. But the critique of psychology, in the sense of a study of the human psyche, lies at the root of phenomenology, as developed by Husserl earlier in *Logical Investigations*. A phenomenology of experience is *not a theory of the psyche* in the ordinary sense of psychology, but an exploration of experience in terms of the *how* of its meaning-fulfillment. This is the great achievement of phenomenology: that it developed a conceptual articulation of the life of the *psyche*, which is not reductive in the sense of modern science and psychology, but which at the same time does not commit us to the domain of the esoteric. Phenomenology provides the most consistent vocabulary to give word to the life of the spiritual, and in this sense it is the natural meeting ground for contemporary work in theology, religion, humanities, as well as in the arts. For I think it is also very important when we discuss the religious, this vast and amorphous territory, that we do not forget that this is also a territory of the aesthetical. Literature, music, architecture, and art are the principal forms in which what is recognized as divine has been brought to a living presence throughout the history of religious practices.

In attempting to approach phenomenologically the Christian, reli-

7. *Ibid.*, 79.

8. *Ibid.*, 131.

gious experience, Heidegger takes the exemplary case of Paul's letters, in which he traces its basic existential comportment primarily in terms of its relation to the past, present, and future. Faith is understood as a mode of relating, from within which existence articulates its historical position. The Christian experience is a mode of living time, as Heidegger also writes.⁹ The premise for this kind of explication of meaning is that the conceptual resources of philosophy are not totally fixed in advance, but, on the contrary, that they can, on the one hand be generated from within the problematic itself, but also that we can realize them as indicative concepts, which do not pretend to objectify their matter, but rather function as pointers in the direction of a fulfillment of a meaning. It is also important not to mix this approach with that of an *Einführung*, as Heidegger remarks.¹⁰ Rather it is a question of articulating the character of the *situation* from within which, e.g., Paul speaks to his congregation in the making. To this situation belongs precariousness, that it is without certainty, that he does not speak from within knowledge, but from within hope, wakefulness, apprehension, etc. In this way Heidegger works himself towards the meaning of the Paulinian discourse, as characterized by a temporal horizon of the *parousia*, not primarily as a theological dogma, but as a lived meaning horizon. It requires that we set aside the traditional interpretations, as well as the dogmatic explications, and listen instead for an experience as it takes shape.

Only from the standpoint of such an understanding is it possible to develop, also in a critical sense, the meaning that is realized here. Just as phenomenology in its Husserlian sense presupposes a bracketing of the dogmatic and realistic interpretation of phenomena in order to experience their meaning, so Heidegger also works in relation to the fulfillment of a religious existence. We set aside the question of dogma, and permit the meaning of the explication to unravel itself. The premise here is that religious dogma is rather to be seen as the posterior elaboration of the themes as they are first articulated. Furthermore dogma can also be critically assessed in relation to a tentative explication of the meaning of the phenomenon in question. This strategy is

9. *Ibid.*, 82

10. *Ibid.*, 88.

very visible in Heidegger's reading of Paul, who is not seen as speaking in a theoretical-dogmatic way in the first place, and also inversely, that it is only from within Paul's articulation of Christian life experience that the very genesis and significance of subsequent dogma can be interpreted.¹¹

In his reading of Paul, Heidegger focuses primarily on the eschatological temporality of the early Christian life experience, and in his subsequent reading of Augustine he turns his interest primarily to the themes of temptation and various modes of falling. In both cases we can trace a close connection to his own existential ontology or analytic of facticity as this is elaborated during the same time. He does not, however, take an explicit interest in prayer as something indicative of Christian life experience, despite the fact that the role of prayer is emphasized in several of the letters, e.g., in 1 Thessalonians and in Romans, where Paul speaks of a praying without ceasing, and of a persevering in prayer.¹² This lacunae in Heidegger's reading has been addressed by Benjamin Crowe in an essay entitled "Heidegger and the prospect of a phenomenology of prayer."¹³ Crowe stresses how central prayer is to the evangelists, as well as to Paul. His point is that the emphasis on eschatology and wakefulness before the uncertainty of the *parousia*, precisely as explored by Heidegger, is in fact concretized in the way in which the congregation is encouraged to pray, to keep awake, alert, and prepared. Summarizing his analysis, Crowe writes of how we, through Heidegger's own analysis, can understand the meaning of prayer in the early Christian community as part of a whole new life orientation, in which it becomes "part of a whole pattern of life, a pattern that is best understood as a joyful response to the gift of freedom and new intimacy with God."

In Crowe's reading, Heidegger's criticism of the standard objectifying mode of understanding implies, in the end, that the interpreter also lives the concepts that are to be understood. So an authentic hermeneutics of prayer also will be a call to prayer.¹⁴ However, in say-

11. *Ibid.*, 112.

12. *Ibid.*, 129.

13. In *The Phenomenology of Prayer*, eds. B. E. Benson and N. Wirzba, 2005.

14. *Ibid.*, 131.

ing this, he moves too quickly in the end. It is one thing to conclude, as he also does, that religious concepts, make sense only as “practice,” and that their meaning dawns on us in living them out. But the work of the phenomenological analysis is to bring this enactment-meaning, this meaning-to-be-enacted, to explicit articulation, not just to give way to their adopted practice, and especially not simply to affirm their dogmatic, theoretical extension. An unfortunate aspect of some of the work in the recent upsurge of the phenomenology of religion, not just in Marion, but also in the writings of Caputo and Vattimo, is a tendency to use a phenomenological explication to justify in the end an affirmation of Christian and theistic doctrine. It is in the detailed working out of the enactment-meaning of what is supposedly a religious concept or a religious practice, that phenomenology can contribute to the understanding of religion, and in the end also open a philosophical space of discourse on the nature of the sacred. And this presupposes that no fixed theological framework is established, or re-established exterior to the experience itself, but that rather it can be understood from within its enactment. Only through such an approach can we see how the existential-hermeneutical interpretation of prayer can also give way to an understanding of the confessional, which itself is not confessional. It is toward such a precarious attempt that the notes presented here are directed, still in a very tentative way.

II

Let us now take one step back and address first in more principal terms the phenomenon of prayer. What is prayer? A common reference in the writings on this topic is the brief passage in Aristotle’s *De Interpretatione* (16b), which defines the sentence, the *logos*, as the meaningful speech, *phone semantike*, which is an affirmation or a denial, *apophasis* or *kataphasis*. Not all sentences, however, can rightly be called “propositions,” which is the standard translation of Aristotle’s *logos apophantikos*, a showing or demonstrating speech. For to be a proposition implies that it can be true or false, in the previously defined sense of saying how it is, or how it is not. As an example of a sentence which is not *apophantikos* Aristotle then mentions prayer, *euche*, from *euchomai*, meaning to pray, wish, or vow, but also to declare. It is not obvious by

means of what term Aristotle's remark should be translated, by prayer, vow, or proclamation. But the general point here is that these types of sentences, which do not aspire to truth or falsity, fall outside the scope of his investigation in this particular treatise. He explicitly says that they belong to another domain, namely that of poetics and rhetoric.

The historical and principal importance of this analysis can hardly be underestimated. It establishes a strict distinction between that which can have a truth-value — to speak in modern Fregean terms — and that which cannot. A prayer, of whatever kind, is not a sentence that aspires to truth since it belongs to a whole different kind of discourse. In Aristotle's terminology, as it is commonly understood and transmitted, truth and falsity have to do with being, or with how it is. In *Metaphysics* (1051b) he writes: "To say that what is is, and that what is not is not, is true." In other words, truth has to do with being, with saying being, how it is. In speaking the truth, our words give words to being, or perhaps one should say that they let being be what it is in words. Taken in a strict definition, prayer is precisely what cannot be true, for it does not say how it is. Instead it expresses a wish or a hope, of how it should be. And a wish cannot be true in the sense that a statement about what is the case can be true. This is undoubtedly so. And Aristotle's famous definition has also proven to be surprisingly stable. Truth has to do with being, with how it is, as accounted for in speech. This is also how Husserl and Heidegger reconnect to the ancient tradition in their respective discussions of truth. Yet starting with Husserl, and developed much further by Heidegger, it is precisely in and around the issue of *truth* that phenomenology opens up an avenue for discussing language and, being so, makes room for a more differentiated understanding of what we could call the truthfulness of non-propositional discourse, including prayer.

Husserl's phenomenological analysis of truth is developed primarily in *Logical Investigations VI*, to which Heidegger would often refer with great respect. Summarizing in very brief terms the point of his analysis, it seeks to explore the intentional structure of the acts by means of which something is made to appear as true. Through intentional analysis, Husserl can transgress the standard, static correspondence theory, where truth is only the correspondence or correlation between statement and fact. Instead he can show how truth has to do

with the very emergence of the object as true, in and through a system of intentional acts. It is on the basis of this analysis that phenomenology can also be spoken of as an *aletheiology*, a discourse on the becoming of truth, as a discourse on appearing in general. From the phenomenological standpoint we can never take for granted the existence and nature of an objective world in itself, except as an ideal correlate of our acts. The world is the world as manifestation, as appearing, as coming to presence, in and through the active participation of subjectivity.

Husserl's analyses in the sixth logical investigation serve as a premise also for Heidegger, as can be seen from his positive remarks in §44 of *Sein und Zeit*. But in Heidegger's case the phenomenological-existential reformulation of truth takes its lead also from Aristotle, but not the Aristotle of the correspondence theory in *Metaphysics*, but from the famous line in *Nicomachean Ethics Book VI*, where he speaks of the different ways in which the soul has truth, or brings about truth, *aletheuein*, not just in *theoria*, but also in *phronesis* and *techne*. For the development of the existential ontology of Heidegger the interpretation of this line is pivotal. It permits him to connect the intentional analysis of meaning-enactment to the ancient, logical, tradition in the exploration of human existence as a living disclosure of being. Man does not have truth only to the extent that he has access to correct propositional sentences representing reality. The movement of life is a movement of understanding, and of disclosure, of making true, in a way that can eventually coalesce in discourse and theoretical statements. And the understanding which is brought about in the course of life is an understanding which is never only theoretical but also always attuned in a comportment, a *Befindlichkeit*.

Through this analysis, which is here summarized in extreme brevity, the strict distinction between the truthful and the non-truthful, elicited from Aristotle's formulation in *Metaphysics*, and implied in the brief remark on prayer in *De Interpretatione*, is not cancelled, but made problematic in a new and more differentiated way. If we look upon scientific and theoretical discourse as one mode in which the disclosing concern, the *Sorge* as *Erschlossenheit*, is lived, then we have a very different situation for interpreting various types of discourses, compared to when the propositional in a strict sense is what defines what can have truth. Not least does it open up the possibility of discussing art

in general, and poetry in particular, precisely as modes of making true. In the analysis of the seminal essay "The Origin of the Work of Art" from 1935, this is precisely how Heidegger approaches the question of art, beyond the traditional aesthetic categories of form and matter, namely as a way of making true, of bringing about an opening in and through which being is made manifest.

In what way could prayer be explored as also a way of making true, of bringing about truth, or letting truth happen? This seems to me to be the most appropriate way of posing the question of prayer from an existential-phenomenological perspective. In the following section I try to develop an answer, first in more Husserlian terms, searching for the intentional act-structure of prayer.

III

What kind of act is prayer? At a first level it would seem to be an intentionality that relates to a non-present object in the mode of want or desire. In praying for something, we ask for that which we do not have, happiness, wealth, health, for ourselves and for our kin, etc. This is the most elementary form of prayer. Structurally it would seem similar to asking someone to give us something, and to give it for free. Another name for this is begging. Seen from the outside prayer would seem to have the intentionality of begging. The beggar cannot compensate for the demanded gift in any other way than through humbling himself, showing his gratitude in gestures of subjection and exaggerated asymmetrical respect and praise. The subject desires what it does not have, thus placing it in a position of servitude in regard to the one that has what oneself does not have.

In a secular setting the role of the beggar is that of the miserable man, for whom it can be a virtue among the more affluent to feel and express pity, but whose own existence is looked upon as wretched. But in many religiously defined cultures the role of the beggar has also been raised to the level of a human ideal, as in the practice of beggar-monks, who live the life of the wretched and dispossessed as a freely chosen fate. In this case the role of the one who needs and who is prepared to receive the help of others is inverted into an ideal. The fact of this ideal is one way to approach further the phenomenology of

prayer. In the case of the monk, the kind of subjectivity which manifests itself in expressed need and exposure, cannot be understood along the lines of the intentionality of begging in the first, everyday sense. For whereas the beggar, who begs from within a desperate need, is a wretched being, the monk manifests his spirituality through *askesis*, training, as a free choice, to live a life in need.

Let us now look closer at the phenomenon of prayer in the religious sense, and see how it differs from the attitude of the beggar as the one who simply cannot pay for what he wants. In prayer the words are directed towards a being who is not an equal human being, but of a totally different standing and nature. It is of course possible to interpret and even to live this prayer in the mode of inter-human begging. We can direct our prayers to God, as little children, in which we express our wishes and try to think out how we, with our very limited means, can pay for what we ask, for example by performing good deeds, or simply by delivering something of ourselves in return, in other words to sacrifice something of ourselves, e.g., our desires. Already in *Eutyphro* Plato ridiculed this form of prayer as a kind of misplaced trading skill between men and Gods.¹⁵ In this mode of prayer, as a negotiation of deeds and things, we are still in a closed economy, which produces sacrifice and violence, in the end on the self. But if we take the analysis one step further, we can see that the phenomenon of prayer is not restricted to such an economy of exchanges with an asymmetrical other, modeled on the experience of begging, or for that matter, trading.

First of all we must note what many analyses of prayer emphasize, and which can also be easily exemplified, namely that prayer tend to be divided in two distinct modes: that of praise, and that of asking for a gift of supplication. A prayer is often both, as in the case of Augustine, who turns to the Lord, in praise — “great are thou o Lord” — and then in the next line, asking for a gift, in this case a gift of understanding: “great are thou o Lord, and grant me to understand.” The same movement is followed in the the prayer “Our Father”, which opens with the lines “Our Father who is in heaven, hallowed be Your name” and which then continues with a supplication for bread and for

15. *Eutyphro*, 14e.

forgiveness. Also Zarathustra's prayer in the third book opens also with praise: "O, heaven above me, so pure! so deep! You light-abys" ["*Oh Himmel über mir, du Reiner! Tiefer! Du Licht-Abgrund*"].¹⁶

To praise is on one level to enter into a relation of evaluation, where value is conferred to that which is being bespoken. But the deeper existential sense of praise, in the case of prayer, would seem to have to do with the transformation of the one who praises, rather than with the determination of the object praised. For in praising, the praiser also opens his being to the presence and gift of this value. He does not simply conclude and note it, but he lets it come into presence. To praise is to give something, to give recognition, to give appreciation and love, but as such it is also and at the same time to make oneself available for that which is being praised. Such is the logic also of a discourse of love and friendship, that it cannot be understood only from a solipsistic standpoint, as one relating to another, but also as making oneself available to the life of the other.

In a contribution in the volume on *The Phenomenology of Prayer*, James R. Mensch tries to approach prayer in terms of giving way to the sacred, through a kind of emptying, oriented by the *kenosis*, mentioned by Paul in Phil. 2.7. In Paul this is the act of God emptying himself into the world in the shape of a slave. In one sense the sacred is beyond the region of phenomenality, and as such in principal beyond the reach of a phenomenology. But in another sense the sacred is precisely that which comes into the world, taking place and shape, in other words becomes incarnated. The crucifixion can then also be interpreted as a second such emptying, in which the most valuable and laudable takes on the meaning of nothingness, and precisely in this self-sacrifice manifests itself. The point of the argument here is that in order to have an encounter with such a divinity, man must perform a kind of second emptying, one that opens itself to a different kind of receptivity.¹⁷ This emptying, in order to provide space for the holy and

16. *Also sprach Zarathustra*, Kritische Studienausgabe IV, Berlin: De Gruyter, 1988, 207. English trans. G. Parkes', *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005, 141.

17. "Prayer as Kenosis," in Benson, Bruce and Norman Wirzba, eds., *The Phenomenology of Prayer*, New York: Fordham University Press, 2005, 67.

for the other, is then also interpreted along the lines of enacting a sympathy, a suffering with and for the other, so as to make room for him or her. The sacrifice of Christ, the absolutely innocent victim, becomes the model for this kind of existential comportment, which imitates the divine kenosis, so as to “share the unfathomable generosity of God’s kenosis.”¹⁸

This argument has a limited value for a more general interpretation of prayer since it presupposes in too high a degree a specific mythical interpretation of the passion of Christ. Yet, it points to an important existential aspect of prayer precisely in the theme of self-emptying as a way towards a different kind of receptivity. As a mode of discourse prayer would then not be seen as fundamentally concerned with asking for something, but rather as a way for subjectivity to give way, to transcend its self-centeredness, to open itself up to a gift. In another contribution to the same volume, Merold Westphal addresses this theme in less definitive terms, showing how prayer can point the way toward what he speaks of precisely as a “decentered self.”¹⁹ He refers to a formulation by Jean-Louis Chrétien about prayer as a form of speech whereby we present ourselves before an invisible other. In his elaboration of this theme, he shows how this presentation of oneself is also at the same time a transcendence with regard to oneself, and as such an emptying, a kenosis. The self that asks in prayer for forgiveness is not asking to be without guilt and thus restored in its self-assuredness, but it is a self that seeks to be more deeply “de-centered,” as he writes.²⁰ This de-centering he understands primarily from the perspective of the intersubjectivity of prayer. As long as prayer is a prayer for something that should satisfy or strengthen one, it works in the region of self-centeredness. But, when it is addressed to a You, as Chrétien also writes, it changes the posture of the praying subject. It is no longer a desire to have somebody as one’s object, but instead to demonstrate one’s vulnerability in the face of another, of an alterity.²¹

18. *Ibid.*

19. “Prayer as the Posture of the Decentered Self,” in Benson, Bruce and Norman Wirzba, eds., *The Phenomenology of Prayer*, New York: Fordham University Press, 2005.

20. *Ibid.*, 26.

21. *Ibid.*, 29.

At this point, however, Westphal too turns his finely tuned phenomenological discourse into a more confessional mode, asking concretely what this means in terms of the relation established between man and God in prayer. He writes: "Let us return to the supposition that the you to whom I address these words is God."²² But we should be careful to let the analysis slip into this mode of affirming the nature of the addressee. For the important point that he then makes is that the You, to whom prayer is often directed, is not a person to be *had* by oneself, but rather the one to which one hopes to *belong*. As Westphal formulates it: "But the only way to take this gift is to place ourselves at God's disposal, to give not this or that but our very selves to God."²³ He comments also on how both Kierkegaard, Derrida, and Marion, in different ways touch upon this paradox of taking through giving, of receiving through dispossession of the self. He sees it as a miracle, and a transubstantiation, which ultimately escapes full conceptual comprehension, and also the ability of the will.

In this thoughtful analysis, Westphal brings us close to a core phenomenon, which deserves careful reflection and whose lead we can follow while bracketing its dogmatic content. Religion has to do with living in gratitude, in hope, and in need, in a sense in "sin," understood as the recognition of one's finitude. The voice of prayer could be interpreted as the living linguistic expression for this life. It incarnates an existential predicament, setting the subject in motion, opening up its capacity for experiencing this predicament. Who has never prayed, who has never been moved by prayer, who has never rejoiced in gratitude and wonder at what is, and who has not at the same time profoundly experienced the limited nature of all creatures, their desperate exposure and loneliness before the totality of it all, will perhaps not be able to enter this space. But this is not to say that one has to belong to a confession or congregation in order to access and thus to be able to reflect on this experience.

22. *Ibid.*

23. *Ibid.*

IV

In Nietzsche's autobiography *Ecce Homo*, there is a passage, relating to the writing of *Zarathustra*, in which he discusses the experience of "inspiration." I quote the long passage, for it speaks so eloquently of an experience which is not only at the heart of his philosophical-poetic expression, but which also relates in profound ways to the core phenomenon of prayer as it emerged in the previous section.

Has anyone at the end of the nineteenth century a clear idea of what poets of strong ages have called inspiration? If not, I will describe it. — If one had the slightest residue of superstition left in one's system, one could hardly reject altogether the idea that one is merely incarnation, merely mouthpiece, merely a medium of overpowering forces. The concept of revelation — the sense that suddenly, with indescribable certainty and subtlety, something becomes visible, audible, something that shakes one to the last depths and throws one down — that merely describes the facts. One hears, one does not seek; one accepts, one does not ask who gives; like lightning, a thought flashes up, with necessity, without hesitation regarding its form — I never had any choice. A rapture whose tremendous tension occasionally discharges itself in a flood of tears — now the pace quickens involuntary, now it becomes slow; one is altogether beside oneself, with the distinct consciousness of subtle shudders and of one's skin creeping down to one's toes; a depth of happiness in which even what is most gloomy does not seem something opposite but rather conditioned, provoked, a necessary color in such a superabundance of light; an instinct for rhythmic relationships that arches over wide spaces of forms-length, the need for a rhythm with wide arches, is almost the measure of the force of inspiration, a kind of compensation for its pressure and tension. Everything happens involuntary in the highest degree but as in a gale of a feeling of freedom, of absoluteness, of power, of divinity — the involuntariness of image and metaphor is strangest of all: one no longer has any notion of what is an image or a metaphor: everything offers itself as the nearest, most obvious, simplest expression. It actually seems, to allude to something *Zarathustra* says, as if the things themselves approached and offered themselves as metaphors.²⁴

The passage offers itself to a long commentary and interpretation. Here I will only make a few remarks. What is being described here? It

24. *Ecce Homo*, trans. W. Kaufmann, New York: Vintage, 1969, 300f.

is not simply an experience of joyful exaltation, of psychic intoxication. It touches the core of what it means for a subject to be open to the world and to an otherness, and as an event that involves language. In this situation of openness and receptivity, the world is a gift, but a gift of meaning, of meaningfulness, of language. "Everything offers itself as expression," he writes. What Nietzsche claims to be describing is "poetic inspiration," and the condition under which certain parts of *Zarathustra* came into being. And as he says, if one had only the least bit of "superstition" in oneself, it would be interpreted as being the medium of overpowering force. For everything offers itself at this stage as "freedom and power, and as divinity."

But what is inspiration? It is, etymologically, to be inhabited by spirit, by *spiritus*, to be filled by the breath or the *pneuma*, so as to make oneself the recipient, who in receiving is also able to give. The phenomenology of inspiration is, it seems to me, inextricably bound to the experience and practice of prayer. For in prayer, if we take it in the direction suggested by, among others, Westphal, we can see it as the linguistic practice, whereby the subject opens itself, through the dual gesture of praise, and receiving. In the prayer of Zarathustra, the poet calls out to the "sky above me," speaking to this sky as to a "you": He searches this you, in order to make room for it in himself, in order to permit him to become this sky, to be part of its blessing, as itself a blesser. In this non-theistic prayer we nevertheless see the two elements that have been pointed out earlier as key components in prayer, namely praise and supplication. As in the tentative analysis above we saw how praise in the case of prayer is not primarily connected to recognizing and ascribing the value of something. Rather it serves as a preparation for stepping out of one's own self-possessed sphere of valuation, in a recognition of the finitude of one's own existence.

Supplication can be understood as the deepening of this experience. It does not ask in the expectation that it will be obeyed in its demand. The supplication in prayer is more connected to showing oneself as prepared to receive a gift, as a grace, as something that cannot be controlled, checked, and certainly not required. The prayer is thus also a prayer to be released from the entrapment of the self and its egoistic desires. It is connected to the transformation of subjectivity itself in

the direction of its openness, also to the needs of others. We could therefore speak both of an ontological and an ethical dimension of the posture of prayer, connected to its two central features of praise and supplication. Ontologically, prayer points in the direction of a conception of the self, not as independence and autonomy, but as dependency and belonging. Ethically, it points in the direction of the subject as openness to the need, suffering, and simple being of the other.

I would venture to say that in this strange, in the end unknown experience of inspiration, in the sense of giving way, in order not simply to receive, as the beggar, but also in order to be able to place oneself in the role of the giver of loving praise we also discover an elemental form of prayer. But the subject cannot give unless it can receive; this is also the secret economy of prayer: that we must recognize our need, our finitude, in order to speak. Both of these elements are also present in the Lord's Prayer, as first presented in Matt. 6.7, which starts out with praise, and then turns to supplication, but a supplication not only for one's life and survival, but also for a composure of forgiving, in regard to the other, as connected to the ability to be forgiven oneself. In prayer, the subject recognizes its moral finitude in recognizing its sins, but asking not only to have them cancelled, but also to relate them to the ability to forgive what is sinful and deficient in the other. Thus we could venture to describe prayer, ideally, also as a song of finitude, as the recognition, in poetic speech, that we are not the full masters of our own fate, and that only on the condition that this finitude is recognized can we also enter into a living, thinking relation to our predicament.