

JEAN-LUC MARION

University of Chicago

THE IRREDUCIBLE

Translated by Jason Alvis

I. That which forbids the question

Of that which we cannot speak, must we remain silent? Probably—especially if we understand why we cannot say anything about it, and have good reason for not speaking. If there is no good reason to talk about it, then we should stay silent. Yet without this prerequisite of having good reason, we could always resort to silence simply through negligence, carelessness, or more often, bad faith.

The inability to say anything, or to have nothing to say, can at times come from our decisions, explicitly or implicitly. At other times, in remaining silent, we persist under the conditions of speaking, namely, by thinking.¹ Overall, if the questions we pose concerning that which we deem unspeakable are poor, and incapable of receiving an answer, it remains possible, instead of abolishing them without further trial, to interrogate them in such a way that we might find in them another formulation; a first sense, the original utterance of which was spontaneously prohibited.

Par excellence, the question of God requires, at a minimum, that the conditions of its formulation do not contradict that which the question is capable of reaching or attaining. We say “attaining” here because we cannot assume agreement on concepts such as “signify” “mean,” “want to say,” or “aim at;” all of which perhaps presume too much or too little, ultimately leading us astray from the target at which we are aiming or hoping to reach. In other words, when it comes to what we call, without reservations, “God,” it is necessary, before that, to first and foremost discuss the formulation of the question.

Here, as always but even more certainly here than elsewhere, the question decides the horizon of the eventual responses, which could be arrived at, but never properly achieved or grasped. Rather, in the case of “God,” does it not

¹ Translators Note: “Atteindre” can refer to a conscious grasping and attaining, but also to a less conscious “reaching.” I have chosen to translate usages of “Atteindre” throughout this article as both “reaching out,” and “attaining.” It is worth noting that the differences between these words are subtle, yet important in the original French version. Further, “vise”, which could be translated as “intends”, “aimed at” is generally preferred throughout the article in order to not confuse it with the phenomenological concept of intention.

demand that you “say something of something” (or “know something about what you say”), since it is not initially obvious that “God” can and must have the rank of a “something”? Before asking if God “exists,” we must first determine if “being” (assuming that we have any intelligence of it in other cases) could or should be a suitable register for “God.” The most basic criticism requires here, before we debate the responses, that we interrogate the relevance of our questions, which are biased towards what we are capable of seeing and judging.

And especially in *this* case where, hypothetically (at the very least, because it is arguably more of a hypothesis than a thesis), should there be something like a “God,” it would override, in any manner you prefer, the view or intentions of the one who claims to speak.

Indeed, if the questioning speaker remained, as a matter of principle, not in withdrawal, not delayed and in default to that which he claims to say, then he would, at the outset, achieve precisely the opposite of what he originally aimed to achieve. Hence, it would follow that to have even the slightest chance of aiming at God’s existence (God and not a vain substitute) *it is necessary* to attempt to do so precisely without seeing, comprehending, or attaining God.

Rather than disqualifying this paradox from the outset, let us take some moment to consider it.

As already mentioned, in metaphysical language, the speaker in question (the one who asks the question of “God”) will only produce an inadequate idea of “God”. Inadequate: that is, not only an idea that is formally unequal to the objective reality of that which it would like to make thinkable, but also and as a result, an idea that only brings about a more clear representation of him (the questioner) than that which or whom he claims to represent.²

So, he does not, in fact, make evident that which he wishes to represent, but only represents himself. As a consequence, the discourses on “God” in general – the God of both scholars and believers³ – can be valuable exclusively as symptoms of themselves, and nothing like a sketch or representation of “God” (if one might find such a thing). That which *they* say of “God” usually only provides information for us concerning those who are doing the speaking, of the *ones* who say it, but doesn’t at all concern that which “God” could possibly want to say – that is, in both senses of that term, of its possible signification, and God’s possibly taking the opportunity to speak.

Anyone who dares to speak of “God” speaks infinitely more of themselves than the “God” of whom they claim to speak. And the same goes for anyone who attempts to speak of God based on a pretext or actual text. In theological language, it can be said that every visible or abstract representation, every definition of what is intended under the title “God” does not grant access to

² Spinoza, *Ethics II*, 17.

³ From this perspective, it should make no difference as to whether or not these are views held by philosophers, historians, sociologists, psychologists, linguists, but also politicians, artists, journalists, etc., or religious leaders or believers.

this “God,” but in that very instant offers a perfect view of the one who produced or recited them.⁴

In other words, it all comes back to the question of the idol. The idol, and this once again bears repeating, is not an illusion or deception, but simply shows perfectly that which it shows, without a shadow, and without concealment or withdrawal. But it only reveals that which it is aimed at—namely, *the one* who does the aiming, not *that* at which he aims. The idol is fixed to the extent that the eye can endure the excess of the visible, to the last point of endurance: it is made visible—like an invisible mirror—according to the scope and capacity of the one who sees and speaks. The idol always tells the truth: not of “God,” but of he who manifests himself as such, he and he alone, in recognizing the highest level of *his* conception of the infinite, or the ultimate capacity of his ability, or the extreme limit of his phenomenal experience.

Thus, if the supposed question of “God” only allows for responses that affect those who pose them, or simply put, when the supposed question of God actually only concerns me, without knowing that which I say, then isn’t it necessary that we renounce and do away with such a question? Renouncing it, however, would lead us back precisely to committing the fundamental error that we have already condemned—the admittance of the previous conditions of the question uncritically accepted do not qualify or meet the specific requirements of that on which it claims to rely.

So how then can the question be liberated from being under the control of its answers, which are all too familiar and well-known?⁵ How can we pull away from that which concerns only me, who poses the question of “God” only in order to answer for myself and to correspond to myself, or, more precisely, to assign to myself my own place? There is only one way that remains: to reduce the responses, in order to safeguard the question.

II. *What the Response has to Say*

The validity of the idol cannot be debated precisely because it only concerns the one who produces and reproduces it. Yet this validity, although limited, has a price: The idol will never reach the level of “God” but always returns to me, who says “God,” if only to repudiate me in it and to reinforce me, that is, more precisely, to revoke me in it, me and not it. In efforts to verify these innate tendencies and automatic responses, let’s consider a few examples that offend the very question of “God.”

Saying “I believe in God” or “I do not believe in God” doesn’t say anything about God, but only more about myself. Still, nothing about “God,” since it is indeed a mere belief, which in metaphysics we name to be an opinion, which does not define any essence, and it doesn’t affirm another, *a fortiori*, existence,

⁴ St. Augustine, “Profecto not Deum quem non cogitare possunt, sed semet ipsos pro illo cogitantes non illum, sed ipsos, nec unlimited, sibi sed comparing.” (*De Civitate Dei*, XII, 18, ed. “Library Augustinienne” vol. 35, Paris 1957, 210f.)

⁵ TN: The relationship between the question and the answer is here described as one of “l’hypothèque”, or a mortgage. I chose to leave away this metaphor in favor of “being under the control of.”

which is even less provable. But already it says much about me: for example, that I can accept to be true something that I do not see, or on the contrary, that I admit to be true only that which is capable of being objectively verified (i.e., an epistemological position among others).

It says that I am ascribing myself into a broader community beyond the non-human (that of the divine), or on the contrary into a strictly human community in which all can equally participate (a political position, so to speak). It says that I no doubt find in this position a comfort, confidence, insurance, etc. (a psychological disposition of heteronomy), or on the contrary, that I reject every external or transcendent authority (a psychological disposition of autonomy). Yet in all of this, there is nothing that actually refers to "God."

Could it not be argued that the statement "I believe in God" (or not), however, says something about something, namely the existence of "God" to actually mean "[I believe] God exists" (or not)? In which case, objectively speaking it would be a propositional statement that is capable of being proven or disproven, or in short, could be argued rationally. This, however, is only a mere illusion.

In a strictly metaphysical sense, to say "God exists (or not)" doesn't say anything about God, and this is for two reasons. First, that is because this statement does not yet indicate what it proposes and because, as the history of philosophy confirms, *for and against* arguments are not self-evident. Thus, even a purely theoretical utterance (statement/enunciation) is ineffective (or fails to move the addressee). So nothing, *de jure*, can be said decisively about "God" except this: when it comes to the matter of "God," conclusions concerning "God" do not belong to him, but to the one who thinks him.

This precisely confirms metaphysics as idolatry. Second, that is because the statement presupposes that the existence "God" can be predicated of or attributed to "God," however, this is not a self-evident truth. First of all, this is because "existence" in this case is but a privileged sense of the concept of "being" itself, which when attributed to "God," cannot say anything of him. And second of all, because even if "existence" in this case took on a privileged sense (a necessary existence, infinite, independent, etc.), suitable only for "God," we still would be capable of conceiving of it as something real, and therefore, it would be included in our univocal concept of being. However, nothing relates more directly to the *ego* than this entity, which is reduced to the rank of a simple *conceptus* conceived by him, and is conceived as a simple and pure *cogitable*. This again confirms that being in itself is idolatry.

Let us admit once and for all the idolatrous status of any statement about God.⁶ In fact—and who could ignore it?—it is not reasonable to say that my own reason or judgment precedes and conditions the existence of "God." No one thinks "God does not exist, so I do not believe in him," but rather "I do

⁶ TN: "une bonne fois", is here translated as "once and for all", for though it directly translates to a "good time," it refers here more to a "final time."

not believe in him (I cannot and do not want to), so therefore he does not exist." This also explains that "exist" here has no meaning or relevance.

Further, even if the most metaphysical of statements reveal more about their enunciator than what they allegedly aims at, this will be the case even more so for statements that directly implicate the speaker. For example, in terms of political idolatry, especially taking the most powerful example of the privilege of election, the statement "God exists" actually means he is "with us," and therefore "we exist", especially when compared to others.

It is at this point a purely political idolatry, which without a doubt maintains a simple, logical absurdity: "God does not exist, but we are his people," or in other words: "We do not believe that God exists, but we still have the privilege to choose whether or not we will believe in him, and this privilege causes us to stand out when compared with the others, who do not have the choice to believe or to deny the existence of God." But all of this absurdity disappears if we can consider that "God" here refers exclusively to those who speak about him, not to that about which they claim to speak.

The same goes for moral idols. And more than any other, the supposed problem of evil is also unsolvable because the problem is posed incorrectly. It typically is understood that this problem must be bound to "God" by virtue of the principle of sufficient reason, which requires a cause for every effect, therefore here demanding a responsible culprit: evil exists, they say, so we must find a reason for it, which in this case, can only be "God." Clearly, this argument, if it is one, is worthless.

First, because it could be precisely that evil does not "exist" and therefore does not require any efficient cause, but it attests only to a deficiency or lack of being, and thus escapes from falling under the rule of the principle of sufficient reason. And second, because the conclusion that "God" is in the first place universally responsible for evil, allows for two contradictory conclusions. Either we say that "God" does not exist, and does not deserve to exist since he actually is evil, which is inconsistent with his supposed goodness. Or, we say that "God" must still exist, precisely so that we can accuse him of being the provoker of evil, and condemn him to no longer existing.⁷

The contradiction of these conclusions ("God" exists, but he doesn't exist) does not necessarily lack some consistency in logic however, because each of these arguments stem equally from one shared critical point: there must be someone responsible for evil, a cause other than myself. In other words, the argument concerning "God" only acts as a symptom of my situation: "I'm

⁷ De Sade clearly exposed this argument: it must be that God have a sort of non-existence in order to, at least for the time being, be accused; and at the same time, God must exist just enough so that God's non-existence may result from my one and sovereign decision. "I claim to expire in atheism / And that infamous God who one wants to draw my attention to / Is designed by me for blasphemy / [...] I would like to have a moment in which you could exist / To enjoy the pleasure of insulting you more." Marquis de Sade. "The Truth" (1787), in *Anthologie de la poésie française*, "Pleiades," vol. 2 (Paris: Gallimard, 2000), 256. And, of course, this nonexistent existence boils down to the idol that *I conceive*.

unhappy and evil, and therefore God does not exist” or on the other hand “he must exist so someone is responsible for evil.” This contradiction disappears once it is taken into an ethical point of view, which in this occurrence amounts to an idolatrous point of view of myself, being obsessed with culpability, yet pleading my own innocence.

Herein lies the paradox: In seeking “God”, or in at least posing the question of him, it is necessary that we first bracket our belief (or the belief in our belief) in “God” since these beliefs only concern the one who owns and supports them. The question of “God” perhaps can be raised only after the differences between those who believe and those who do not believe are finally bracketed, and as a consequence, suspending all other differences: between the Jew and Greek, the slave and the free man, of course, between male and female, and even between atheists and theists, between philosophers, modern men of the world, and journalists. *Especially* the difference between believers and non-believers – since they each believe that what they say very well represents “God” as such, when in fact, their firm convictions most often only serve to confirm an identity that would otherwise be doubtful or questionable.⁸

III. *The Reduction of the Idea of God*

The question of “God” can only be asked properly once it is freed from all responses that impose themselves by way of idolatry. It remains only to perform the reduction upon the question of “God” to God, by bracketing “God” from all of these dogmatic responses (in other words, metaphysics). If it is therefore possible to prove that we can reduce everything to idolatries and if, in this case, there remains something to be said, then it remains reasonable to name God “irreducible.”

Such a reduction of the idea of “God” to God must be considered, and may even, to some extent, be accomplished, as Husserl himself once claimed.⁹ Yet to what degree? Philosophy must admit here that it cannot advance very far down this path, and that it stops well short of theology. At least it can make some first steps towards the reduction of the idea of “God,” in the reaffirmation of “God” to God.

The idea of God imposes itself upon us once his existence is bracketed. The failure of the existence of God does not disqualify God as a question, but rather makes it possible for us to qualify its singularity and privilege. First, because (as we have seen) it is not self-evident to attribute existence to “God,” as it proves to be either useless in its univocity, or unintelligible in its

⁸ More than any other, the “fundamentalist” only believes in “God” with the intention to keep confidence in himself; so he never actually speaks of “God,” of whom he says nothing and thinks nothing, but always and only of himself under the shelter of his idol.

⁹ See E. Husserl, *Ideas pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy. First book: General introduction to a pure phenomenology*, trans. F. Kersten (The Hague et al., Nijhoff, 1983), 133-4 (§ 58). See my comments in *Etant donné. Essai d'une phénoménologie de la donation* (Paris: P.U.F., 1997), 106, 336sq. English translation: *Being Given: Toward a Phenomenology of Givenness* (Stanford, CA, Stanford University Press, 2002).

equivocality. And then second, because the lack of existence (the negative existence) is often required in order to think “God” as God.

Thus, in order for the “death of God” to not be just the death of a mere idol, but the death of the “true” God, we must assume a “God” without being God (so that which dies, without existence, is still of divine essence). Similarly, in order for a “new God” to happen upon us like a real God, it must be admitted that what is yet to come – albeit still without existence – already deserves the name of God. Though these claims appear to be contradictory or impossible to achieve (for they actually are), this has still not prevented some of the greatest thinkers from supporting them.

Yet above all, even more than his metaphysical identification with his own existence, God is distinguished as such by his excess over existence and over being in general.¹⁰ It suffices, for admission, to consider that God’s divinity and grandeur cannot (nor should not) be thought in univocal abstraction from existence of fact. This existence does not have a meaning and qualification for what the world reveals as beings, which have to be there. This existence is not like any other because it only can manifest itself in the world in a way that *is* not permanent. If God never reveals himself in our world, he reveals that he *is* not, and does not present himself in the mode of being, of existence.

What God (and him alone) accomplishes under the names of creation and resurrection, consists precisely in nullifying the distinction between being and not being, and in reversing what is, in what is not, and in transferring what is not, to the account of what is. Not only can the idea of “God” be rid of existence, but also this disqualification of existence qualifies God as such. Therefore, he who denies “God” as such, actually affirms him all the more surely when claiming God’s lack of existence. This is because God surpasses existence in himself. And consequently, the idea of God must also be bracketed.

Can we reduce the idea of God beyond existence? Beyond, or better yet below, existence is essence itself, the essence that determines the possibility of every being through its non-contradiction. Does the idea of “God” therefore survive due to its possibility? In other words, does God think of himself in terms of impossibility? It seems obvious that no essence, no definition, and no statement can contradict possibility, and that no impossibility can contradict itself by making itself obvious and by imposing its impossibility upon us.

But if the idea of “God” stands for God, that is, if one assumes God for how he is given, namely as the exception par excellence (in essence, definition, and statement), then the idea of “God” not only remains thinkable in its state of impossibility, but it is characterized precisely by this unique possibility: namely, the possibility of impossibility. God makes his idea obvious to us, allowing us to bracket his possibility. His impossibility does not forbid the idea of “God,” because when it comes to God, impossibility itself becomes impossible.¹¹

¹⁰ TN: “sur” is used here, which more literally translates as “on”, but I take it to mean “over”, since “excess” goes beyond (over).

¹¹ This point and the following were developed with more historical and textual arguments in “The impossible for Man-God,” in *Transcendence and Beyond*. A

First, the difference between the mortals and the gods, or more precisely between man and “God”¹² can be located only in the context of their respective attitudes towards impossibility. Humans define themselves as mortals according to the contrast between the possible and the impossible; because they live in the possible, as long as it lasts, and die when the possible succumbs to impossibility.

Their death exposes them to impossibility, most essentially because impossibility itself opens them up to death, starting from the impossibility of possibility. Man lives in the possible, but dies in the impossible. Nevertheless, where there is God, there the impossible is also, and where there is the impossible, God also must be, for he operates according to the impossible. “With man it is impossible, but not with God. With God, all things are possible” (Mark 10:27) – this formula actually defines the ends of man, and the prerogatives of God. In other words, “Nothing is impossible with God” should be understood as an analytical, tautological, and *a priori* statement.

Therefore, it seems impossible that the idea of “God” does not embrace the impossible, and it also seems contradictory that it yields when in the face of contradiction. For as long as thought does not enter into the realm of the impossible, or at the very least, *we* reach its impassable border, such a thought cannot yet be properly about God. As long as thought remains in the possible (logical and effective, as well) man is capable of peacefully managing life, and the mortal has no need or reason to call upon “God.”

But as soon as he reaches (or rather, he precisely does not reach) the impossible, as soon as he stumbles upon it, then he opens up a domain that *may* be about God. It is not enough to experience the impossible, and therefore to experience God also, as if the impossible were enough to cause “God” to become an idea. Yet once the realm of the impossible has been opened, it is sufficient that something might contradict it, so that we have the right to acknowledge it as a title of God. If and in so far as “it is impossible,” it *may* behave like God, it *may* be about God.

But by definition, of course, the impossible always remains impossible *for us*, while *for God* the difference between such an impossible and the possible disappears. Such an impossible only makes sense in *our* concept. The impossible and our concept of it, must also be understood as an analytical, tautological, and *a priori* statement. Accordingly, the impossible *for us*, as it defines our finitude and that of our concept, cannot *de-limit* God, or rather, can only delimit the symptom of his effect on our finitude.

Postmodern Inquiry, ed. J. D. Caputo, & M. D. Scanlon, (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2007), 17-43.

¹² The distinction between the two impossibilities (logical contradiction and ineffectuation of existence) is not a deciding factor here. It indicates rather the difference between two gods who can affect all that is possible without contradiction (pagan gods, but also the gods of most philosophers, from Thomas Aquinas to Leibniz) and a “God” who can even act in logical impossibility, or at least has the power to do so (Descartes, Hegel, Nietzsche).

It thus is impossible to say “God is impossible” because the impossibility to understand him (i.e., to comprehend him in *our* concept) is that which formally, precisely, and foremost, characterizes God. Not that everything impossible is equivalent to “God,” but rather that without the impossible it no longer would remain possible that it is about God. Because if the incomprehensible and the impossible do not suffice to be about God, if he is not quite impossible or incomprehensible, it very likely could be a matter of dealing with his idol, “God.”

The impossibility *for us* to have a concept of God defines his essence, if he admits to having one. That God becomes comprehensible to God alone, and therefore remains incomprehensible to us, is neither incomprehensible nor absurd. That God becomes comprehensible and possible to us without contradicting our finitude, however, would seem especially incomprehensible and absurd. Only God exceeds his own impossibility *for us*. God exceeds, therefore, the essence and existence of “God.” The idea of him remains thinkable to us, even after bracketing his existence and his essence. Especially after this reduction.

IV. The Irreducible.

Of God, we cannot therefore not have an idea, especially after the reduction. As irreducible, the idea of God is given as that which one cannot have. This is because his possible impossibility qualifies the idea for us. Because of this, one could consider it more akin to an empty signification, or an objectless representation. For that which is proper to contradictions or impossibilities consists in the fact that we cannot represent them as either beings or as objects, but that we think them, if only for the sake of identifying them as contradictions or impossibilities. We therefore think them without condition, like a pure given.¹³

Yet, that is the case for the idea of God: after reduction, once the possibility itself is reduced in the idea, it cannot come to us as a representation of whatever it is. Yet it still occurs to us as irreducible; for, in order to criticize a definition of “God,” to denounce the inadequacy of it, to observe the impossibility or the incomprehensibility of it, it is necessary precisely for one already to have access to it. And we always have access to it, indeed. No one can deny having an idea of “God,” one that we all know, at least by the name.

How does the idea appear to us? Here again, as a given, or according to the most minimalistic acceptance, as a pure given: “Si detur Dei idea (ut manifestum est illam dari...)” or “if the idea of God is given (as it is manifest that it is given...)”¹⁴ Not so much because the object and being lack, but more so because it is here about that which cannot in any shape or form serve as an object of any representation whatsoever, neither one of being, nor one of nothingness. Of that by which God comes to the idea, nothing is

¹³ First see A. Meinong, *Theory of Objects*. (Leipzig: Barth, 1904, *Collected Works*, vol.1, Graz: Akademische Druck- und Verlagsanstalt, 1968), §§ 3, 4 and 6. For the priority of “the given” here, and with Husserl, see also J.-L. Marion, chapter 1 of *In Excess: Studies of Saturated Phenomena* (New York, Fordham University Press, 2002).

¹⁴ R. Descartes, *Meditationes de prima Philosophia*, III^{ae} Responsiones, ed. C. Adam, P. Tannery, (Paris: Cerf, 1904), 183.

presupposed, not even nothingness, and it remains irreducible to everything, even to the reduction. The irreducible imposes itself as irremediable, one “... cannot escape God.”¹⁵ Always already here, and forever.

¹⁵ E. Lévinas, *Autrement qu'être ou au-delà de l'essence*, The Hague, Nijhoff, 1974, 165. (English translation: *Otherwise Than Being, or, Beyond Essence*. Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1998), 128: “The impossibility of escaping God [...]”