CrossMark

ARTICLE

Difficulties in Defining the Concept of God: Kierkegaard in Dialogue with Levinas, Buber, and Rosenzweig

Claudia Welz[1]

Abstract   This article investigates difficulties in defining the concept of God by focusing on the question of what it means to understand God as a 'person.' This question is explored with respect to the work of Søren Kierkegaard, in dialogue with Franz Rosenzweig, Martin Buber, and Emmanuel Levinas. Thereby, the following three questions regarding divine 'personhood' come into view: First, how can God be a partner of dialogue if he at the same time remains unknown and unthinkable, a limit-concept of understanding? Second, if God is love in person and at the same time a spiritual reality 'between' human agents, in what ways are his personal and trans-personal traits related to each other? Third, what exactly is revealed through God's 'name'? By way of an inconclusive conclusion, divine personhood is discussed in regard to prayer, where the problems of predication that arise in third-personal speech *about* God are linked with the second-personal encounter *with* God.

Keywords   God · Kierkegaard · Levinas · Buber · Rosenzweig · Prayer · Personhood

✉ Claudia Welz
   cwe@teol.ku.dk

[1]   Faculty of Theology, Center for the Study of Jewish Thought in Modern Culture (CJMC), University of Copenhagen, Købmagergade 44-46, 3rd Floor, 1150 Copenhagen K, Denmark

Introduction: Issues common to Judaism and Christianity

As the title of this article discloses, here I will focus on difficulties in defining the concept of God. The question that forms my point of departure is that of God's possible (or impossible?) personhood: What does it mean to regard God as a divine person?

One of the most influential definitions of the term 'person' was given by Anicius Manlius Severinus Boethius (who died in 524): *persona est rationabilis naturae individua substantia*—a person is an individual substance of rational nature. *Persona*—understood as an indivisible, independent, self-existing being, which is not just the attribute of something else, but substance (i.e. Aristotle's *ousia*) endowed with reason—is the Latin translation of the Greek *hypostasis.* However, Boethius concedes that *persona* can also be the translation of the Greek *prosopon,* a mask set upon the face in performing tragedies and comedies where the actors represent individuals (*Contra Eutychen et Nestorium,* cap. III, 3–25).[1] When individuality is combined with rationality it also involves the power of speech, freedom, and relatedness to others.

If God is to be regarded as a person in this sense, he is a specific, determinable 'something' that is distinguished from other entities. That is to say that he must be finite—otherwise a definition, which entails (de)limitation, could not be achieved. Through this definition, however, the problem of defining the concept of God is aggravated, for how does God's personality, individuality, or singularity go together with his immeasurability, omnipresence, or infinity? As soon as we define God as a particular individual, i.e. as a counterpart with whom we can communicate in prayer, we miss God as all-embracing wholeness or totality that permeates everything, i.e. as *omnitudo realitatis.* How, then, can he be the One *and* the Whole? How can he be conceived as a living being exterior to us *and* as principle of life interweaving everything? How can he become 'immanent' in entering human experience *and*, nonetheless, remain 'transcendent' beyond us?

Judaism and Christianity have for centuries grappled with this tension, which is inherent in the concept of God. In what follows, I will neither argue for one or the other 'pole' within this polar opposition, nor will I present a personal concept of God as viable alternative to a non-personal concept of God. Rather, I will try to keep the diverging 'poles' together and attempt to make sense of the tension in the concept of God: as an irresolvable, but fruitful tension. I will do this in conversation with four philosophers who also were theologians—provided that theology is understood in a broad sense: as critical reflection on the speech of, to, and about God—namely Søren Kierkegaard (1813–1855), Franz Rosenzweig (1886–1929), Martin Buber (1878–1965), and Emmanuel Levinas (1906–1995).

In their company, the disappointment of not being able to define the concept of God in any intellectually satisfying way might turn out to be somehow refreshing: when thought runs against the wall, there's no other way; it must go back and start afresh. Trying once more, again and again, untiringly—this is maybe the most

---

[1] In *Patrologia Latina* 64, 1343, the formulation differs slightly: *persona est naturae rationalis individua substantia.* Cf. Schlapkohl (1999).

productive and passionate way of dealing with insoluble problems. Instead of focusing on the shared ground in Kierkegaard, Rosenzweig, Buber, and Levinas' existential thought, this article explores perplexities about divine personhood. The discussion will touch upon both consent *and* dissent. Despite numerous differences between Judaism and Christianity, the lines of demarcation in this discussion are not dependent on boundaries *between* these two religions, but appear also *within* Jewish philosophy of religion, often in surprising ways, which notably bring Buber and Levinas much closer to Kierkegaard than their polemics against him would suggest.[2]

God as the Unknown—A Partner of Dialogue? Kierkegaard and Levinas

In Chapter III of *Philosophical Fragments* (1844), which deals with "The Absolute Paradox," Johannes Climacus—alias Søren Kierkegaard—defends paradoxical thinking with the following, oft-cited words: "But one must not think ill of the paradox, for the paradox is the passion of thought, and the thinker without the paradox is like the lover without passion: a mediocre fellow" (PF 36). The passion of thought is then described as willing the collision of two incompatible contrasts. This collision leads to "the ultimate paradox of thought: to want to discover something that thought itself cannot think" (PF 36). This paradoxical passion continually collides with something inaccessible: the unknown. Despite the impossibility of knowing the unknown, thought nonetheless cannot stop engaging with it:

> To declare that it is the unknown because we cannot know it, and that even if we could know it we could not express it, does not satisfy the passion, although it has correctly perceived the unknown as frontier. But a frontier is expressly the passion's torment, even though it is also its incentive. And yet it

---

[2] The credit for correcting decisive aspects of Buber's polemic perspective on Kierkegaard belongs to Hugo Bergman and his by now classic study *Dialogical Philosophy from Kierkegaard to Buber,* which appeared in Hebrew in 1974. Bergman basically juxtaposes four book parts on (1) Kierkegaard, (2) "transitional thinkers from Feuerbach to Rosenstock," (3) Rosenzweig, and (4) Buber. The task today consists in discussing the concord or discord of these thinkers. It is debatable whether Kierkegaard is a philosopher of dialogue in line with Rosenstock, Rosenzweig, and Buber. Bergman uses a (perhaps too) broad definition of dialogical philosophy, which allegedly views reality as a dialogue "between man and God, man and man, and man and nature" and has affinities with existentialism in that the participants of the dialogue are "individuals," "not abstractions but men of flesh and blood" (Bergman 1991, p. 2). For an overview of the scholarly debate on the relation between Kierkegaard and Buber, see Šajda (2011).

To my knowledge, Michael Oppenheim's unpublished doctoral dissertation *Sören Kierkegaard and Franz Rosenzweig: The Movement From Philosophy To Religion* (microfilm at University of California, Santa Barbara 1976) is the first comparative study on Kierkegaard and Rosenzweig. Oppenheim (1999) also includes Buber and Levinas in the comparison, yet the subject matter of this article is not the concept of God, but "Four Narratives on the Interhuman." See Welz (2011b) for a review of the literature on the relation between Kierkegaard and Rosenzweig.

Among the first book-length projects to consider Kierkegaard and Levinas together are the following single-authored and edited volumes: Westphal (2008), Welz (2008), Welz and Verstrynge (eds.) (2008), Simmons and Wood (eds.) (2008), and Sheil (2010).

can go no further, whether it risks a sortie through via *negationis* [the way of negation] or via *eminentiae* [the way of idealization]. (PF 44)

The motor of this restless movement of thought lies in its passion for discovering what is beyond the frontier. However, there is no exit, which would lead from ignorance to the knowledge of the unknown. Neither identifying God as that which is *not like* the world or ourselves, nor identifying him with what is *higher than* all we know proves successful.

Kierkegaard's Climacus implicitly refutes even Anselm of Canterbury's self-transcending thought of God as *id quo maius cogitari nequit* in Chapter II of *Proslogion* (1077–1078). Anselm's idea of God as that "than which nothing greater can be conceived" (cf. PF 291 n. 27 with reference to St. Anselm 1930, p. 7) still presupposes the Platonic pyramid of beings, which, as it were, serves as the ladder to the Most High. The comparison with other beings is needed in order to assert that God is other and higher than all the rest; he is, ultimately, incomparable. When the ladder is thrown away and thought reaches God, the sublime and peerless beyond comparison, thought is no longer in itself, no longer coherent, no longer thought. As Anselm describes in Chapter XV, God is even greater than can be thought. Therein Anselm meets Kierkegaard. Trying to think God ends in a paradox, in thinking the unthinkable—where all thought comes to a halt.

The unknown or unthinkable is a limit-concept. On the one hand, it is that which differs absolutely from human thought; on the other hand, this difference also appears in thought—yet without being grasped securely. Difference and likeness coincide when the unknown God is confused with our ideas about the unknown. Remarkably, in this context, Kierkegaard's Climacus speaks of the unknown as being in *diasporá,* in dispersion (PF 45). The Greek term 'diaspora' is normally used to describe the centuries-long dispersion of the Jewish people in different countries. For Kierkegaard it is God himself who is 'expelled' from our familiar world. As the unknown, God is that from which thought differs without knowing exactly what the difference consists in.

Therefore it is impossible for us to understand that the difference between divine and human is absolute: "The understanding has the god as close as possible and yet just as far away" (PF 46). According to Kierkegaard, human beings themselves have opened up an abyss between the divine and the human through sin, and without God's revelation they have no chance of acquiring any consciousness of sin, let alone a possible redemption from sin. Here it becomes clear that the God-relationship is misunderstood if it is taken to be only an intellectual relation. It concerns human existence in all its dimensions. Correspondingly, the problem of understanding that is linked to the paradox of thought thinking the unthinkable resides not only on an epistemological plane. The question is then how human beings can come to understand that they cannot understand God (cf. Grøn 2010, p. 113[3]). Kierkegaard refers here to "the moment of passion" (*Lidenskabens*

---

[3] "Det drejer sig om at fatte paradokset *som* paradoks, og det vil sige at forstå, at det ikke kan forstås. Vi er med Climacus i den menneskelige forståelses sfære. Hvis vi kunne komme uden om eller bag om vores forståelse til det, vi ikke forstår, ville vi kunne springe over os selv. Det er med vores forståelse, at vi ikke forstår."

Øieblik) in which alone the paradox and human reason or intellect (*Forstanden*) "have a mutual understanding" (PF 47 / SKS 4, 252)—of their difference.[4]

Although this difference is insurmountable, the encounter with the absolutely Other can nevertheless be a happy one. This is the case when the paradox is personified and becomes part not only of a human *thought experiment*, but also of a *dialogue of love*. This is not made explicit in *Philosophical Fragments,* but is shown implicitly in Kierkegaard's *Upbuilding* and *Christian Discourses.* I will return to this point in the second section, which is about 'God as love.'

Some issues analyzed in the aforementioned passages have striking parallels in modern Jewish thought. Let us have a look at a series of interviews with Emmanuel Levinas that were recorded and broadcast by Radio France-Culture in 1981 and later published under the title *Ethics and Infinity: Conversations with Philippe Nemo.* In Chapter 7 on "The Face," Levinas is asked to specify in what aspect his discovery of ethics in the other person's face breaks with 'philosophies of totality.'[5] He answers that "[a]bsolute knowledge, such as it has been sought, promised or recommended by philosophy, is a thought of the Equal," while "the idea of the Infinite implies a thought of the Unequal" (EI 91). Levinas starts "from the Cartesian idea of the Infinite, where the *ideatum* of this idea, that is, what this idea aims at, is infinitely greater than the very act through which one thinks it" (EI 91). This disproportion is, for Descartes, one of the proofs of God's existence because "thought cannot produce something which exceeds thought"; and for this reason, one must "admit to an infinite God who has put the idea of the Infinite into us" (EI 91). Like Kierkegaard, Levinas speaks of an otherness that must not be made into 'the same,' into something we know beforehand. And like Kierkegaard, he deals with a paradox: "the Infinite in a finite act" (EI 92).

Moreover, Levinas' approach to the idea of God is similar to Climacus'. The following statement by Levinas indicates this methodological similarity: "In Descartes the idea of the Infinite remains a theoretical idea, a contemplation, a knowledge. For my part, I think that the relation to the Infinite is not a knowledge, but a Desire" (EI 92). Levinas goes on to say that this desire "is like a thought which thinks more than it thinks, or more than what it thinks" (EI 92). In other words, neither the content of thought nor thinking itself can match the dynamic object of thought, which exceeds and overturns all efforts of thinking. Kierkegaard and Levinas arrive at a similar conclusion: *thinking* of God is not enough. Where Kierkegaard introduces an unsatisfiable passion, Levinas refers to a desire that "cannot be satisfied," but "nourishes itself on its own hungers" (EI 92). This is the structure of movements directed at something unattainable, which is nonetheless worth striving for. Moving towards the idea of the Infinite means never to be finished, for the very motion towards it is infinite as well. It is here, in this motion, where ethics and infinity meet.

---

[4] Cf. PF 49 / SKS 4, 253: "Dersom Paradoxet og Forstanden støde sammen i den fælleds Forstaaelse af deres Forskjellighed, da er Sammenstødet lykkeligt […]."

[5] Levinas repeatedly criticizes an idealist (Hegelian) philosophy of the All, which aspires to the identity of thought and being, as well as any other philosophical projects that exclude the unfathomable transcendence of the (divine or human) Other by relying on an ontological (or onto-theo-logical) totality.

In Chapter 9 on "The Glory of Testimony," Levinas elaborates more on this meeting, which takes place in the ethical relation to another person, whose face "*signifies* the Infinite"—not in the sense that it "appears as a theme," but rather in the fact that the more one is *just* the more one is *responsible*, so that "one is never quits with regard to the Other" (EI 105). Levinas localizes the possibility that "the revelation of the Infinite occurs" (EI 106) in human testimony to the Infinite, which can be experienced when and where one person says in the presence of the other: "Here I am!"—as Abraham said *hinneni* whenever God spoke to him, thereby signaling attention, readiness, and obedience. Interestingly, the biblical dialogue between God and humankind is thereby transposed, placed into the interhuman face-to-face relation. The witness does not testify to God's words, but rather "to what was said by himself" (EI 109). Does the witness, then, testify to human glory? This is not the case. Levinas states expressly that it is the "glory of the Infinite" that reveals itself "through what it is capable of doing in the witness" (EI 109). Levinas speaks of "inspiration" and explains that the "exteriority of the Infinite," which exceeds human capacity, becomes "interiority" in the sincerity of the testimony of the person who recognizes his or her responsibility (EI 109). This process of interiorization does not imply that the Infinite is absorbed by the finite, but that it "commands"—through the witness's own mouth, ordering the witness by his or her own voice (EI 110). Hence, God reveals himself indirectly—not by means of a voice ringing out from heaven, neither in words spoken by others, but in a person's own self-obligation.

At this juncture, one might ask, 'Well, doesn't this presuppose that God himself has previously proclaimed his commandments? For how could human beings otherwise *know* what is demanded of them?' Levinas is no advocate of divine command ethics. He undermines the alternative between autonomy and heteronomy.[6] The alterity that inspires subjects who are obedient of their own accord and who are at their neighbors' service long before they utter any wish—this alterity remains nameless, unidentifiable, anonymous. In affirming the ambiguity of God's trace in the human face as well as God's non-phenomenal transcendence and its enigmatic character, Levinas appropriates and modifies the Kierkegaardian account of a God who preserves his incognito in a human being walking the streets of Jerusalem. Furthermore, Levinas affirmatively takes up Kierkegaard's notion of an exiled God, of persecuted truth in diaspora. As he writes in "Enigma and Phenomenon" (1965), it is "up to us, or, more exactly, it is up to *me* to retain or to repel this God […], exiled because allied with the conquered, […] disarticulating the very moment in which he is presented and proclaimed, unrepresentable" (BPW 70). This Kierkegaardian God, in Levinas' view, is "revealed only to be persecuted and unrecognized" (BPW 71).

---

[6] See also Welz (2011a, p. 76f), *pace* Chalier (2002), who claims that Levinas accepts the heteronomy that Kant rejects, and Westphal (2008, pp. 75–93), who speaks of "The Trauma of Transcendence as Heteronomous Intersubjectivity" and regards the responsible self as "triply heteronomous before transcendence," namely in terms of "its being, its knowing, and its doing" (ibid., p. 107). For a more nuanced view, which takes into account the reversal of heteronomy into autonomy, see e.g. Holte (2015, pp. 140–176), who describes how Levinas reconciles autonomy and heteronomy.

Levinas has often voiced his sympathy for the concept of God's kenosis, "the humility of his presence on earth"—for instance in an exchange of ideas and questions with Hans Hermann Hemmerle, the bishop of Aachen, in 1986 ("Judaism and Christianity"), where he not only refers to Isaiah 58, but also to Matthew 25, pointing out that God's proximity can only be enjoyed once the slaves are *freed* and the hungry *fed*; and, conversely, if people turn away from the poor who knock on their doors, it is God in person they are shutting out (TN 146). Interviewed by Michaël de Saint Cheron in 1992 and 94, Levinas said he believed "that a society in which there is equality is a society in which there is God" (de Saint Cheron 2010, p. 35). There is an astonishing directness in this speech about a God in our midst. However, when the interviewer tried to push Levinas ("Q: When it comes to speaking to Christians, you readily say that for you the incarnation is to be understood literally as the presence of God in the face of the other…"), Levinas clarified immediately that God is not identical with the human other, but only encountered "through the other" or "in the guise" of the other, yet without the other ever being "the incarnation of God" (ibid., p. 33). One might add that Levinas, of course, cannot follow Kierkegaard in adopting the Christological two-natures doctrine, according to which Christ is human *and* divine.

When reading these late interviews with Levinas, I wondered how his speech of God's presence as mediated by interpersonal encounters went together with statements in his earlier writings, which seem to be diametrically opposed to this. For instance, in "God and Philosophy" (1975) he claims that God is drawn out of presence, that he "is neither an object nor an interlocutor" and that his "absolute remoteness" turns into "my" non-erotic responsibility for the other (LR 179). If we exaggerate a little, we could interpret this as meaning that God transcendent can only become present among us if we become present to one another. Still, there is no guarantee that God will be 'found' when being 'in disguise.' Unlike Kierkegaard, Levinas does not assume that God is omnipresent and can be accessed directly in prayer. On the contrary, the 'detour' that leads to the neighbor is, for Levinas, the only way to God (cf. Welz 2007b). It is here, where Levinas denies God the status of a partner in dialogue, that Kierkegaard and Levinas part ways.

For Levinas, God "remains a third person, the *he* in the depth of the you"—and does so precisely because of his holiness or separation from those who desire contact with him: "The desirable is intangible and separates itself from the relationship with desire which it calls for" (LR 178). However, does this justify Merold Westphal's criticism that Levinas' God "is not the god of the Bible," but rather "the depth dimension of each human person," by virtue of which a categorical call to responsibility emanates, which results in "a reduction of religion to ethics" (Westphal 2010, p. 224)? Admittedly, Levinas' God is not someone to whom one without further ado can say 'you.' However, I doubt that the concept of God can be dissolved into humanity—on the following grounds:

(1) First, only a few lines after Westphal's quote from "God and Philosophy," Levinas develops a distinction within the notion of otherness, which shows that the God-relationship is irreducible to interhuman relations, and that God's alterity is not the same as the alterity of other human beings:

God is not simply the 'first other', the 'other par excellence', or the 'absolutely other', but other than the other (*autre qu'autrui*), other otherwise, other with an alterity prior to the alterity of the other, prior to the ethical bond with another and different from every neighbour, transcendent to the point of absence […]. (LR 179)

As we have seen, God's alterity precedes the alterity of other human beings who, as creatures, are always already 'late' in relation to God as their creator. If God were nothing but a depth dimension of humankind, our relationship to him would be more aptly described as simultaneity or co-presence rather than as a trace from an immemorial past.

(2) Second, in an interview with Salomon Malka (1984), Levinas corroborates that what he does is "the opposite of what would be the quest for a God without divinity"; instead, his method consists in "'describing' the circumstances in which the word *God* comes to mind" (IEL 101). For him, the positive sense of the negative notion of "a nonthematizable God" lies in the situation when the one is turned toward another and called not to leave the other alone: "This is the circumstance in which God has spoken" (IEL 101). If Levinas understood the event of one-being-turned-toward-and-being-there-for-the-other as purely ethical, why should he place God into the mix? Rather than reducing religion to ethics, ethics is a point of view or an 'optics' from which religion becomes meaningful for him. In an interview conducted by Bertrand Révillon, first published in 1994 ("On the Usefulness of Insomnia"), Levinas says: "For me, theology begins in the face of the neighbor. The divinity of God is played out in the human. God descends in the 'face' of the other" (IEL 236). In my judgment, this explicitly theological model would not work if Levinas had bid adieu to the biblical God.

However, even though the 'God = humanity' equation does not work for Levinas—and the term 'God' is much more than an "empty notion," "a placeholder," or "the name for responsibility within the interhuman," as Jill Robbins (2001, p. 19) has put it in line with Westphal—, one question remains: if we can encounter God in the face of the other person, why has God himself lost all personal features, for Levinas? Other than the God of Abraham and Kierkegaard, Levinas' God apparently does not speak when he is alone with a human being.[7]

---

[7] I agree with Jeffrey Dudiak (2008, p. 112) that "God, in Levinas, is the name for that which binds me irremissibly to the other human being, or is this binding itself, in a binding that is one of the core meanings of religion." Dudiak does not think of God "as the other end from us of an 'intentional' relationship (as we find in Kierkegaard) […], but as prior to *any* intentionality" (ibid.), thereby rejecting Westphal's point that an "inverse intentionality" is at play in the God-relation (cf. ibid., p. 120, n. 49). In contrast to Dudiak, I do not think we should discard the notion of intentionality in this context. Inverse intentionality still presupposes intentionality in its ordinary sense (the object-directness of consciousness), without which we would not even notice another's focus of attention being directed at us. Reducing God to an intentional object (the *noema* of thought or belief) is, of course, inadequate, and ascribing noetic processes to God might seem to be too speculative. *If* God as Wholly Other is also the creator *and* redeemer of humankind, he must be prior to *and* higher than human intentionality, both preceding and exceeding human experience. However, the question of whether he himself has *personal* traits or is rather the *non-personal* origin of personhood and the *impersonal* condition of possibility for ethical responsibility and self-obligation is still unanswered.

Having reached this crossroads, let us look back and see how Levinas arrives at this point. In his conversation with Philippe Nemo, Levinas refers to Jewish mysticism and "certain very old prayers" in which the faithful one *begins* by saying "Thou" to God and *finishes* the proposition by saying "He" (in Latin: *ille,* in French: *il*)—which is, to Levinas' mind, nothing other than that which he has called the "illeity" of the Infinite (EI 106). Thus the apparent shift in Levinas' later thinking is grounded in an unresolved tension in the concept of God, which reflects an age-old human experience with the divine: that the distance grows in the approach. It is noteworthy that the insight into God's supervening transcendence occurs in dialogue with him. Conversely, even if God is not addressed personally, it can happen that he suddenly, surprisingly, and unexpectedly comes to mind in an exchange of glances, thoughts, or gestures with another human being. Nonetheless, it is conspicuous that Levinas leaves out one characteristic in his speech about God, which for Kierkegaard is the most outstanding attribute of God: love.[8] This brings us to the next section.

God as Love—Personal and Trans-Personal? Kierkegaard and Buber

When writing my PhD dissertation on God's (non)phenomenality and the problem of theodicy, my office mate, a philosopher, asked one day: "Who or what is God?" I replied that, for Kierkegaard, on whose writings I focused at that time, God is love—but this makes the problem of theodicy even more intricate, for how can a loving God tolerate evil? She looked at me and said: "Well, if God is the same as love, why not just speak about love and drop God?" That's a reasonable objection, which has given me a lot to think about. However, if the equation 'God = love' is not an equation with equal qualities, we would suffer a loss if we dropped one part and only kept the other. Eberhard Jüngel (1977, pp. 446–448) has argued that this is indeed the case. While the subject and the predicate in the proposition 'God is love' interpret one another, there is an asymmetry between divine and human love because the latter is dependent on the former. Love is grounded in God in that he alone can elicit the event of love. Provided that he alone can begin to love— regardless of whether or not the beloved is loveworthy—we cannot drop 'God' and just speak of love.

Kierkegaard oscillates between two definitions of 'love' within the unequal equation 'God = love.' On the one hand, he personifies love. For Kierkegaard, God is not only a loving God; he is love *in person*, in fact the only person who *is* love. On the other hand, when speaking of love as middle term between persons, Kierkegaard seems to understand love as a transpersonal spirit of love. This duplexity goes back to the New Testament. Kierkegaard aligns himself with the tradition of 1 John 4:16, where God is identified with love ("God is love"), and where the human dwelling *in love* is said to be equivalent with remaining *in God* as well as God's remaining *in the human being* ("Whoever lives in love lives in God,

---

[8] This does, of course, not mean that love is irrelevant for Levinas (see, e.g., Beals 2007, Chapter 3. on "Levinasian Love"); it only means that he remains silent about *divine* love.

and God in them"[9]). Note here the mutual intertwining of being 'in' the respective other.

The opening prayer to Kierkegaard's first series of the "Christian deliberations" collected in *Works of Love* (1847) reflects the idea that God is a lover who can be bespoken. Kierkegaard addresses God in the vocative with the help of a Trinitarian formula and three rhetorical questions, which all begin with the phrase: "How could one speak properly about love if you were forgotten [...]"? The first question is directed to "you God of love, source of all love in heaven and on earth [...]" (i.e. God Father as creator), the second to "you who revealed what love is, you our Savior and Redeemer [...]" (i.e. Jesus Christ), and the third to "you Spirit of love, who take nothing of your own [...]" (i.e. the Holy Spirit) (WL 3). All questions are comprised by the ensuing exclamation: "O Eternal Love, you who are everywhere present and never without witness where you are called upon" (WL 4). Kierkegaard is loyal to the early Christian creed, which describes God as three *hypostaseis*—an interpersonal communion of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Since the Spirit is also regarded as a 'person,' one cannot separate God's 'personality' from his omnipresence as Spirit and declare the latter to be a nonpersonal power. Rather, both aspects must be 'seen' together. To perform such an intellectual 'synopsis' is quite a challenge. Let me reconstruct Kierkegaard's attempt to do so in *Works of Love*.[10]

According to Kierkegaard, a person meets his or her neighbor only through God, who is the "middle term" [*Mellembestemmelsen*] (WL 107 / SKS 9, 111) of the relation, that is, the 'through-which' of the relation, or, so to speak, the 'catalyst' that binds the two. Love "is by no means a separate and third thing but is the middle term" of any love relationship (WL 260). For this reason, the relation to the neighbor is basically a relation to God, and vice versa. Kierkegaard can also call the neighbor the middle term of the God-relationship (cf. WL 142).[11] In God, or in love, self and neighbor are united. Yet this 'interior' (spiritual) unity does not involve the fusion of self and neighbor in their existence in the 'exterior' (phenomenal) world.

Now, if love can be 'in' a person only if it moves 'between' two persons, can it then be ascribed to persons at all? This is all the more questionable, as Kierkegaard's language usage indicates that love is like a 'room to move' in which a person can abide and which can be entered or left. The reference to the spatial realm implied in the preposition 'in' is problematic, since it belongs to the limited sphere of exteriority, while the spirit's love [*Aands-Kjerlighed*] is said to be infinite and allegedly "cannot be outwardly expressed, since it is indeed inwardness [*Indvorteshed*]" (WL 146 / SKS 9, 147). Love is 'in' a person only if it reaches another person. It is in itself, in its element, only if it is for someone else. When speaking of the 'Spirit of love' or 'the spirit's love,' Kierkegaard does not mean

---

[9] Unless indicated otherwise, quotes from the Bible are cited according to the New International Version (NIV).

[10] For a more detailed account, see Welz (2008), pp. 108–116, especially pp. 114–116.

[11] It is therefore inaccurate to describe Kierkegaard and Levinas' "fundamental disagreement" as follows: "Levinas insists that the neighbor is always the middle term between me and God, while Kierkegaard insists that it is God who is always the middle term between me and my neighbor" (Westphal 2008, p. 5).

spirit in a psychological sense (i.e., spirit in distinction from the soul and the body), but rather in a pneumatological sense (i.e., divine spirit in distinction from the human mind when being in a state of self-enclosure or self-centeredness).

For Kierkegaard, interhuman love relations are intimately related to God. The God-relationship is mediated by the relation to the neighbor, and the relation to the neighbor is mediated by the God-relationship. Both relations influence each other: "to love people is to love God, and to love God is to love people—what you do unto people, you do unto God, and therefore what you do unto people, God does unto you" (WL 384). Here it might appear as if Kierkegaard understands God's love as a personal agent. Insofar as divine love remains independent of the human love that God commands, his love might be termed a 'subject' of its own; nonetheless, this 'subject' must not be confused with human lovers, because God would then become a finite agent, too. Shall we, alternatively, assume that God is an eternal agent? Ulrich Lincoln, for instance, speaks of divine love as "the true transcendent subject of action" (cf. Lincoln 2000, pp. 43, 103).[12] However, if human beings also have the possibility of being the subjects of their own actions and not just the vehicles of God's self-expression, then this manner of speaking is, at least in part, misleading.

While Kierkegaard personifies God's love, it nevertheless does not directly interact with human persons. Rather, it is a spiritual reality 'between' persons who act—a reality that is not just transcendent and 'beyond' them, but qualifies the situation in which they act. As such, however, it neither appears as another loving subject next to the lover and the beloved, nor as an object they could give or receive; rather, it works as *the medium* by which one person loves another person (cf. Welz 2007a, p. 478). Thus, in understanding love as 'middle term,' Kierkegaard succeeds in circumventing false alternatives. For instance, is love an event or an entity? Insofar as there would be no 'event' of love without lovers acting lovingly, love is more than an impersonal event; and insofar as love is an immaterial gift, namely the gift of self-giving and becoming present to another in a beneficial way, it is not an entity in the usual sense of the word, but rather requires embodied and ensouled 'entities' performing love in this world.

Another author who has famously dealt with these issues is Martin Buber. In the Second Part of *I and Thou* (1923), Buber defines 'spirit' in a way that is reminiscent of the Kierkegaardian 'middle term': emphasizing its 'in-between-ness' rather than its subjectivity. "Spirit is not in the I but between I and You. It is not like the blood that circulates in you but like the air in which you breathe" (IaT 89). As Shmuel Hugo Bergman (1991, p. 236) has put it, this 'between' is "the province of the spirit. […] Air is not our possession; it only connects man with man" and thereby envelopes people. Moreover, spirit as a relational power is communicative. For

---

[12] Lincoln is aware of the problem (cf. ibid., p. 463) and therefore distinguishes between the finite and the absolute subject of love; nevertheless, he speaks of human love as a 'direct phenomenon' of divine love (cf. ibid., p. 208) and of divine love as "dem eigentlichen, transzendenten Subjekt des Handelns" (ibid., p. 320).

Buber, spirit is not only a transpersonal force that penetrates and transforms the world. Rather, he formulates that "the essence of the spirit" is "being able to say You" (IaT 100). According to the Third Part of the book, God is for him "the eternal You"—with characteristics that are untypical for ordinary persons, as this You "cannot be placed within measure and limit, not even within the measure of the immeasurable and the limit of the unlimited; […] because it is not to be found either in or outside the world" (IaT 160f). Like Kierkegaard, Buber avoids counterposing notions that belong together, and like Kierkegaard, he uses the paradox in order to articulate the affiliation of antithetical options.[13]

Irene Kajon writes trenchantly that the reality of love or spirit, which allows the 'between' or *Zwischen* to be established, "is not a mediating element that can be hypostatized or substantiated"; rather, spirit "is effective only in its unifying function of different beings" (Kajon 2015, p. 108). But, given that spirit is "a force that is not an independent being" (ibid.), does this provide an argument against designating God as a person? In 1957, Buber wrote an afterword to his book, where he argues that the designation of God as a person is indispensable, although the concept of personhood is, "of course, utterly incapable of describing the nature of God; but it is permitted and necessary to say that God is *also* a person" (IaT 181). The contradiction that a person, by definition, is an independent individual and yet relativized by the plurality of other individuals—which cannot be said of God—is met by "the paradoxical designation of God as the absolute person" (ibid.) entering into a direct relationship to us. As Buber describes this absolute person, it seems to unite traits of the Trinity invoked by Kierkegaard. Furthermore, the definition of God as 'absolute person' merges aspects of human persons with the idea of a God who surpasses all of them.

---

[13] Leslie Zeigler (1960, p. 82) correctly points out that, for Kierkegaard, God is "the Personal Spirit who can be known by man only as he makes himself known to man." My reading deviates from hers when she claims that "the category of 'the individual' means that, for Kierkegaard, human existence is constituted by individual persons in relationship," while Buber locates reality "between persons rather than within them" (ibid., p. 88)—for two reasons: (1) Kierkegaard's relational self is constituted by relating to itself via relating to others, such that it would not make sense to postulate the existence of individual persons apart from the relationships in which they are involved. (2) Kierkegaard's notion of God as middle term between persons does not imply that spiritual reality can be confined to a place 'within' a person. Thus the 'between' and the 'within' are not an either/or—neither for Kierkegaard nor for Buber. Let me use Buber's metaphor to explain this: we could not breathe at all if the air only surrounded us, but did not enter our lungs. If the spirit is like air, it must be everywhere.

Zeigler then argues that the I-Thou relation, upon which Buber's philosophy of dialogue is built, does not give us knowledge of that to which we become related: "We can only meet that which remains undisclosed" (ibid., p. 93). In her view, Buber's philosophy denies direct knowledge of persons attained by personal encounter, while for Kierkegaard "such personal knowledge is the *essential* knowledge," which "requires God as the middle term and hence is grounded in revelation and response, that is, an act of God and an act of man" (ibid.). In viewing God as a divine agent, she overlooks the same point as Lincoln: that God is not a loving subject on a par with human lovers.

Buber elaborates on this issue in his book *Eclipse of God* (1953), which contains his 1943 essay "Die Liebe zu Gott und die Gottesidee" (G 51–65 / EG 47–62). Section I. is, as it were, the prelude that intonates the opposition between the love of God and the idea of God. Here Buber refers to Blaise Pascal's declared belief in the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, not the God of philosophers and scholars (1654)—a belief which is a commitment to a living God, not just an idea of a deity (cf. G 51 / EG 49f). In section V., Buber refers to Hermann Cohen's posthumously published work *Religion der Vernunft aus den Quellen des Judentums* (*Religion of Reason, from the Sources of Judaism*) (1919), where Cohen asks: "How one can love an idea?"—replying, "How could one love anything save an idea?"—and substantiating his reply by saying, "For even in the love of the senses one loves only the idealized person, only the idea of the person" (G 61 / EG 59). Buber objects that even the idealized person remains a person. Only if the idealized person actually exists can he or she be loved. In parentheses, Buber turns sensual love (*sinnliche Liebe*) into sensuality-comprising love (*sinnlichkeitsumfassende Liebe*) (cf. ibid.). In a similar fashion, he corrects Cohen's definition of human love of God as love of the moral ideal (*Liebe zum sittlichen Ideal*) by stating that love of God is not identical with this ideal, but only includes it. Buber's argument culminates in the following sentences:

> Someone who loves God loves the ideal and loves God more than the ideal. And by him, […] by that *absolute person* [we call] God, not by the ideal, he knows himself to be loved. Does this mean that God 'is' a person? The absolute character of his person, that paradox of paradoxes, prohibits such a predication. It only means that God loves as a person and wants to be loved like a person. [My translation][14]

Buber adds that the deepest ground of the Jewish idea of God can only be reached through immersion in the *Ehje,* in the 'I-shall-be-there' by which God revealed himself to Moses, which has for all times dictated the meaning and content of the idea of God. The personal being-there of God, his living presence, is the attribute that most directly touches the human being to whom God makes himself known (cf. G 64 / EG 61f). The idea of God, "that masterpiece of man's construction," is for Buber only the most lofty or sublime of all the images by which human beings imagine the imageless, aniconic God (G 65 / EG 62). However, when human beings learn to love God, they experience an actuality that overruns and rises above the idea.

Kierkegaard and Buber agree at least on one thing: that all conceptualizations of God remain rough approximations and that God and the phenomenon of love are not to be seen as totally equal. Furthermore, both thinkers insist on "the essentially relational constitution" of the human 'I' (Šajda 2011, p. 42). While Kierkegaard identifies God with a form of love that oscillates between being personal and

---

[14] The German original (G 62) runs as follows: "Wer Gott liebt, liebt das Ideal und liebt Gott mehr als es. Und von ihm, nicht von einem Ideal, […] von ihm, der *absoluten Person* Gott, weiß er sich geliebt. Heißt das, daß Gott Person 'ist'? Der Absolutheitscharakter seiner Person, die Paradoxie der Paradoxien, verbietet solch eine Aussage. Es heißt nur, daß er als Person liebt und als Person geliebt werden will." Cf. EG 60, where *Person* is translated as "personality."

transpersonal, Buber's God is called an absolute person precisely in regard to his loving and being-loved; but here, too, the concept of human personhood is too narrow to harbor God's hidden, overflowing presence, since God's presence can neither be reduced to embodied presence in one place nor to metaphysical presence in an inaccessible 'beyond.' Instead, his presence is a becoming-present when- and wherever a creature addresses itself to him. The next question, then, is how we can 'receive' the gift of God's invisible co-presence, which involves his self-presentation. In order to answer this question, I will first make recourse to Kierkegaard and then to Rosenzweig (cf. Welz 2008, pp. 99–105, 197–200[15]).

God's 'Name'—A Self-Giving Gift? Kierkegaard and Rosenzweig

In his 1843 *Upbuilding Discourses* on James 1:17–22 ("Every Good and Every Perfect Gift Is from Above"), Kierkegaard describes God as "the only good" (EUD 133) that is "a gift" (EUD 134). God lays down the conditions for the reception of the gift along with the gift itself (cf. EUD 134–137) because we have no access to the absolute, unless it makes a gift of itself. For us, there is no way "to the secret hiding place of the good," and that is the reason why the good, which is beyond phenomenalization, has to come down from above (cf. EUD 135). David Kangas has called attention to the fact that Kierkegaard here rearticulates some basic structures of the Neoplatonic theological tradition.[16] According to book VII of Plato's *Republic,* the good as ultimate origin of being remains 'beyond being' and beyond knowability. In his discourses, Kierkegaard does not just expose the non-determinability of the good, but also its self-communication, which permits human participation in the good (cf. EUD 134).

   In another discourse of 1843, "The Strengthening in the Inner Being" is regarded as effect of God's fatherly love, which is "*a gift from God*" (EUD 98). Kierkegaard admits that when we call God 'Father' this 'name' [*Benævnelse*] is a figurative, metaphorical [*billedligt, overført*] expression drawn from earthly life (EUD 99 / SKS 5, 104). Metaphors are not brand-new words but rather already-given words endowed with an extra meaning. It is crucial that we understand this extra meaning. While the designation of God as 'Father' remains "figurative and unreal" [*uegentligt og uvirkeligt*] for the one who looks at the external [*det Udvortes*], the inner being [*det indvortes Menneske*] understands that this expression is "the truest and most literal expression" because God not only gives the gift, but is "completely present in the whole gift" (ibid.). Our Father in heaven remains hidden precisely because he gives himself totally, which would be impossible for an earthly father. Instead of drawing conclusions from earthly fathers to the heavenly Father,

---

[15] Apart from my 2008 dissertation, there is no secondary literature on the connection between Kierkegaard and Rosenzweig regarding the problem of language as related to the question of God's personhood, so I will concentrate on the primary sources and explain my finding, which was a genuine discovery.

[16] James 1:17 is a defining text for this tradition. It was a favorite text of Pseudo-Dionysius and Eriugena, Eckhart devoted two important sermons to it, and Nicholas of Cusa explicated his metaphysics with an exegesis of the text in his *De Dato Patris Luminum.* Cf. Kangas (2000).

Kierkegaard turns things around and says that from God all fatherliness in heaven and on earth derives its name (cf. EUD 98, 100). Compared to God's fatherliness, even the most loving father among human beings would still be "but a stepfather, a shadow, a reflection, a simile, an image [*et Billede*], a dark saying" (EUD 100 / SKS 5, 104). Kierkegaard does not disapprove of this transfer of meaning itself; he acknowledges that the metaphor, a single word with a double reference, manages to refer to the invisible *in* referring to the visible. However, he is aware of how dangerous it might be to establish a division between 'true' reality and its 'unreal' image.[17] This is unfortunately not evident in the English translation. The Hongs (and Kangas alike) translate both *billedligt* and *overført* as 'metaphorical.' Yet the point of the metaphor is precisely that it is not just an image. Rather, it is the very *connection* between the visible and the invisible dimensions of reality.

If the metaphorical meaning of the word is only an image of something more real, the question is where we find 'the original.' Ordinarily, one would seek it in the visible world, to which the literal meaning of the word refers, but then the invisible would inevitably be shaped in (or as) its image. For instance, the invisible Father in heaven then appears like visible fathers on earth. When Kierkegaard speaks of God as 'Father' or as a self-giving 'gift,' he does not oppose the literal and figural meanings of the word. What is at issue here is a figural meaning for which *there is no* corresponding (and opposing) 'proper' meaning of a concept. Does this mean that the *concept* of God can be replaced by the *appellation* and metaphorical *naming* of God? This question is provocative, but the point I wish to press here is whether we can call God whatever we would like to call him, or whether there is a criterion for more or less adequate speech of, to, and about God.

Franz Rosenzweig can help us to ponder on this question. In 1913, after a nocturnal discussion in Leipzig with his friend Eugen Rosenstock-Huessy, Rosenzweig—who grew up in an assimilated Jewish home—nearly converted to Christianity. He decided to remain a Jew, but the friends took up their discussion again in a remarkable exchange of letters that were written at two different fronts in Europe during WWI. This 1916 wartime correspondence is the first and probably most important Jewish-Christian dialogue of the twentieth century, as well as the cradle of the philosophy of dialogue. In one of these letters, Rosenzweig outlines a key difference between the Jewish and the Christian relations to God. A Christian has to learn from someone else to call God 'our Father,' whereas the Jew can afford an "unmediated closeness to God": "To the Jew, that God is our Father is the first and most self-evident fact—and what need is there for a third person between me and my father in Heaven?" (Rosenstock-Huessy 2011, p. 113, letter no. 11) For Rosenzweig, this implies that he can dispense with Christology and pneumatology because he already has direct access to God. How can he be so sure of this? Let us delve a bit deeper into his universe of thought.

In 1921, after the publication of his *magnum opus*, the *Star of Redemption,* Rosenzweig was invited to present his philosophy in a more accessible form. He did so in *The Little Book of Common Sense and Sick Reason.* Rosenzweig's lectures and

---

[17] For further examples of Kierkegaard's use of metaphor and the positive role of images that are not opposed to reality and do not merely illustrate, but perform it, see Purkarthofer (2000).

a seminar he gave on German idealism from Kant to Hegel at the Jewish *Lehrhaus* in Frankfurt served as preparation; however, he was unsatisfied with the manuscript and decided not to publish it.[18] Rosenzweig declares in this manuscript that idealism and anti-idealism are equally harmful, since all these '-isms' seek an essence hidden behind reality, be it "das 'Geistige'" (BM 54) or something else. Instead, he identifies the essence of the world with its appearance (cf. BM 68f). In regard to God as well, Rosenzweig encourages us to look for essence in the heart of appearance, and not somewhere behind it; to look for it not in a single phenomenon, but in the abundant whole: "He is everything which at any time bore the name of God; all the gods and idols of man assemble and in their transient manifestations and transformations make up that which we call God. God is the sum of all His manifestations, transient though they be" (USH 77 / BM 98). God becomes phenomenal insofar and exactly in the way he is experienced, imagined, or thought by us.

   Identifying God with the totality of linguistic expressions naming God in one way or another is of course rather daring, for how can we then distinguish between his own or 'true' name and the misnomer? Rosenzweig rightly rejects the view that we could compare God as he 'appears' when he is called with God as he 'is' in himself, since the very comparison between God's 'appearance in language' and God's 'reality' cannot take place anywhere other than *in language*—as a comparison of different nomenclatures. If it is indeed language that erects a 'visible bridge' to the 'other' (cf. USH 68 / BM 87), how are we to visualize God? Rosenzweig hints that this is not completely arbitrary. He looks for a quality of God that is beyond the reach of all our ideas and fantasies, sufficiently external to God, yet despite its externality so inseparable from him that it belongs to him—and finds his name, proper name and noun alike, the name that God bears for our sake, so that we may call him (cf. USH 78–80 / BM 100–102). His name is not invented by us, but rather revealed by himself.

   Calling a person by name does not only make the person 'visible' to others, it also forces the person into the presence of mind (cf. USH 69 / BM 87). Does this apply to God as well? For Rosenzweig, God's name signifies his reality in relation to human beings: his being-for-us. He does not translate Exodus 3:14 (אהיה אשר אהיה) with 'I am who I am,' since this would be too static, denoting God's being in a Platonic fashion. Rosenzweig stresses that היה is a word of becoming, occurring, happening. God names himself as the One who will be there for the one who calls him and needs him, as the One who comes and helps. God's ever-present eternity and 'absolute being' becomes 'visible' precisely in these events (cf. the letter to Martin Goldner (23.06.1927) in GS I, 1161). Accordingly, the Tetragrammaton comes to life as a meaningful name only in the address. It entails a mutual relation and different dimensions of being-present-to-me: "die Anredbarkeit, die Vernehmbarkeit, die Beredbarkeit" (GS I, 1162), i.e. God can be called 'You', the call can be heard by the 'I', and the 'I' and the 'You' can speak to each other.

---

[18] Cf. his self-critical letters to 'Gritli' (Margrit Rosenstock-Huessy) of July and August 1921 (in: GB 748ff).

Normally, proper names function in terms of identification and deixis, i.e., by identifying and localizing individuals in time and space. Calling a person by name means that something of that person becomes present to the speaker (cf. Hartenstein 2007, p. 31f). God's 'vocativity' (understood as his being called by a human person in response to his having spoken to the respective person), however, makes a magical understanding of his becoming-present impossible, since God's name cannot be 'used' in such a way that human beings could force him to become present in space–time. Both as a proper name and a common name, the name of God remains 'improper'[19]: God cannot be identified and localized in the same way as human beings. Accordingly, Exodus 3:14 also conveys the following message: 'You don't know me, and you cannot fathom me, but nonetheless, I am the One who will be there for you…" Hence God's being-there-for-us is not due to our own intellectual insight or an act of our will, but rather to his self-giving gift of self-presentation.

In a section on the proper name in the *Star* (cf. SR 186–188 / SE 207–209), Rosenzweig writes that there must be "a where in the world, a visible spot whence revelation radiates, and a when, a yet echoing moment, where revelation first opened its mouth" (SR 187 / SE 209). Revelation gives orientation and puts our experience on a firm foundation. "The ground of revelation is midpoint and beginning in one; it is the revelation of the divine name," and this name is not just sound and smoke—what's in a name?—but "word and fire" (SR 188 / SE 209). In his letter to Margarete Susman (22.02.1922, cf. GS I, 752), Rosenzweig confirms that this very sentence, which she took as the motto for her essay on the *Star*, is what he considers the core of the whole, refuting the words that Goethe placed in the mouth of Faust: "Denn Name ist nicht Schall und Rauch, sondern Wort und Feuer. Den Namen gilt es zu nennen und zu bekennen: Ich glaub' ihn" (SE 209). Rosenzweig regards it as imperative to mention, confess, and trust in God's divine name, which is, for him, not as futile as sound and smoke, but a word that burns like fire in the heart of those who search for warmth in the cold, light in the darkness, and for liberating language in the frosty silence.

In a letter to Gertrud Oppenheim, which anticipates this central theme of the *Star* (30/31.5.1917, cf. GS I, 413–415[20]), Rosenzweig explains that coldness, darkness,

---

[19] I owe this idea to Vincent Delecroix, whom I wish to thank for his comments on my above-mentioned Copenhagen lecture (delivered on August 27, 2014).

[20] The German original runs as follows: "Denn die Offenbarung begründet ein Oben und Unten […] und ein Früher und Später […]. Das Grenzenlose ('Absolute'!) steigt zur Erde nieder und zieht von hier aus, von dem Orte seines Niedersteigens, Grenzen in das Meer des Raums und die Strömung der Zeit. […] Es ist nichts mehr überall und nirgends, sondern es sind Richtlatten eingeschlagen; man weiß wo man steht und man weiß das Ziel. Statt des Überall des unnennbaren Gefühls das 'den Finger drauf!' des *Namens*. Und zwar des Namens, der *nicht* 'Schall und Rauch' ist. Nicht Schall und Rauch, sondern Wort und Feuer. Wo das *Wort* gehört wird, da ist es *vorbei* mit dem Schweigen, der Stille, der Stummheit, und auch dem Lärm, dem Schrei, dem Tierlaut. Und wo das *Feuer* brennt, da gibt es keine Kälte und kein Dunkel. Es *gibt* zwar noch all das, aber eben nur dort wo das Wort und das Feuer *noch nicht* hingedrungen ist; aber es sind ihnen ja keine Grenzen gesetzt; das Wort tönt fort durch die Zeit, von Mund zu Mund, und das Feuer breitet sich aus im Raum. Eben durch das Einbrechen des *Namens* in das Chaos des Unbenannten, das so und auch anders heißen kann (und das überhaupt 'auch *anders* kann'), ist der Schauplatz und der Inhalt der Weltgeschichte entstanden. […] Gott *ist* nicht alles, sondern 'von ihm und *zu* ihm' ist alles. Also gelehrt ausgedrückt: er steht zu allem in *Beziehung*. Er ist nur einiges, genau gesagt

and muteness exist only where the word and fire of God's name has *not yet* come. Here Rosenzweig clarifies that God *is not* 'everything,' but relates to everything, and everything is related to him. As the 'God in heaven' he is not that important for us; important for us is his descendence to earth, the point of contact or the horizon where heaven touches the earth. Rosenzweig in fact identifies God with this point or horizon. The optical metaphor indicates that neither heaven nor the earth are definable in themselves, and the point at which they meet is not definitively determinable if it is a horizon. A horizon cannot be delimited. God appears to us only when he is seen together with what he is not. Although he is not one of the phenomena of or in this world, he becomes present only in connection with and in contrast to the phenomenal world. God's manifestation in his name differs from the manifestation of other phenomena in that God's 'givenness' in the name presupposes his giving of himself and his being called by us. God's phenomenality in his name is bound to his revelation, which is not visibility in general. What is rendered visible and audible is precisely the relation *between* God and his opposite—a relation that is realized and actualized only in an interaction. Addressed by his name, God appears as unmistakably distinguished from the apparent horizon of the world and also from our own horizons. For Rosenzweig, language is the locus from which God can become phenomenally present. God's appearance in his name *is* his reality, which is shared in being communicated.[21]

Thus Kierkegaard and Rosenzweig agree on the following three points regarding criteria for theological reflection about God and communication with God: (1) We have to resort to metaphorical language if we want to speak of God at all—with the proviso that we do not transfer the meaning of our experiences with earthly fathers to God when we call him 'Father.' The anthropomorphism of figural language is tolerable only if it is based on theomorphism. (2) Human speech *about* God can only be correct if it is consistent with human speech *to* God, that is, what we say about 'him' from a third-person perspective must correspond to what we can say to God when 'he' has turned into a 'You' and is addressed by 'me' from a first-person perspective in a second-personal encounter. (3) Therefore, we need not take leave of the concept of God, but define it in keeping with God's name in which he gives and reveals himself to us.

In summary, it can be said, therefore, that formal and content-related criteria need to be combined. In this way, the concept of God can be developed and

---

Footnote 20 continued

nur eines, der Punkt des *Herniedersteigens*, der Horizont in dem sich Himmel und Erde *berühren*. […] Die *Wirklichkeit* des Ziels in der Welt der Wirklichkeiten, das ist was ich brauche. […] Praktisch kommt es sogar *nur* darauf an, daß man mit dieser Wirklichkeit zusammenwächst. 'Gott im Himmel' ist durchaus Nebensache."

[21] Bergman (1991, p. 191) underlines the social function of calling God by name. While we need a human being's name in order to gain access to him or her, we can address God even in silence; nonetheless, it makes sense to call him by name: "God has a name for the sake of man and also for the sake of the world. He allows man to call him by name so that those who do so will become a congregation."

revisited in the process of prayer, in which the person praying is also transformed and acquires a new understanding of his or her relation to God.[22]

Inconclusive Conclusion

Having come full circle, we return to our point of departure: the question of how we are to understand God's 'personhood.' I did not promise a solution to the difficulty of defining the concept of God, so let us dwell a little longer on the problematic points. The imagined dialogues between Kierkegaard, Levinas, Buber, and Rosenzweig have shown that the concept of God as the unknown and unthinkable is at best a limit-concept. Yet we only reach its limits if we *try* to get to know God. In this enterprise, thought will come to nought. Inevitably. Can this enterprise, then, ever be a happy one?

Let me round off with an anecdote. In the Easter holidays, a desperate theology student walked around in Jerusalem. How to rely on the resurrection of someone who was killed by people who didn't believe he was more than human? This is indeed hard to believe. And how to make sense of the doctrine of a triune God? The student went into the Church of the Holy Sepulcher and was addressed by a monk. "You look so sad!"—"Yes," said the student, "I think I have lost faith. I don't understand any longer what it is that we celebrate these days."—The student was led to another monk, reportedly a very intelligent man who had also studied theology. He listened to the student. And then he said: "I cannot help you in regard to the conceptual problems of understanding who God is. But what about telling Christ what's on your mind?" He paused. And then he continued, beaming with joy: "I can't explain these things to you. I just love Christ! He is in my heart and I love him." This monk's heart had reached the unreachable. He had managed to turn the frustration of having to think and speak *about* God, while not being able to do so, into the happiness of speaking *to* him, thereby forgetting about the difficulty of defining the concept of God. I think Kierkegaard would have agreed with him. In his *Christian Discourses* (1848), Kierkegaard writes that a human being cannot "come closer and closer to God by lifting up his head higher and higher, but inversely by casting himself down ever more deeply in worship" (CD 292 / SKS 10, 314). Sylvia Walsh (2013, p. 295) comments on this passage that "whatever we say about God is based on human criteria, which are woefully inadequate, even if the purest, noblest, most loving human being were used as a basis for comparison with and speech about the divine." Is God's adoration in prayer, then, more appropriate than purely intellectual approaches to him?

As Reiner Preul has argued, when a human being prays, the question of whether or not God is a person is already decided, because praying means addressing oneself to God, which presupposes that there is a personal counterpart who can be approached and who does not only hear, but is also able to comply with requests, if

---

[22] Kierkegaard's 1844 upbuilding discourse "One Who Prays Aright Struggles in Prayer and Is Victorious—in That God Is Victorious" illuminates this process and the problem of determining criteria for adequate speech *about* and *to* God. For a discussion of the intellectual and existential moves in this discourse in comparison with the work of the Jewish aphorist Elazar Benyoëtz, see Welz (2014).

he wants to. It is difficult to argue convincingly for God's personhood *remota oratione,* apart from prayer (cf. Preul 2007, pp. 99, 103). Yet, it is far from self-evident why one should establish a personal relation to God and speak to him. If one does so, it is serious. One cannot pray in a hypothetical manner à la Voltaire, who is said to have jestingly recommended to pray as follows: 'Dear God, if you exist, then save my soul, if I have one.'[23] Prayer requires whole-hearted commitment that embraces the passion of thought. It is in prayer that we become God's children—in calling upon God our Father. Following Preul, one could say that *God* is a person for us because and insofar as he turns *us* into persons, both in the sense of letting us be and of conducting us to reaching our personal destination (cf. ibid., p. 119f[24]).

Whether or not we believe in a personal God who turns us into his children when we call him 'our Father,' for the time being we must reckon with the preliminarity of all predications. Whether they are true or not cannot be decided by us. There is only one who can verify or falsify them: God himself (cf. Hartenstein 2007, p. 45f). For this reason, the above-described difficulties in defining the concept of God cannot be resolved by pondering about God while averting one's face from him. This implies that a second-personal approach to God has an added value. Let me, with reference to Bergman, explain the importance of the vocative case as second-person speech in direct address.

Bergman writes, "When we speak *about* a person rather than *to* him, a 180-degree turn has occurred. In this case I have turned my back to him; in the former case I have turned *toward* him" (Bergman 1991, p. 166). While a scientist aspires to give an objective account of things, speaking in the indicative and third person, the name 'God' would not be *God* without addressing him (cf. ibid., p. 167). In this line of reasoning, 'Thou' is the most important personal pronoun, "for only from the 'Thou' can the 'I' be created" (ibid., p. 168). Hence the ego cannot be the beginning of philosophy. Referring to Samuel 3:5, where the calling comes first and establishes the 'I' of the one being called, Bergman describes the liturgical grammar invented by Rosenzweig's friend Eugen Rosenstock-Huessy, which "would challenge Descartes' 'Cogito ergo sum' to read, 'God, you have called me, therefore I am'" (ibid., p. 169). The difference between the second-personal address and third-personal statements can also be illustrated by the difference between 'I love you' (which is the most daring utterance) and 'He loves her' (which is merely gossip) (cf. ibid., p. 232). So do we end up with a defense of the creative and transformative nature of prayer, while accommodating the insight that we cannot account for divine personhood (which is an ethical and epistemological limit-concept)?

William Desmond (2008, p. 197) has pointed out that our sense of 'person' is tied to finite centers of mindful life; a personal God, however, would have to be "an infinite center of mindful life" that is everywhere, without being closed into itself. We cannot put a face on God's infinity. Insofar as God is unlike the human, he is not

---

[23] Cf. Preul (2007, p. 111) (my own translation of "Lieber Gott, wenn's dich gibt, rette meine Seele, wenn ich eine habe"). Unfortunately, Preul does not give a reference to the Voltaire-quote.

[24] In German: "[…] *weil und indem er uns zur Person macht*—'macht' in dem Doppelsinne des Daseinlassens und des Geleits zur Erfüllung der Bestimmung unseres Personseins […]."

just personal, but includes also "a meta-personal or non-personal otherness beyond all finite manifestation" (ibid.). Moreover, Desmond calls attention to the fact that personal communication is, at the same time, also trans- or inter-personal, in that communication is a transcending that happens between person and person, something that is *per-sonans,* i.e., sounding through (cf. ibid., p. 196f). In this sense, a person can be understood as "an acoustic passage" or "a porosity of transition, in which an energy of being more original than itself passes in communication"—and God presents himself as both a personal and trans-personal "*logos* of the *metaxu,*" i.e., a word in the 'between' (ibid., p. 197).

Extending Desmond's formulations, one could designate God's dynamic becoming-present to us, which is made possible with the help of his word, as the possibility condition of prayer. Without God's concrete co-presence, which is due to his being a person and at once more than a person, human beings could not call on him. If the mystery whose cipher is the word 'God' is conceived as paradox of a simultaneously personal and impersonal absolute, we need to combine first-, second-, and third-personal speech in approaching this mystery.

God may be envisaged as the midpoint of a circle. As the innermost center of the universe, he can only be approached as a 'Thou' by those who are ready to meet that which surrounds him and to also encounter their fellow creatures. God remains inaccessible to those who do not want to enter the circle and instead keep their distance. As the singular One, God nonetheless participates in everything else, yet without being all-encompassing in the static sense of an *ens entium,* a being in the highest power. The image of God as a sphere might correspond to a pan(en)theistic world view, but not to the God of the Hebrew Bible. "When the question revolves around prayer, the issue is whether God is a speaker to whom we can speak in the second person and who speaks to us with a voice that is neither ours, nor our society's, nor that of the widow, orphan, and stranger" (Westphal 2008, p. 41). Once this is granted, we may ask: "Is it not possible that the voice of the visible human face and the voice of the invisible God are in agreement?" (ibid., p. 54). We will never know if we do not listen.

References

Beals, C. (2007). *Levinas and the wisdom of love: The question of invisibility*. Waco: Baylor University Press.

Bergman, S. H. (1991). *Dialogical philosophy from Kierkegaard to Buber* (A. A. Gerstein, Trans.). Albany: State University of New York Press.

Buber, M. (G) (1994). *Gottesfinsternis* (2nd ed.). Gerlingen: Verlag Lambert Schneider.

Buber, M. (EG) (1996a). *Eclipse of God: Studies in the relation between religion and philosophy*. New York: Humanity Books.

Buber, M. (IaT) (1996). *I and Thou* (W. Kaufmann, Trans.). New York/London: Touchstone.

Chalier, C. (2002).*What ought I to do? Morality in Kant and Levinas* (J. M. Todd, Trans.). Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

De Saint Cheron, M. (2010). *Conversations with Emmanuel Levinas, 1983–1994* (G. D. Mole, Trans.). Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press.

Desmond, W. (2008). *God and the between*. Malden: Blackwell.

Dudiak, J. (2008). The greatest commandment? Religion and/or ethics. In M. K. Simmons, & D. O. Wood (Eds.) *Kierkegaard and Levinas* (pp. 99–121).

Grøn, A. (2010). At forstå—og at forstå. In J. Garff, E. Rocca, & Pia Søltoft (Eds.), *At være sig selv nærværende: Festskrift til Niels Jørgen Cappelørn* (pp. 100–115). Copenhagen: Kristeligt Dagblads Forlag.

Hartenstein, F. (2007). Personalität Gottes im Alten Testament. In W. Härle & R. Preul (Eds.), *Personalität Gottes* (pp. 19–46). Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt.

Holte, S. (2015). *Meaning and Melancholy in the thought of Emmanuel Levinas*. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht.

Jüngel, E. (1977). *Gott als Geheimnis der Welt: Zur Begründung der Theologie des Gekreuzigten im Streit zwischen Theismus und Atheismus* (2nd ed.). Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck.

Kajon, I. (2015). *Religio today: The concept of religion in Martin Buber's thought*. In P. Mendes-Flohr (Ed.), *Dialogue as a trans-disciplinary concept: Martin Buber's philosophy of dialogue and its contemporary reception* (pp. 101–112). Berlin: Walter de Gruyter.

Kangas, D. (2000). The logic of gift in Kierkegaard's four upbuilding discourses (1843). In *Kierkegaard studies. Yearbook* (pp. 100–120).

Kierkegaard, S. (PF) (1985). In H. V. Hong, & E. H. Hong (Eds.) *Philosophical fragments. Johannes Climacus* (Kierkegaard's writings, vol. VII) (H. V. Hong, & E. H. Hong, Trans.). Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Kierkegaard, S. (EUD) (1990). In H. V. Hong, & E. H. Hong (Eds.) *Eighteen upbuilding discourses* (Kierkegaard's writings, vol. V) (H. V. Hong, & E. H. Hong, Trans.). Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Kierkegaard, S. (WL) (1995). In H. V. Hong, & E. H. Hong (Eds.) *Works of love* (Kierkegaard's writings, vol. XVI) (H. V. Hong, & E. H. Hong, Trans.). Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Kierkegaard, S. (CD) (1997). In H. V. Hong, & E. H. Hong (Eds.) *Christian discourses* (Kierkegaard's writings, vol. XVII) (H. V. Hong, & E. H. Hong, Trans.). Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Kierkegaard, S. (SKS 4) (1997b). *Philosophiske Smuler*. In N. J. Cappelørn, et al. (Eds.), *Søren Kierkegaards Skrifter* (Vol. 4). Copenhagen: Søren Kierkegaard Research Centre.

Kierkegaard, S. (SKS 5) (1998). *Opbyggelige Taler 1843*. In N. J. Cappelørn, et al. (Eds.), *Søren Kierkegaards Skrifter* (Vol. 5). Copenhagen: Søren Kierkegaard Research Centre.

Kierkegaard, S. (SKS 9) (2004a). *Kjerlighedens Gjerninger*. In N. J. Cappelørn, et al. (Eds.), *Søren Kierkegaards Skrifter* (Vol. 9). Copenhagen: Søren Kierkegaard Research Centre.

Kierkegaard, S. (SKS 10) (2004b). *Christelige Taler*. In N. J. Cappelørn, et al. (Eds.), *Søren Kierkegaards Skrifter* (Vol. 10). Copenhagen: Søren Kierkegaard Research Centre.

Levinas, E. (LR) (1989). God and philosophy. In S. Hand (Ed.), *The Levinas reader* (pp. 166–189). Oxford: Blackwell.

Levinas, E. (BPW) (1996). In A. T. Peperzak, S. Critchley, & R. Bernasconi (eds.) *Emmanuel Levinas: Basic philosophical writings*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Levinas, E. (IEL) (2001). God, death, and time. In J. Robbins (Ed.), *Is it righteous to be? Interviews with Emmanuel Levinas*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Levinas, E. (TN) (2007). *In the time of the nations* (M. B. Smith, Trans.). London/New York: Continuum.

Levinas, E. (EI) (2009). *Ethics and infinity: Conversations with Philippe Nemo* (R. S. Cohen, Trans.). Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press.

Lincoln, Ulrich. (2000). *Äußerung: Studien zum Handlungsbegriff in Søren Kierkegaards die Taten der Liebe*. Berlin/New York: de Gruyter.

Oppenheim, M. (1999). Four narratives on the interhuman: Kierkegaard, Buber, Rosenzweig, and Levinas. In R. L. Perkins (Ed.), *International Kierkegaard commentary, Works of love* (Vol. 6, pp. 249–278). Macon: Mercer University Press.

Preul, R. (2007). Die Anrede Gottes im Gebet. In H. Wilfried & R. Preul (Eds.), *Personalität Gottes* (pp. 99–122). Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt.

Purkarthofer, R. (2000). Imagin(arr)ation. Bemerkungen zum Dialektischen und Bildlichen in einigen 'erbaulichen Reden'. In *Kierkegaard studies. Yearbook* (pp. 146–162).

Robbins, J. (2001). Introduction: 'Après Vous, Monsieur!'. In J. Robbins (Ed.), *Is it righteous to be? Interviews with Emmanuel Levinas* (pp. 1–19). Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Rosenstock-Huessy, E. (Ed.). (2011). *Judaism despite Christianity: The 1916 wartime correspondence between Eugen Rosenstock-Huessy and Franz Rosenzweig*. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press.

Rosenzweig, F. (USH) (1953). In N. N. Glatzer (Ed.) *Understanding the sick and the healthy. A view of world, man, and God*. New York: Noonday Press.

Rosenzweig, F. (BM) (1964). In N. N. Glatzer (Ed.) *Das Büchlein vom gesunden und kranken Menschenverstand*. Düsseldorf: J. Melzer.

Rosenzweig, F. (GS I) (1979). In R. Rosenzweig, & R. Rosenzweig-Scheinmann (Eds.) *Der Mensch und sein Werk: Gesammelte Schriften,* vol. I: *Briefe und Tagebücher*. Den Haag: Nijhoff.

Rosenzweig, F. (SR) (1985). *The star of redemption* (W. W. Hallo, Trans.) Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press.

Rosenzweig, F. (SE) (1990). *Der Stern der Erlösung*. Mit einer Einführung von R. Mayer und einer Gedenkrede von G. Scholem, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp.

Rosenzweig, F. (GB) (2002). In I. Rühle, I., & R. Mayer (Eds.) *Die Gritli-Briefe: Briefe an Margrit Rosenstock-Huessy*. Tübingen: Bilam-Verlag.

Šajda, P. (2011). Martin Buber: 'No-one can so refute Kierkegaard as Kierkegaard himself'. In J. Stewart (Ed.), *Kierkegaard and existentialism* (pp. 33–61). Farnham/Burlington: Ashgate.

Schlapkohl, C. (1999). *Persona est individua substantia: Boethius und die Debatte über den Personbegriff*. Marburg: Elwert.

Sheil, P. (2010). *Kierkegaard and Levinas: The subjunctive mood*. Burlington: Ashgate.

Simmons, J. A., & Wood, D. (Eds.). (2008). *Kierkegaard and Levinas: Ethics, politics, and religion*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

St. Anselm. (1930). *St. Anselm: Basic writings* (S. N. Deane, Trans.). Chicago: Open Court.

Walsh, S. (2013). Kierkegaard's theology. In J. Lippitt & G. Pattison (Eds.), *The Oxford handbook on Kierkegaard* (pp. 292–308). Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Welz, C. (2007a). Present within or without appearances? Kierkegaard's phenomenology of the invisible: Between Hegel and Levinas. In N. J. Cappelørn et al. (Eds.) *Kierkegaard studies. Yearbook* (pp. 470–513).

Welz, C. (2007b). The presence of the transcendent—transcending the present. Kierkegaard and Levinas on subjectivity and the ambiguity of God's transcendence. In A. Grøn, I. Damgaard, & S. Overgaard (Eds.), *Subjectivity and transcendence* (pp. 149–176). Mohr Siebeck: Tübingen.

Welz, C. (2008). *Love's transcendence and the problem of theodicy*. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck.

Welz, C. (2011a). A wandering dog as the 'Last Kantian in Nazi Germany': Revisiting the debate on Levinas's supposed antinaturalistic humanism. In J. Bloechl (Ed.), *Levinas studies: An annual review* (Vol. 6, pp. 65–88). Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press.

Welz, C. (2011b). Franz Rosenzweig: A kindred spirit in alignment with Kierkegaard. In J. Stewart (Ed.), *Kierkegaard and existentialism* (pp. 299–321). Burlington: Ashgate.

Welz, C. (2014). Gebet, Theologie und die Stimme der Stille—Elazar Benyoëtz "*Sandkronen*". In B. Fetz, M. Hansel, & G. Langer (Eds.), *Elazar Benyoëtz. Korrespondenzen* (pp. 73–96). Wien: Paul Zsolnay.

Welz, C., & Verstrynge, K. (Eds.). (2008). *Despite oneself: Subjectivity and its secret in Kierkegaard and Levinas*. London: Turnshare.

Westphal, M. (2008). *Levinas and Kierkegaard in dialogue*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Westphal, M. (2010). Thinking about God and God-talk with Levinas. In K. Hart & M. A. Signer (Eds.), *The exorbitant: Emmanuel Levinas between Jews and Christians* (pp. 216–229). New York: Fordham University Press.

Zeigler, L. (1960). Personal existence: A study of Buber and Kierkegaard. *Journal of Religion, 40*(2), 80–94.