Theology as Improvisation: Using the Musical Metaphor of Attunement to Think Theologically

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ABSTRACT

This project places itself within the tradition of Christian theology which has sought to think about its thinking of God. In so doing, the tradition has seen it necessary to do this thinking in light of one’s contemporary situation. Thus, this project carries this line of thought through by thinking the thinking of God within the contemporary context. The thesis of the project is that theology is improvisation. This thesis is advanced through an analysis of the idea of attunement in both theology and improvisation.

The project articulates the nature of theology as improvisation by analyzing the nature of attunement within theological thinking and how this opens certain possibilities for theology. There are three broad steps. The first is a philosophical step that accomplishes two things: first, an articulation of the current situation of theology within a post-metaphysical world and, second, a sketch of the idea of attunement through an analysis of the work of Martin Heidegger and Jacques Derrida. The second step in the project’s argument is an examination of improvisational music and the way that attunement works within the thinking that takes place within this musical form. Third, the project makes an explicitly theological turn by proposing a way of thinking for theology in light of the analysis of attunement in the first two steps. The result is twofold. First, the project takes up the work of David Tracy on theological fragments
and uses this to show the multiplicity of forms available within theological thinking. This leads, second, to an analysis of St. Augustine of Hippo and his unstructuring of theological form. He does this through a hermeneutic of love which resulted in a plurality of forms used to think theologically because the object of theology—God—necessitated this plurality. The end goal of the project is a proposal for a way of thinking in theology that is attuned to the multiplicity of forms necessary for thinking God.
INTRODUCTION:

THINKING THE THINKING OF GOD

The following project places itself within the broader Christian tradition by attempting to think about how it is that theology thinks God. The goal is to do what a myriad of thinkers before has done—from Origen, Pseudo-Dyonisius, Thomas Aquinas, Meister Eckhart, Martin Luther, Freidrich Schleiermacher, Soren Kierkegaard, etc.—which is to think the thinking of God within one’s contextual milieu. The Christian theological tradition has consistently attempted to think God in light of one’s historical and cultural context. When thinking God, theology has used the metaphors and ways of thinking available in one’s world. The goal of this dissertation is to find an idiom in the contemporary world that allows for a thinking that is part of the cultural milieu while also being faithful to the broader Christian tradition. The way that this is done in the following is through an analysis of what form(s) shows itself to be able to think God in the contemporary, postmodern world, where plurality, multiplicity, instability, and fragmentation are markers of the current context.

This project analyzes what form(s) is appropriate and adequate for Christian theology by asking of the question “what is theology?” Through an examination of this question, the nature of theology as a discourse that contains certain forms begins to come into view. The question also allows new opportunities for the exploration of theological thinking within the current cultural milieu. This is to continue within the
tradition of asking what theology is. Through this concern with the question of theology this project is able to open the way that (various) form(s) works to open the kind of thinking—and, thus, content—able to be appropriated within theology. The question “what is theology” breaks down to asking how it is that form conveys content and how this content is appropriated in thinking theologically, specifically when thinking God.

Within the current theological milieu, one could argue that there are two broad streams of the nature of theology. The first group answers that theology is ultimately a descriptive discourse meant to repeat the content of the Christian tradition. This approach can be seen in Barthians, postliberals, and the theological turn to aesthetics, among others. In these groups the goal is to re-peat the belief of the believing community. The second group answers that theology is a prescriptive exercise that is concerned with saying something about God and the way that theological beliefs are expounded and appropriated in a cultural and historical setting. For these theologians, theology attempts to say something “new” by offering forms and ways of thinking that may not have been appropriated and approved by the tradition. Theologians in this group would include correlationalists, revisionists, and liberationists. It would be a mistake, though, to believe that these groups did not intermingle or were mutually exclusive. Those favoring description also say something new at times and want to make statements that are intelligible to one’s culture and setting while those favoring prescription are still aware of the tradition and try to be faithful to said tradition in their theology.
This project finds itself within the latter category. This prescriptive task does not neglect the tradition but offers a corrective to those theologians favoring description. Prescriptive theologies advance a thesis that interprets claims in light of current forms and ways of thinking. This is a corrective to descriptive theologies that pass on a tradition (or multiple traditions) while not thoroughly engaging the broader world in which a tradition lives. The way that this project proposes to think theology otherwise is by arguing that theology is improvisation. This thesis is presented by arguing that an attunement to an/other is what concerns both theology and improvisation. By putting forth the idea that the nature of thinking is attunement, this project shows a place of interaction between improvisation and theology. This place of connection shows that the point of contact between the two allows for more similarity than dissimilarity by showing how attunement is at the center of what it means to think both while also being the center point for beginning to do both improvisation and theology.

There are three broad concerns that underlie the argument as it is advanced throughout this project. The first is with offering a way of thinking theologically that makes room for the “new” or “newness” in theology. Since their goal is repetition and the continued life of a tradition, descriptive theologies tend to avoid saying anything “new”;¹ while prescriptive theologies are concerned with articulating theological belief within historical settings while using the forms and ways of thinking made available through those settings. The prescriptive approach to theology offers a corrective by articulating how it is that the theological tradition can be thought within other forms and

¹ This is a constant refrain in the work of Thomas C. Oden. See Thomas C. Oden, The Living God, Systematic Theology: Volume 1 (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1987).
modes of thinking than those available strictly from the tradition. For the prescriptive theologian this opens various possibilities and avenues for insight within theology, offering ways of thinking where plurality, multiplicity, and fragmentation can occur. By turning to improvisation, this project offers a form for theology to deal with the new.

The second basic concern undergirding much of the argument in this project is the importance of attunement. The first two chapters show how thinking is built around the idea of attunement. This path leads into the way that attunement works in the thinking of improvisational forms of music and theology. The argument is that attunement allows unique ways of opening ways to reinterpret the tradition and provides a way for advancing newness in different forms of thinking. The concern with attunement is to show a way of being passive-active in one’s reception of the other, that it is not just listening but also a concern for translation and making apparent the new. This is apparent in music as one is attuned to the music, composer, other musicians, and the audience in order to play well. In theology one is attuned to the divine while also being in-tune with the tradition and culture in order to do theology in a way that says something. Thus, this notion of attunement offers an alternative to some of the proposed ways of thinking in descriptive theologians.²

The third concern at work in this project is that of taking the idea of God seriously in one’s treatment of theological language. This concern follows from the previous two: if this proposal is concerned with making new statements theologically because of one’s

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attunement to the divine, then it would follow that the result would be to make new statements about the divine or God. While this is in some respect true, attunement to God ultimately brings out that there is an aspect of God that is unsayable in that God is ultimately non-conceptual or in-conceivable. Since God is not able to be conceptualized or said, theological language struggles to say anything meaningful about God. This project proposes a way of doing theology that is similar to the way that an improvisational musician works, dealing with the multitude of possibilities for how one can hear a piece of music or how it may be interpreted. The theologian also must play on the names of God or ways of thinking God in a way that opens the infinite possibilities for thinking God and needs to find forms available for allowing an endless exploration of God due to the inability of the human to offer conceptualizing statements about God.

The intellectual and ecclesial context out of which this project arise is that of contemporary Protestantism. The project offers a response to the current “Barthian” nature of much of contemporary Protestant theology through a turn to the form of music for thinking theologically. Both Barthian theologians and this project hold to a beginning point of the revelation of the Word in the person of Jesus Christ. However, Barthian theologies tend to emphasize the spokenness of the Word while this project emphasizes the musical nature of the theology that arises from the revelation of the Word. Barth wants to offer a way of “hearing the Word” and how this is the impetus to theology. This project, on the other hand, offers an account of the originary encounter\(^3\) that enables the

\(^3\) Within the argument of this dissertation, I rely upon language from the phenomenological tradition. The idea of an “originary encounter” derives from this tradition, talking about the experience one has that gives rise to “thinking/understanding” an object. However, this “thinking” is always in relationship with the object, so that there is no subject-object split; rather, the originary encounter is an
hearing of the Word through the notion of attunement. The result of Barth’s theology of revelation was a dogmatics. This project, on the other hand, pursues a non-dogmatics that is interested in theological forms outside of the strict speaking of the Word.

With this context and these three concerns initially articulated, the goal for the rest of the introduction is to give a cursory overview of the scope of the rest of the project. This will entail outlining both the type of theological thinking that this project seeks to engage within as well as articulating the scope of the terms being used. Also, it will be important to briefly offer a point of contrast with theologies primarily concerned with the descriptive task. Thus, the introduction will include four subsequent sections. The first will outline the nature of the theological task as it has been rooted in the tradition of Christian theology. The second section will be a brief analysis and rebuttal of various descriptive theologies, mainly those from the postliberal and aesthetic theology camps. The third section will begin to set forth the terms and how they are used in the project. The last section will offer a brief outline of the project by detailing how each chapter works to put forth the thesis that theology is improvisation.

A. The Theological Task in the Christian Tradition

In this section of the introduction, the goal is to articulate a line of thinking within the Christian tradition that formulates some of the earliest questions with which this project is concerned. This section will briefly analyze the way that different theologians have used form to shape how it is that theology thinks the thinking of God. The turn to these theologians will help establish a tradition for the kind of theological thinking this experience that gives rise to a pre-understanding of an experience that causes one to begin to think through the nature of the experience. I describe this language and way of thinking more thoroughly in the first chapter through the discussion of Heidegger.
project is pursuing. It does so by showing that the concern of this project is not new but part of the Christian tradition. By rooting itself within this tradition, this project builds upon what has already come in the tradition while also opening new avenues for thinking God.

I begin with a discussion of the thought of Pseudo-Dionysius as he is a common place to begin thinking through how language and form relate to thinking God. In his two most famous texts—*Divine Names* and *Mystical Theology*—Pseudo-Dionysius addresses the same problem as this project: How is one able to think and name God? In his various writings, he roots this problem in the way that God has created the world and that through this God has revealed Godself to the world. The goal for thinking God is to be able to notice God in creation. Through this experience of God one is able to begin thinking God.

For Pseudo-Dionysius, to say that God is the Creator of all the cosmos implies that God is in some way wholly other than the creation. God is the Infinite that gives rise to the finite. Since God is creator, then Pseudo-Dionysius says that all being “derives from, exists in and is returned toward” God. He argues that the creator, as transcendent, has been “clothed in the terms of being.” Creation acts as the source for the symbols that are available for humanity to use for the things of God. The symbols he chooses to use are part of a broader culture or society in which Pseudo-Dionysius resides. These are

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5 Ibid., 52/592B.
what are used to think God. He can say this because he understands creation to be infused with the presence of God which allows people to think God as one becomes aware of God as Creator in the creation.\textsuperscript{6} Language about God derives from creation. And, for Pseudo-Dionysius, the first language used to speak of God is that of praise. Thus, all the language of our praise is brought forth from an awareness of God’s trace in creation.\textsuperscript{7} By paying attention to this, the human can begin to develop a language that can speak adequately of God and think the reality of God rightly.

However, Pseudo-Dionysius does not believe that the reality of our language necessarily corresponds to God through the symbols used from creation. He says there should be an awareness of the fact that God is not confined by a form; God is the one who creates, giving form to that which had none. God is the one who gives form but God is unconfined by form since the creation shows a multiplicity of forms that exist.\textsuperscript{8} For Pseudo-Dionysius, the way to begin talk of God is from the place of naming God “Good” as this points to the unconfined nature of God. He argues that God is the one from whom all forms come—all of creation is given form by the one who has no form, God.\textsuperscript{9} All attributes come from God, but God is not reducible to any one of these attributes or shape or beauty or form; rather, God is all of these together in a unity, a beautyless and formless

\textsuperscript{6} Ibid., 53/ 592B.  
\textsuperscript{7} Ibid., 56/ 597A.  
\textsuperscript{8} Ibid., 73/ 697A.  
\textsuperscript{9} Ibid., 79/ 705D.
unity that is the source of all. Pseudo-Dionysius argues that the only way one can think and name God is to use the forms God has created.

Pseudo-Dionysius overcomes the problem of what form to use for thinking God by offering a multiplicity of forms. As one looks at his corpus, there is his desire to sing a hymn of praise to the one who creates in *Divine Names*, offering a prayer to begin thinking of God in *Mystical Theology*, while also pursuing his thinking in the form of an exhortation to think God rightly through a letter to Timothy. Through the use of these different literary forms in three different treatises, Pseudo-Dionysius offers a multiplicity of ways to think God. This comes for him because he believes that the proper response to the encounter of God is silence. This is because as one moves into deeper knowledge of God one realizes that this is an unknowing where one enters the darkness of God. The darkness of God is key here for Pseudo-Dionysius, as this is where the clarity of language to speak to the reality of God falters. As one moves deeper into the darkness, one realizes that God is beyond darkness, is beyond assertion and denial, beyond truth and error. By moving into this deeper knowledge of God as beyond all, Pseudo-Dionysius shows the necessity of using a plurality of forms to speak to the reality that is God. The way that this is done is through a certain disposition of prayer and praise, which leads to

10 Ibid., 101/ 842B.

11 Ibid., 96/ 816B.


13 Ibid., 139/ 1033B-1033C.

14 Ibid., 141/ 1048A-1048B.
openness to the reality of God, which allows the movement beyond truth and error, assertion and denial, into the Good that is God.

Thomas Aquinas continues on the same path as that begun by Pseudo-Dionysius. The first sections of Aquinas’ *Summa Theologica* struggle with the same issues as Pseudo-Dionysius, mainly how it is that the finite can know and name the infinite, God. Dealing with this problem, Aquinas first elucidates what count as sources for allowing one to think God properly. He shows that the thinking of God which results in knowing and naming is part of sacred doctrine, which takes as one of its sources the “authority of philosophers” as they relate to “natural reason,” but only as this is in concert with the canonical Scriptures and “the authority of the doctors of the Church…” Like Pseudo-Dionysius, Aquinas allows for the fact that creation, through natural reason, is able to point towards God and that the way humanity sees God in creation is through the knowledge acquired by interacting with Scripture and the tradition. Through this idea of creation, Aquinas finds the importance of including the symbols and understanding of the world in which he lives to be part of the way theology thinks God. This leads him to a prescriptive theology that makes certain claims about God in light of and in response to the world in which he lives.

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15 All references referring to the *Summa Theologica* will follow the standard citation of part, question and answer, and will be to the following translation: Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province (Notre Dame: Ave Maria Press, 1948).

16 ST I.1.8. rep. obj. 2.

17 ST I.2 demonstrates how Aquinas would see the ability of natural reason to see God in creation through his famous “Five Ways.”
Aquinas begins his thinking through an attempt to understand how it is that people can connect with God in a way that makes knowledge of God possible. For Aquinas, this comes through participation. Participation is concerned with being tuned into the nature of God and the way that this occurs is through the practice of charity. He argues that since God is concerned with charity then when people practice charity they are participating in the divine. Thus, humans are able to be tuned more and more into God. The way that one is able to be tuned into God is through one’s “deiformity,” or how one is made like God. This knowledge does not occur through a knowing of the divine essence but through attachment (or participation) to the divine essence, always inaugurated by God. Aquinas says, “Those who see the divine essence see what they see in God not by any likeness, but by the divine essence itself united to their intellect.” Thus, attachment to God is the beginning and end of humanity’s knowledge of the divine. For Aquinas, a person can never know the essence of God fully. This is because God exceeds human ways of knowing. Thus, God is beyond humanity’s knowing of God. However, humanity can know God by being tuned into God through God’s giving

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18 There needs to be a distinction made between a weak sense and a strong sense of participation. The weak sense refers to the fact that all of creation, by the fact of being created, participates in some weak way in God by existing. The use of participation here refers to a strong sense where there is a conscious effort on the part of the person to participate in the divine. This resonates with what the project calls attunement. For an elucidation of this understanding of participation, see Kathryn Tanner, *Christ the Key*, 8ff.


20 ST. I.12.9. Within Aquinas’ discussion here, he posits two different ways of knowing: knowing things as they are appear as an object and knowing things as they appear within their “similitudes pre-existing in God.” The first type of knowledge is purely objective knowledge while the second is to know something as it is and exists within God. When I discuss knowledge for Aquinas I am referring to the second as this is complete and true knowledge for him.

21 ST. I.12.1. rep. obj. 3.
of Godself to humanity. God’s gift leads to understanding God as the creator of all. Humanity cannot know God in the divine essence but can know God as the creator and through this knowledge the human intellect can begin to form conceptions about God. These conceptions, though, are made proportionally because the intellect understands that as creator, God is beyond the different ways that humanity understands God in creation. Humanity can say God is good or God is love, but God is always beyond people’s understanding of these. This is the famous way that Aquinas says that it is through analogy that humanity can speak of God. This way of naming God comes from creatures as a term used for God “is thus used in a multiple sense signifying various proportions to some one thing.” God is known through the way that the creation points toward God, not in the divine essence itself.

The way humanity knows God is from creation. Creation represents God so that humanity can see that the only way creation is or has goodness is because of the divine. For Aquinas, this comes from the primary name for God, which, derived from Exodus 3:14, is HE WHO IS. By understanding God in this way, Aquinas sees that the very essence of God is to exist. God’s essence is existence; thus, all existence is dependent upon God. Aquinas wants to think God in such a way as to take into account all of

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existence as pointing toward the divine. This is only possible as one is attuned to the
divine that is the creator, which allows one to see the essence of divinity in creation. If
one is not tuned into this, then knowledge of God escapes the person. From this, then,
Aquinas can be seen as advocating a similar path as Pseudo-Dionysius, where as
important as the type of argument one makes for naming God is that one is disposed
rightly: for Aquinas, this means participating in God in a way that leads to attunement
through charity.

This tradition is continued in the thought of Martin Luther. He approaches
thinking God in a way that seeks to remove itself from many of the forms of his day in
order to retrieve parts of the Christian tradition, especially the thought of Augustine.
Luther argues one must approach thinking God in a way that avoids anthroporphization.
In order to avoid this, he insists on the otherness and hiddenness of God. Thus, Luther
thinks God in God’s otherness and hiddenness from humanity. His embrace of God’s
otherness leads to the various approaches to thinking God that he embraces.

Luther begins his thinking by reimagining the nature of the dominant theological
sources: scripture and the Christian tradition. He begins with Christian scripture due to
his belief that all of scripture points to the work and glory of God. Because it elucidates
the work and glory of God scripture gives knowledge of God. The knowledge of God
given by scripture is good news. This knowledge is that God offers forgiveness of sins
and, the correlate of this, that God is merciful. The forgiveness of sins and mercy of God

27 Martin Luther, “Preface to the Complete Edition of Luther’s Latin Writings,” trans. Lewis W.
Spitz in Martin Luther, Martin Luther: Selections from his Writings, ed. John Dillenberger (New York:
are the central proclamation and the divine promise given in scripture. Luther’s reworking of scripture is built upon the doctrine of God and who God is, not upon the tradition or thought of the church. This is seen explicitly in his critiques of the canonization of the book of James. His criticism of James is twofold: first, Luther says the book does not ascribe the work of salvation to God alone in justification, but also to works; and, second, he argues that the book does not teach about Christ, but drives the believer to the law and works. Luther’s critique of James shows his impatience with any ways of thinking God that do not focus on the grace, mercy, and forgiveness of God. In his mind, to do otherwise is to take away from the nature of God.

The second theological source for thinking God in Luther is that of tradition. His interpretation of the nature and message of scripture already shows how he will approach tradition: mainly, tradition is subservient to scripture. Luther’s approach to tradition shows where theology needs to break with the tradition in order to do theology in the service of God. He even makes mention of this, saying that the mass is part of the gospel, but not the whole gospel. The mass, a locus of the tradition of the church, is critiqued because it is simply “play” and a “mockery with allegorical human ceremonies.” Instead, the mass should simply be a reiteration of the gospel proclamation of God’s mercy and the forgiveness of sins. The mass should point to this instead of

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upholding the numerous rites and ceremonies.\textsuperscript{30} One such example of the tradition holding to rites and ceremonies over the gospel for him is the way that Holy Communion is taken. Luther’s critique says that the Roman view of Holy Communion is misguided because it does not follow the gospel but the teachings of the “Romanists.”\textsuperscript{31} He points to the use of both elements in Paul’s explanation of the Lord’s Supper (1 Cor. 11).\textsuperscript{32} Thus, he feels justified in saying that the tradition does not necessarily speak to the reality that is God, but at times simply perpetuates itself.

The critique of the tradition leads into a critique of the nature of the church. From his talk of the church, one gets the sense that Luther believes that it has become an idol that is leading people away from the gospel. In his view, the church is not able to dispense grace or divine promises. The church is not God but is the place where God dispenses Godself to God’s people. The church is brought into existence through the work of the Word of God. As such, the church does not rise to the importance that the Word of God does in terms of means of connecting with God. The church is able to distinguish what is the Word of God and what is the word of humanity. This is due to God’s work in and through the church though and not because of some special power. The only reason the church can see what is the Word of God is because it knows the

\textsuperscript{30} Martin Luther, \textit{The Pagan Servitude of the Church}, 290.

\textsuperscript{31} Ibid., 255.

\textsuperscript{32} Ibid., 257.
gospel of the forgiveness of sins and the mercy of God. Through the mercy of God, the church is founded upon the promises of God.\footnote{Ibid., 340-41.}

Luther’s reassessment of the traditional theological sources leads him to a reevaluation of ways of thinking God. Most notably, Luther thinks God through the difference that arises between the power of God and the power of humanity. For Luther, to deny or ignore this difference is to be ignorant of God. The difference between the two lies in the complete otherness of God from humanity. Luther takes up an equivocal understanding of power here, saying that the power of God is completely other and different than the power of humanity. He believes that when one is aware of this difference one can then understand the nature of God’s work. Luther argues that when one is ignorant of the power and works of God then one “cannot worship, praise, given thanks, or serve [God]…”\footnote{Martin Luther, \textit{The Bondage of the Will}, trans. J.I. Packer and A.R. Johnston in Martin Luther, \textit{Martin Luther: Selections from his Writings}, ed. John Dillenberger (New York: Anchor Books, 1962), 179.} This leads Luther into a discussion of the otherness of God’s knowledge from humanity’s, saying God’s knowledge is not contingent but God foreknows things. Luther says, “[God] foresees, purposes, and does all things according to [God’s] own immutable, eternal, and infallible will.”\footnote{Ibid., 181.} God’s knowledge is tied to God’s will. Whereas a human cannot necessarily will what one knows, God’s knowledge is predicated upon God’s will and God’s will is predicated upon what God knows.

The only power the human person has is to respond to God through one’s own faith, even though the power to do this comes from God’s grace. For Luther, each person
either embraces the divine promise or not: to embrace the forgiveness and mercy of God is to have faith.\textsuperscript{36} The mercy of God is what actually merits salvation. God’s extension of mercy is what works salvation in a person and is what ultimately allows a response on the part of the person to God. A person’s will, though, does not choose God as much as respond through faith.\textsuperscript{37} This work of God is what ultimately allows humanity to know God. One only knows God in and through God’s mercy. One cannot know God’s mercy unless one has experienced it. The only way that one experiences the mercy of God is if God extends it to a person when God justifies through God’s righteousness.\textsuperscript{38} The mercy of God is the only possibility for one’s knowledge of God. If God was not merciful in God’s forgiveness of sins then no one would be able to know God. The human knowledge of God is, thus, entirely dependent upon the work of God. There is nothing that the person can do to have this knowledge until God has first extended Godself to humanity.

Friedrich Schleiermacher continues in the tradition of Martin Luther when it comes to thinking God. Both Luther and Schleiermacher share a concern with thinking God in God’s otherness from humanity but pursue this line of thinking in quite different ways. Whereas Luther attempts to keep a large separation between the human and divine, Schleiermacher will close this gap through his famous “feeling of absolute

\textsuperscript{36} Luther, \textit{The Pagan Servitude of the Church}, 283.

\textsuperscript{37} Luther, \textit{The Bondage of the Will}, 179.

\textsuperscript{38} Luther, “Preface to the Complete Edition of Luther’s Latin Writings,” 11.
dependence.” Schleiermacher will do this through an understanding of God that, while Wholly Other, still has contact with humanity in the very nature of humanity.

The beginning point for understanding Schleiermacher’s theology is his elucidation of the feeling of absolute dependence. The feeling of absolute dependence comes from humanity’s core realization that one cannot exist without being dependent upon something Wholly Other; or, that, as finite, the whole of creation must depend on an infinite other for its existence.39 He begins to elucidate this feeling by pointing to the essence of religion in intuition and feeling. In his lectures On Religion: Speeches to its Cultural Despisers, he says, “Religion’s essence is neither thinking nor acting, but intuition and feeling.”40 The reason that he turns to intuition and feeling is because he believes that these are universal in humanity. He argues that all people have a natural desire to intuit the infinite.41 He says this because of his belief that there is an immediate nature to how one experiences and perceives religion. For Schleiermacher, the way that one knows religiously is through one’s initial feeling of the divine. As such, intuition is the beginning of religious knowledge since it is “individual, set apart, the immediate perception, nothing more.”42 Intuition begins religious knowledge because it is an immediate knowledge that relies on its feeling and perception.

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41 Ibid., 24.
42 Ibid., 26.
Intuition is important for Schleiermacher’s thinking God because he believes all thinking about God begins from human self-consciousness. Thinking God begins here because self-consciousness leads to the feeling of absolute dependence. The feeling of absolute dependence comes from the awareness that one is not alone on the earth, but that there is some other outside of oneself.\(^43\) Thus, for Schleiermacher, “In self-consciousness there are only two elements: the one expresses the existence of the subject for itself, the other its co-existence with an Other.”\(^44\) Since human self-consciousness is a part of what it means to be human, the feeling of absolute dependence is also part of the “general nature of [humanity].”\(^45\) The feeling is the same experience for all people as all people feel themselves dependent upon something absolutely other. He believes that this feeling is present in every religion as it gives rise to God-consciousness. Since this feeling gives rise to God-consciousness, it overshadows all other feelings and, thus, all other relations. Self-consciousness makes one aware of oneself as subject and gives awareness of others outside of the self; when one has a feeling of absolute dependence upon the Wholly Other, then all other relationship are subordinate to this one as this one gives “colour” and “tone” to the nature of relationship.\(^46\)

In order to complete his sketch of what it means to know religiously, Schleiermacher connects intuition with feeling. He says that “every intuition is, by its


\(^{44}\) Ibid., 13.

\(^{45}\) Ibid., 134.

\(^{46}\) Ibid., 47.
very nature, connected with a feeling.”⁴⁷ If one wants to know in a religious way, one has to connect one’s intuition with one’s feeling. Schleiermacher says that the intuition that one has of religion is its infinite nature. For him, in all respects religion is infinite, whether in matter and form, of its being, of its vision, or of the knowledge possible there within. This intuition leads to the feeling of the infinity of religion.⁴⁸ Due to the intuition of religion in its push towards infinity, religion shows that things cannot be understood strictly within the bounds of the awareness of this world’s existence. Through the fact that the creation is an “absolute undivided unity,” Schleiermacher says that one can also have an awareness of the one who makes this unity—God. When one intuits the God who brings all into unity, then one begins to have the feeling of absolute dependence.⁴⁹ This feeling stems from the fact that there is more to existence than just what one can be aware of within the present world. The transcendence of the world, then, gives Schleiermacher the impetus to ground knowledge of God in the feeling of absolute dependence.⁵⁰

Schleiermacher roots his understanding of the feeling of absolute dependence in the Christian doctrine of creation. The doctrine of creation is the first one that he turns to when trying to explicate humanity’s religious self-consciousness as expressed in the relation between world and God. Within the argument of The Christian Faith, the doctrine of creation is the most important doctrine for thinking the relationship that exists

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⁴⁷ Schleiermacher, On Religion: Speeches to its Cultural Despisers, 29.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 27.


⁵⁰ Ibid., 17.
between world and God and how this affects one’s feeling of absolute dependence.\textsuperscript{51} The reason that Schleiermacher turns to the doctrine of creation as the basis for his theological grounding of the feeling of absolute dependence is because if God was not the creator, there could not be such a feeling. Also, if God had created out of something instead of nothing, there would be no feeling of absolute dependence.\textsuperscript{52} Thus, the doctrine of creation carries two important aspects: first, God created the world and, second, God is what sustains the world.\textsuperscript{53}

Schleiermacher’s doctrine of creation opens up thinking about God because it places all things in reliance upon God. This is because he argues that the origin of the world is dependent upon divine activity and that the world continues because of the divine.\textsuperscript{54} He roots this belief in the Christian idea that creation is “out of nothing.” His argument is that nothing could have existed outside of God before the creation of the world. If this had happened, then there would be something coequal with God and humanity would have a split feeling of absolute dependence. However, this is not possible. Instead, God created out of nothing because God is the one eternal and nothing existed beside God when God began to create.\textsuperscript{55} The feeling of absolute dependence arises here because all of the creation is actually dependent upon God for its existence.

\begin{footnotes}
\item[51] Ibid., 142ff.
\item[52] Ibid., 153.
\item[53] Ibid., 142-43.
\item[54] Ibid., 152-53.
\item[55] Ibid., 153.
\end{footnotes}
Due to the fact that God creates out of nothing, the doctrine of creation does not place God under any conditions or antitheses that are part of the created world.\textsuperscript{56} While God is active in the creation, God is other than the creation. The work of God in creation gives rise to the feeling of absolute dependence and this feeling becomes part of one’s own self-consciousness. If God were under the conditions and laws of the creation this would hurt the development of the subject’s self-consciousness. This is because it would take away from the feeling of absolute dependence since God, who one is absolutely dependent upon, would actually be dependent upon something else that was finite. This would destroy one’s own feeling of absolute dependence.\textsuperscript{57} Schleiermacher says that God’s work in creation is of God’s own free will and decree. God is not compelled by anything to create.\textsuperscript{58} This freedom on the part of God to create gives rise to the feeling of absolute dependence as it shows that one depends upon God wholly.

The way that Schleiermacher thinks God is through the feeling of absolute dependence. For him, this occurs in the self-consciousness of the subject who understands oneself as wholly dependent upon an Other for one’s existence. This is undergirded for him in the doctrine of creation. Schleiermacher ultimately offers the development of one’s self-consciousness as the prescription for theology. Karl Barth will take a somewhat similar and, yet, quite different approach. While Barth will continue to emphasize the difference that exists between God and humanity, he will root his

\textsuperscript{56} Ibid., 150.

\textsuperscript{57} Ibid., 150-51.

\textsuperscript{58} Ibid., 156.
argument in the revelation of the Word of God instead of in the development of one’s self-consciousness.  

Barth begins thinking God by stressing the complete otherness of God from humanity. The implication of this for him is that humanity cannot know God through anything other than God. The only way that humanity is able to think God is through a participation in God. He says, “Only God conceives of [God]self.” The correlate of this is that any human concept of God and God’s Word is an indication of the limits of human thinking about God. However, this is not to make a negative statement about humanity as much as to show the complete otherness of God from humanity. For Barth, this otherness of God is where God reveals Godself. He points to the unveiling of God in and through God’s mystery and hiddenness. Both of these show the unveiling of God, where God’s mystery and hiddenness are what actually unveil God. Human knowledge of God, and the ability to think God, come through God’s unveiling of Godself in mystery and hiddenness as these point to the otherness of God. 

The way that God unveils Godself is in the revelation of the Word of God. The only way to think God is through this revelation. The revelation of the Word of God is the person of Jesus Christ. This is where God is made most manifest. The Word of God is what gives rise to faith. This faith comes from preaching and hearing the Word of

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59 I do not want to infer Barth was not aware of Schleiermacher. Rather, Barth operates in direct opposition to much of the thought of Schleiermacher.


61 Ibid., 165.

62 Ibid., 319-20.
God. The reception of the Word comes through the grace of God. When one receives the Word of God, this event points to the Lordship of God through and in Jesus Christ. For Barth, the idea of God as “Lord” is important because it allows him to think God through the revelation of the Word of God in Jesus. The revelation of God as Lord comes through the person and work of Jesus Christ. For Barth, revelation allows humanity to know that there is a Lord. The revelation of God’s Lordship comes in the person of Jesus Christ because Barth believes that when one acts as Lord one acts as God in God’s revelation to humanity. The place that one can know God’s Lordship is in the Church, where Jesus reveals himself as Lord. This revelation comes in the Church’s belief that Jesus is the Son of God as an equal of God. Jesus is, then, afforded the same Lordship as the Father while being the one to reveal this Lordship.

Barth believes the Church is the place of the revelation of Jesus Christ because “[t]he being of the Church is Jesus Christ.” For Barth, the Church carries the revelation of the Word of God. In doing so, it is the place where there can be knowledge of the Word of God because of the relation that exists between humanity and the Word of God. This knowledge comes in the person of Jesus Christ whose being has been


64 Barth, *Church Dogmatics, I.1*, 306ff.

65 Ibid., 306.

66 Ibid., 320.

67 Ibid., 15.

68 Ibid., 189.
extended to the Church. As such, this revelation gives the Church its structure of belief. The Word of God as revealed in Jesus Christ also is the condition of the possibility of being able to speak God as Triune as well as being able to know the Triune God.\textsuperscript{69} The Church is called and brought into existence by Jesus Christ. To be with others as Church is to be in Christ. When one acts in the Church one is obedient to the call of Jesus and it is this obedience to Christ that gives rise to faith. Theology, as dogmatics, is built upon the act of faith that comes with being obedient and listening to Jesus Christ.\textsuperscript{70}

For Barth, theology is always dogmatic. His prescription for theology, to correct the problems he sees in liberal theology that stems from Schleiermacher, is that it should be descriptive. He says, “Dogmatics is the self-examination of the Christian Church in respect of the content of its distinctive talk about God.”\textsuperscript{71} Barth argues that theology is dogmatics and, specifically, one that is reflective upon the nature of what it is the Church confesses. He argues that one cannot divorce, or even do, theology apart from the Church. This is because theology is a reflection upon the Word of God and the Word of God is only revealed in the Church. Thus, theology is concerned with understanding how it is that it can confess God or talk about God.\textsuperscript{72} The question of truth for theology then is based upon the agreement that exists between how the Church talks about God and the actual being of the Church.\textsuperscript{73} Within this conception, theology is based upon faith since

\textsuperscript{69} Ibid., 312.

\textsuperscript{70} Ibid., 17.

\textsuperscript{71} Ibid., 11.

\textsuperscript{72} Ibid., 3.

\textsuperscript{73} Ibid., 4.
faith is what allows one to be part of the Church and to bear witness to the revelation of the Word of God in the Church. The revelation of the Word of God, then, is self-authenticating.

The way that Barth has moved to this point leads him to set up a series of eight conditions for theology to occur if it is to live up to its descriptive task. First, he says that theology is a positive science that extends and explicates the beliefs of the Church: this is its primary task. The second condition of theology is that it cannot go beyond its limit, which is the belief of the Church. Third, he says that all theological statements are inadequate expressions of the object of theology—God. The reason for this is because of God’s otherness which shatters any attempt to speak God, even though theology, through the revelation of the Word of God, can speak to the positive reality of God. Stemming from the third, the fourth condition says that there are no final statements in theology except those that are set down by biblical authority and mandate. The fifth condition says that theology can make progress but this is only on account of God’s wisdom which reveals to humanity certain things when it is good for humanity to perceive them. The sixth condition of theology says that its ultimate authority lies in

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74 Barth, Anselm: Fides Quarens Intellectum…, 18.
75 Ibid., 26-40.
76 Ibid., 26-27.
77 Ibid., 27-28.
78 Ibid., 29-30.
79 Ibid., 30-31.
80 Ibid., 31-32.
scripture in that no theological proposition may contradict the Bible.\textsuperscript{81} The seventh condition for doing theology is that one actually has faith as this is what allows one to give knowledge to the faith of the Church.\textsuperscript{82} The eighth and last condition for theology is the connection that exists between theology and prayer. Following Anselm’s \textit{Proslogion}, Barth says that one prays for two things: first, one prays for God to grant knowledge of God\textsuperscript{83} and, second, one prays that God would instruct one’s heart to see God’s face and God’s very self.\textsuperscript{84} These conditions all point to Barth’s emphasis on the fact that theology is an exercise in describing what the Church believes and what it has always believed.

B. Post-Barthian Descriptive Approaches to Theology

Within the Protestant tradition, Barth sets the agenda for theological thinking within the twentieth century.\textsuperscript{85} The trajectory of Barth’s thinking leads into a number of descriptive theologies. In this section I offer a (brief) account of some of these theologies. The streams dealt with here include that of postliberalism and theological aesthetics. Both of these have been very influential within the Protestant tradition, especially in the last twenty-five years. In what follows, I show how each of these streams advance the Barthian thesis that theology is a descriptive enterprise in that it

\textsuperscript{81} Ibid., 32-33.
\textsuperscript{82} Ibid., 33-35.
\textsuperscript{83} Ibid., 37.
\textsuperscript{84} Ibid., 38.
\textsuperscript{85} In saying, the implication is not that all theologians agree with Barth, but that they must deal with his significance.
simple comments on the belief of the Church. These theological streams take this thesis further than Barth may have felt comfortable with, but each finds itself in the Barthian line.

1. Postliberalism

The first group is that of postliberalism. Within this group, the account set out here will deal with George Lindbeck’s *Nature of Doctrine* as well as Robert Jenson’s first volume of his *Systematic Theology*. The choice of Lindbeck is obvious, as it could be argued that his *The Nature of Doctrine* is the foundational text for understanding postliberalism. As well, Lindbeck, along with Hans Frei, is seen as the “founder” of the Yale school within theology that is often associated with postliberalism. Jenson, however, is not as obvious. However, his theology finds itself in the same trajectory with a similar thesis to that of Lindbeck—mainly, that theology is “an enterprise of the church” and is engaged in Christian self-description.86

George A. Lindbeck begins the discussion of postliberalism. For him, postliberal theology is defined by its “cultural-linguistic” or regulative approach to the nature of doctrine. Here, Lindbeck sees doctrine through the prism of “rules” that regulate belief and life. He chooses a regulative approach because “[r]ules, unlike propositions or expressive symbols, retain an invariant meaning under changing conditions of compatibility and conflict.”87 Rules are used because they are invariant as they always


apply. As such, the nature of doctrine is to give a set of rules that place an “invariant meaning” at the heart of religion, in this case Christianity. Part of what this regulative approach does to the task of doctrine “is to recommend and exclude certain ranges of— among other things—propositional utterances or symbolizing activities.” Thus, while rules may vary from place to place, there are still basic rules at the heart of language.

The reason that Lindbeck also calls this approach “cultural-linguistic” is because the rules that he derives from doctrine are linguistic rules. As such, religions are like languages that regulate what one says and how it can be said. For Lindbeck, while the experiential value may change, the languages are able to maintain a sameness amid various transformations that occur through experience and/or affirmations of certain elements that are other to the language.

Lindbeck believes that his innovation is the turn to a regulative, cultural-linguistic approach to theology. He says this because he argues that the only “job” that doctrines have is to give shape and form to the language of what the church teaches. For him, this is because doctrines are an example of a second-order discourse within theology. These second-order discourses are affirmations of what it means to be Christian rather

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88 Ibid., 19. Lindbeck uses the example of which side of the road one drives on in England and the US. He says that the rule changes depending upon the context. However, what he fails to take into account is that the basic rules of driving—the invariant meaning—still apply in both contexts. In his example, driving is still driving, no matter where it takes place; the form simply changes. My argument is that he does something similar with his cultural-linguistic model.

89 Ibid., 84. Lindbeck goes on to say, “To the degree that religions are like languages, they can obviously remain the same amidst vast transformations of affirmation and experience. When put this way, it seems almost self-evident that the permanence and unity of doctrines, despite changing and diverse formulation, is more easily accounted for if they are taken to resemble grammatical rules rather than propositions or expressive symbols…”

90 Ibid., 19.
Lindbeck shows this difference in the nature of theology discourses in his elucidation of what takes place at the councils of Nicaea and Chalcedon. For him, these are second-order reflections made by the church on the original experience of Jesus as communicated by the apostles. Nicaea and Chalcedon do not speak to that original experience but give the form of the language needed to speak “Christianly” about Jesus as God. The doctrines of Nicaea and Chalcedon are, thus, not necessarily tied to the conceptual apparatus in which they are communicated. Instead, the doctrines at the heart of these councils are distinguishable from the concepts in which they are communicated because one can “state these doctrines in different terms that nevertheless have equivalent consequences.”

As a language, religion is a second discourse that regulates the nature of belief.

Thus, in Lindbeck’s account, “religions are seen as comprehensive interpretive schemes, usually embodied in myths or narratives and heavily ritualized, which structure human experience and understanding of self and world.” As a language, religions give meaning to human existence through the structuring of human existence through the telling of stories and/ or myths. In doing so, religions make certain kind of truth claims. While a religion may make a claim to some ultimate truth (usually God), Lindbeck argues that it is “the conceptual vocabulary and the syntax or inner logic which determine

\[91 \text{Ibid., 94.} \]
\[92 \text{Ibid., 93.} \]
\[93 \text{Ibid., 32.} \]
the kind of truth claims the religion can make.”\textsuperscript{94} The syntax and inner logic of a language point the nature of truth at work in this account: Lindbeck embraces an intrasystematic approach to truth. Intrasystematic truth is not limited to either epistemological or ontological conceptions of truth. Something has intrasystematic truth when it coheres within a linguistic framework.\textsuperscript{95} For Lindbeck, theology is descriptive when it focuses on intrasystematic truth. This is because one can only describe what happens in the regulative elements of a language, which is what doctrine functions as. The theologian describes doctrines with their interconnection with other doctrines in the system in which they are put forth. The theologian simply describes the function of the doctrine in its position within a system.\textsuperscript{96}

The postliberal school of thought continues with the work of Robert Jenson. Jenson also begins by placing theology within the realm of a second order discourse. As a second-order discourse, he argues it is best described as being a “grammar.” This theological grammar is spoken by the church. He says, “The church…is the community that speaks Christianese, and theology formulates the syntax and semantics of this language. Doctrinal statements function as accepted rules of proper usage; theological opinions of individual theologians or schools are attempts to point out such rules.”\textsuperscript{97} Theology is that which shapes the language of the church in its speaking of Christianese. As such, theology sets the rules in which doctrines can be used and how they function.

\textsuperscript{94} Ibid., 35.
\textsuperscript{95} Ibid., 64.
\textsuperscript{96} Ibid., 126-30.
\textsuperscript{97} Jenson, \textit{Systematic Theology, Volume 1: The Triune God}, 18.
within the language. Jenson says that this is a prescriptive activity;\textsuperscript{98} however, he makes no attempt at articulating what the move to grammar prescribes for theology. In fact, it seems that his prescription is to simply keep theology within the realm of the self-description of the story the church tells about the Triune God. This is because, for Jenson, the primary locus for the formation of Christian grammar is in the narrative of the Triune God. Jenson’s hermeneutic for reading doctrine and the Bible is to see how it reflects the story of the Triune God. The church speaks falsely if it speaks in a way that does not cohere to the story that gives rise to the doctrine of the Trinity. Likewise, the church properly speaks when using this story as what regulates its language.\textsuperscript{99}

The way that the grammar of theological language is formed is through the tradition of the apostles.\textsuperscript{100} In this tradition the church has been given the story of the Triune God. The tradition of theology “depends on the chain of witnesses who have brought the news from the first witness to those who now hear.”\textsuperscript{101} The work of the church, partly, is to live within the tradition that has been passed on by these witnesses, beginning with the apostles. The church lives the gospel. Due to this, the church’s work is to live within the tradition that is Christianity while also communicating the gospel to others through the various institutions that are constitutive of the church’s life.\textsuperscript{102} These

\textsuperscript{98} Ibid., 20.
\textsuperscript{99} Ibid., 19.
\textsuperscript{100} Ibid., 23.
\textsuperscript{101} Ibid., 14.
\textsuperscript{102} Ibid., 23-24.
institutions have been set up through second-order reflection upon the gospel and, so, work to point those outside and within to the story of the Triune God. The story of the Triune God is what is perpetuated in and through the tradition. The apostles communicated the story of the God who raised Jesus from the dead as being the same God who brought Israel out of Egypt and the same one is continually the hope of Israel.  

103 For the New Testament, the way of identifying God is as the One who raises Jesus from the dead and whom Jesus calls “Father.”  

104 The church tells this story and theology develops it through second-order reflection that comes through how the apostles bore witness to the life of Jesus. Thus, within this approach, the way that one reads the Bible is through the story of the God revealed in and through Jesus, in that the Old Testament is read in light of Jesus’ life and leading to this life while the New Testament points to Jesus through the retelling of the story of the Old Testament.  

105 The institution that continues to perpetuate the tradition of Christianity is the church. Doctrine resides within the realm of the church, being what Jenson calls “churchly instruction.”  

106 Doctrine is that which instructs the church on how to believe and how to act. The church’s mission is to be responsible for how the gospel is spoken, whether that is an apologetic way that brings the message of salvation or within a way that brings an appeal and praise to God in worship. For Jenson, “Theology is the
Thus, the church is the locus where reflection upon the story of the Triune God, as told through the story of Jesus, takes place. Without the church, there would be no way of perpetuating the tradition as it is the church that shapes how the story is told. The theological reflection upon doctrine that occurs in the context of the church gives an inner logic to Christianity that is based upon the logic of the story of Jesus. It is this logic that constructs the biblical witness, which is the primary source for theological reflection since the Bible is what sets the trajectory for the tradition. However, for Jenson, one cannot interpret the Bible outside of the church because one only learns the inner logic of the Bible within the church. Thus, without the church, there would be no Bible.

This brief discussion on postliberalism shows how such a descriptive theology works by offering second-order discourse upon the doctrines of the church. Similarly, this theology is interested in constructing theology as a grammar that gives rise to the ability to give coherence to the doctrines that construct the grammar. In light of this approach to theology, I make four brief critiques of postliberalism. The first is that postliberalism does not offer any reflection upon the nature of the experience that gives rise to the theological reflection that gives rise to the second-order discourse. Within the context of this project I argue that attunement does such. However, postliberalism seems to be content to allow the originary experience that gives rise to theological reflection, whether this is in the New Testament or for the theologian working in the twenty-first

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107 Ibid., 11.
108 Ibid., 59.
century, to be assumed. In so doing postliberalism cannot account for the kind of experience which gives rise to the various theological languages. Without any discussion of what actually gives rise to theological reflection, postliberalism does not have any way of thinking theological reflection in its originary moment, thus making it difficult to account for what kind of discourse arises from this moment.

The second critique I offer is aimed at postliberalism’s claim to be a prescriptive theology. Within the elucidation of the nature of theology offered by both Lindbeck and Jenson, the task of theology is to construct a grammar through reflection upon doctrine that makes sense of the Christian language. Within this proposal, there is a tendency to revert to theological reflection as simply repeating what came before. While Lindbeck and Jenson both acknowledge that this repetition takes place in new contexts and cultures, for both the goal is still simply the repetition of the Christian grammar. In my view, the implication is that theology has exhausted itself in what it has to say about God and, thus, needs to simply repeat. However, if theology is truly reflection upon God then it can never be finished or closed. Both Lindbeck and Jenson would agree with this statement but their theological system implies otherwise.

The third critique I make is in reference to the idea of an “invariant meaning” at the heart of doctrine.\textsuperscript{109} This is aimed more at Lindbeck than Jenson as Lindbeck is the one who argues that an exposition of Nicaea and Chalcedon must retain that “invariant meaning” at heart of the doctrines while changing cultural contexts. The critiqued offered here is twofold. First, can there be such a thing as an “invariant meaning”? What

\textsuperscript{109} See Lindbeck, \textit{The Nature of Doctrine}, 19.
does this look like? The meaning of Nicaea and Chalcedon, even within the contexts in which they took place, never was established definitively—which is why the church still needed more councils to think through the issues that were not settled here if they were settled at all. By pointing to an “invariant meaning”, Lindbeck implies that there is some kernel that must be kept safe within these reflections. This leads to the second critique of an attempt at invariant meaning. While Lindbeck wants to keep this kernel of truth, the problem arises as to whether this kernel changes as it is placed within new contexts and cultural situations. Lindbeck wants to argue that the “invariant meaning” stays, even when one strips away the Greek metaphysical assumptions at work in Nicaea and Chalcedon. However, as soon as one does this, the kernel of truth is placed in a new form or context and this begins to change the way that that the kernel is thought. This is because, as this project will intimate, the kernel of truth is never fixed but always opening up further possibilities to be explored.

The last critique made here has to do with the way that the church functions within the thought of postliberalism. For Lindbeck and Jenson, the church is the beginning and end of theological reflection because the church is the place that holds the inner logic and syntax which is used in the grammar of Christianity. The problems with this are multifaceted. First, this begs the question as to what constitutes the church and what constitutes the church logic. Since both theologians are Protestant, they should be aware of the fractured nature of the church and that there is no “Church” as it is now constituted. They seem to believe in one unified reality that is “Church.” In reality, there are only “churches” and this is not taken into account. In the same vein, they never say
why it is that theological reflection cannot take place outside of the church. If one stays with the idea of grammar, one can learn the various grammars that exist outside of one’s home grammar. One can even learn to live within it even though it is not one’s own grammar. Similarly, it seems possible for some to reflect on Christianity who do not believe themselves part of the church. Also, the church is the regulative authority that constitutes the Christian grammar. If one takes into account the nature of grammar and language, however, there is no authority except how it is used and how it then changes, how words come and go as well as how their meanings change. If this is the case, the church’s attempt to control how doctrine functions is futile as one cannot control something as amorphous as grammar.

2. Theological Aesthetics

The next approach to thinking theologically taken up here is that of aesthetic theologies. These theologies look to forms from the world of the arts as ways of thinking theologically. While there are many theologians who do this, the following exposition focuses on two. The first is Kevin Vanhoozer who uses drama to think about what it means to think God. He believes that the form of drama gives him a hermeneutical lens through which to approach the various sources used for thinking God, primarily Scripture. The second theologian is Jeremy Begbie, who turns to the form of Western, classical music. His approach uses various musical pieces and ideas to think through the nature of God.

110 The difference between aesthetic theologies and theological aesthetics is minimal. Theological aesthetics refers to the theological approach that favors the form of beauty for thinking God. Aesthetic theologies look to different forms of art as metaphors or ways of thinking theologically, but their hermeneutic is not guided by the beauty of God.
Let us begin with Kevin Vanhoozer. He offers a proposal for what he terms a theo-dramatic approach to theology.\footnote{This approach is articulated most clearly in Kevin Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine: A Canonical Linguistic Approach to Christian Theology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005).} In this approach “the task of theology is to ensure that we fit into the action so that we are following rather than opposing Jesus Christ.”\footnote{Ibid., 57ff.} For Vanhoozer, this follows from the idea that Christianity is not about morals or a system of beliefs, but is a “five-act theo-drama in which God’s speech and action play the decisive parts.” The first three scenes refer to the passion, Easter and resurrection, while the church as currently constituted is the fourth. The eschaton would be the fifth.\footnote{Ibid., 57.} This means that at this moment, the fourth act is being “acted out” so that theology is constantly being constructed. This construction of what it means to think theologically focuses on constructing what he calls a “canonical-linguistic” theology, which he sees as moving the focus from ecclesial practices (as in the cultural-linguist model of Lindbeck) to that of Scripture. The canonical-linguistic model, for Vanhoozer, ensures that theology follows the revelation of Jesus Christ through the knowledge of the speech and action of God.

Scripture is the primary source for thinking theologically in the canonical-linguistic approach. This is because Scripture is a source that helps to form the theologian—and the church—to be able to have knowledge of the speech and action of God. For Vanhoozer, the reason that there is a focus on being formed through the canon of Scripture is because Scripture is the “result of God’s communicative work” and, thus,
shares in the perfections of God without being the same substance. Vanhoozer summarizes his approach when he says, “Theology relates to Scripture for encountering God in communicative action and for being communicants with Jesus Christ.” As God’s communicative work, Scripture “is to be obeyed and trusted, but not worshiped.” This is because Scripture is the place where God offers a “theologically thick description of Jesus Christ.” Through this thick description, God invites the believer(s) to respond so that this thick description is transferred to the human as one is related to Christ. The bible’s goal is to create a covenantal relationship offered by God to humanity through the multi-faceted communicative action that occurs here. In this, God is “the doer, the essential content, and the dynamic effect of the diverse speech-acts that make up the Bible.” A canonical-linguistic approach to theology focuses on Scripture because this is the place to see God at work.

Thus, Vanhoozer has placed Scripture at the heart of his theological endeavor. The issue now becomes how one interprets. Vanhoozer posits that the analogy best available for thinking through the canonical-linguistic approach is that of drama. He looks to drama because he views doctrine as the director, teaching people to rightly

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114 Ibid., 65.
115 Ibid., 68.
116 Ibid., 65.
117 Ibid., 68. This communication takes place through a relationship similar to that of covenant, according to Vanhoozer.
118 Ibid., 67-68.
119 Ibid., 67.
participate in the drama of redemption through covenant. Doctrine also assumes that “one can participate rightly only if one has an adequate understanding of what the drama is all about.” One must be able to make theological and creedal statements that are able to be traced back to their relationship with the Bible. Vanhoozer looks to drama because its central component is concerned with performance, and specifically the construction of an adequate performance of a piece. He also turns to drama because of current theories’ focus on the active role of the audience.

There are three consequences of this for Vanhoozer: first, a reinvigoration of theological imagination; second, an ability to see one’s daily life as full of “tension and urgency,” giving great importance to the day-to-day; and, third, a renewed vision of biblical authority in terms of performance, where interpretation is action and acting is interpretation. This view of the drama of doctrine is both passive and active, engaging one in contemplation and active participation. Vanhoozer reinforces his understanding of theology as consistently trying to rethink itself in a new context while being faithful to the “script” of the bible.

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120 Ibid., 77-78.
121 Ibid., 78.
122 Ibid., 79ff.
123 Ibid., 79.
124 Ibid., 80.
125 Ibid., 79.
126 Ibid., 128.
For Vanhoozer, what is needed then is to improvise the gospel faithfully in new cultures by being able to offer a contextualization of the gospel in new places and times. This leads him to the conclusion that theology embraces a “polyphonic truth” because Scripture’s engagement with reality comes in different ways, embracing a variety of forms of theological truth.¹²⁷ This comes from the multiplicity of forms at work in Scripture which render reality in different ways.¹²⁸ Some forms are better communicators of certain content while other forms are better with other content. This number of Scriptural forms could result in a number of different ways of acting out the gospel.¹²⁹ For Vanhoozer, the goal is always to produce a “script” for the drama of theology that is faithful to the canonical witness by seeing and tasting “everything about a situation that is theologically relevant.”¹³⁰ The construction of Christian doctrine is the means whereby this is possible.¹³¹ This is because doctrine can improvise certain judgments about content while still being tied to the canonical script. Thus, for Vanhoozer, doctrine is the central theological form because it offers a faithful witness to the canonical script.

Jeremy Begbie continues in a similar vein to that of Vanhoozer by seeking an analogy for theology in an art form; however, Begbie finds the most adequate art form for

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¹²⁷ Ibid., 288-89.

¹²⁸ Ibid., 289.

¹²⁹ Ibid., 290.

¹³⁰ Ibid., 290.

¹³¹ Ibid., 335.
thinking God to be music. Begbie finds in music a place where a form of questioning can occur which allows one to connect to the broader culture. His goal is to connect music to the gospel so that through the turn to music he can allow the gospel to affect the broader world. He connects the two by turning to orientation as a way of thinking. For him, thinking theologically begins from a certain orientation that the theologian possesses, where being rightly oriented leads to thinking God correctly. He says, first, that the goal of theology is lived knowledge, or wisdom. This wisdom comes through a lifestyle that is “in tune” with God by living in a way that “resonates” with the intentions of the Creator. The result is an orientation of the theologian as one who is turned towards God. Theology’s truthfulness lies in this orientation toward God and not in a proposition or system. The way that he thinks theologically, then, is through an analysis of the various ways that a turn to music is able to reorient one’s thinking around certain Christian doctrines, most notably that of creation.

Begbie outlines how he sees music and theology interacting through what he terms a “cosmological viewpoint.” This is in contrast to what much of contemporary theology has done, which he argues begins from an “anthropological viewpoint.”

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133 Ibid., 20.

134 Ibid., 24.


turns to some of the earliest philosophies of music in order to begin to think through this cosmological viewpoint, most notably those produced by Pythagoras and the Neo-Platonists. First, he takes from Pythagoras the idea that at the center of the universe is a harmony brought through a ratio that gives the universe rationality. He continues his engagement with Pythagoras by taking up the idea that the mind can catch this rationality. Begbie says that one way this is mediated to humanity is through music.\footnote{Ibid., 79.}

Within this view, to be someone who played or understood music was to be one who was attuned to the rationality—or harmony—of the universe.\footnote{Ibid., 80.} After Pythagoras, he turns to the Neo-Platonists. From them he extends Pythagoras’ idea that the universe has an inherent harmony through its rationality by showing that the Neo-Platonists use this concept to address how it is that the soul can move through an ascent to God. Begbie argues that for the Neo-Platonists the chief aim of the inherent beauty and rationalization of the universe is for the soul’s ascent to God. The ascent of the soul, for Begbie, occurs because God is perfect harmony and beauty and all music in the world comes from God.\footnote{Ibid., 83-85.} The soul that has tuned into the rationality and harmony of the world is the one able to ascend to God.

Drawing from this approach to God, Begbie articulates a way of understanding the whole cosmos as harmonious. He develops this understanding through an analysis of various pre-modern understandings of the philosophy of music. This leads Begbie to
argue that for a theology to be “musical” it should understand what kind of cosmos a music may lead it toward thinking. Turning to Bach, Begbie shows that his music has certain theological resonances and that it opens possibilities for thinking theologically. There are two major reasons Begbie finds this within Bach. First, he turns to Bach’s music as a way of understanding creation as a gift of love directly from God. Begbie uses this statement to counter the “philosophical schemes” which say that God first creates ideals and forms and then goes on to actually do the creation. Second, he wants to follow David Bentley Hart in grounding the doctrine of creation in the Trinity. He does so by saying that that the creation is a place where the music of the Trinity rings eternally throughout the creation. This “stimulates” one to have a certain vision of the cosmos where it “reflects and shares in the life and love of the Triune God.”

The imaginative construction is one where all of the creation dwells in God and resonates the music of God. For Begbie, the result of his musical approach theology is a preferencing of the doctrine of creation as a way to think theologically.

There are three problems with the move to art forms brought forward by Vanhoozer and Begbie. The first is that both put forward doctrine as the central, and somewhat dominating, form for thinking theology. In doing so, they mitigate the multiplicity of other forms available for thinking theologically, whether they be aesthetic forms—like literature, sculpture, or movies and photography—or explicitly theological—like liturgy, narrative, or homiletics, among others. For both, doctrine is the form for

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140 Ibid., 137. Here, Begbie uses Bach as an example, saying that his music shows a cosmos that is centered around the self-giving love of the Triune God.

141 See Ibid., 185-304.
doing theology. This is because doctrine gives content to the form of belief they are endorsing. The problem is that both choose art forms that are not content driven, but evocative. The goal of both drama and music is to evoke, not to give an explanation of reality. Thus, the art forms they choose become secondary to what they really want to talk about, which is doctrinal constructions and methodological issues.\textsuperscript{142} One can see this in Vanhoozer’s over-emphasis on the place of doctrine in the canonical-linguistic approach as well as in Begbie’s choice of theologians and composers—he does not choose theologians who do not talk about music and does not choose composers who are not in some way religious.\textsuperscript{143}

A second critique I make is of their account of how one knows God. For both, there is an implicit assumption that one simply knows God and that this is necessary to do theology. Vanhoozer says that one needs to know the speech and action of God in Scripture, while Begbie says that one has to know that rhythm and harmony of God. Neither one makes the case for how this knowledge is possible. Vanhoozer scans over the issues regarding the interpretation of Scripture, seeming to suggest the need for a “pure” interpretation. The problem is that this is not possible. Even when one acknowledges these hermeneutical issues, there still exists the problem of how Scripture relays knowledge of God. Vanhoozer wants to avoid propositional accounts of knowing, but does not make the case for how knowing God in and through Scripture occurs. In a

\textsuperscript{142} Begbie explicitly does this as his uptake of music is what brings forward special interests that have “strong theological resonance.” See Begbie, \textit{Resounding Truth}, 277.

\textsuperscript{143} See the examples of Schleiermacher, Barth, and Bonhoeffer in Begbie, \textit{Resounding Truth}, chapter 6.
similar manner, Begbie extends how one knows God to include creation, but does not make the case for how one can actually know God in Scripture or in creation. It is always assumed that this is possible and necessary. In the absence of such an account, though, their approaches to theology become quite problematic because there is no originary moment that gives rise to theological thinking.

Lastly, a critique of Vanhoozer’s sole focus on Scripture is important. Vanhoozer’s project of canonical-linguistic theology is meant to counter the focus on ecclesial practices in the cultural-linguistic approach by turning the focus back to Scripture. However, he focuses exclusively on Scripture to the detriment of other traditional, theological resources. In so doing, Vanhoozer gives the implication that the only way God communicates with people is through Scripture; however, this would place a major limit on God as well as ignore the very nature of God in Scripture to communicate with God’s people in more than ways than through the written text. He wants to view Scripture as a “canonical script” and tie doctrinal reflection to this. But, in so doing, he never explains what events give rise to the script that offers the revelation of God in Scripture—is it the kerygma? The acts of the drama? What events are primary and which ones are secondary? He also fails to acknowledge the fact that part of the nature of Scripture is its place as a product of the tradition. This all undercuts Vanhoozer’s account by showing that theology is more than just commentary on Scripture or the church, but needs to take into account a number of issues.
C. The Prescriptive Approach of this Project

The previous sections have given an implicit understanding of a prescriptive approach to thinking theologically while offering a critique of two contemporary versions. This section examines three concepts that are important to the argument I make in the rest of the project: attunement, improvisation, and form. Throughout the project, I make use of these concepts extensively. Thus, it is important to give a cursory understanding of these in order to enter into the argument of this project. This will also help one gain an initial understanding as to the prescriptive approach to theological thinking put forward in this project.

The most used and important term in the project is “attunement.” The idea of attunement is at the center of the argument that follows. I make the case that the originary moment that gives rise to thinking is that of attunement. This term is explored significantly in the next two chapters through an analysis of Martin Heidegger’s proposal for thinking and Jacques Derrida’s approach to interpretation through deconstruction. The initial use of the idea, though, is religious, in that it talks of one’s attunement to the Wholly Other. This is why it is important here to take up the thought of the Jewish theologian Michael Fishbane and his analysis of attunement in *Sacred Attunement: A Jewish Theology*.¹⁴⁴

Fishbane’s account of attunement is rooted in musical terminology. Most notably, he utilizes the idea of rhythm to convey how one is tuned in. He says that when one notices the inherent rhythms within one’s world, one is able to discover various

patterns and possibilities that are available through one’s doing and hearing. Being attuned to the world means understanding the place of the self in relation to the rest of the world, building relationships through the use of right words and gestures, or repairing these relationships through conciliatory language and gestures. Fishbane sees attunement as focusing on one’s interaction with all things, saying, “In short, the vast phenomenal world is the setting for ongoing interactions between the private self and the many public happenings we encounter from moment to moment.”145 This interaction is not limited to the outside world alone. Fishbane also extends attunement to how one is able to interpret a text, most notably Scripture. He says that the ability to be attuned to a text comes from the interaction one develops with it and how this leads one to become aware of the various rhythms and pace at work in the text.146 In doing this, he shows the place of attunement as that which puts one in relation with the other (or Wholly Other).

He furthers the understanding of attunement by turning to what he sees as two moments of attunement in the life of Moses. The first moment of attunement in Moses is a personal event where becomes awakened from the “mindlessness of habitude.”147 This awakening happens because God’s call and voice interrupt his life, telling him to leave his family business of being a shepherd. Instead, God calls Moses to lead the people, which is something that is outside of the realm of possibility for Moses. God is calling Moses out of the depths of his human consciousness to enter into the possibilities

145 Ibid., 16.

146 Ibid., 67. This echoes the elucidation of Derrida’s thought that will take place in Chapter 2.

147 Ibid., 52.
available to God. This models the attunement that takes place in the covenant, as this is a personal covenant that God makes with Moses. God promises Moses that “I [God] shall be.” In saying this, God is saying that God will be there and available to Moses and the people that Moses leads. This is only possible through the attunement that takes place in the personal covenant between God and Moses. Attunement is exemplified when, later, Fishbane says, “Without ever denying one’s natural self, the self of covenant theology tries to be ready to hear and do whatever the moment demands—with a heart and mind cultivated by a tradition of value and a life of thoughtfulness.” Moses is the example to follow.

The second moment of attunement in Moses’ life is in the communal event of God’s call to Moses and Moses’ subsequent speaking to the people. The logic at work in Moses’ speech is that of “if…then.” Moses tells the people that if they follow God, then God will be with them. This is a communal call to all of Israel. The entire nation has been brought into a covenant with God that is based upon this “if…then.” Israel must be attentive to the covenant by following the way that God proposes. The laws that God gives are meant to give a religious shape to people’s lives by structuring the being of the world and their interaction with it. In this covenant, God “shall be” and will continue to

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148 Ibid., 52-55.
149 Ibid., 54-55.
150 Ibid., 175.
151 Ibid., 56-57.
152 Ibid., 57.
be with the people. In being with the people, God continues to develop and revise the structure of the community in response to the people.\textsuperscript{153} The people need to act in line with this covenant in order to be God’s people.

Through the examples at work in the life of Moses one can see how attunement works. For Fishbane, attunement consists of “becoming aware.” In this one realizes that the world is not a static, fixed place. Rather, it is a dynamic happening that one knows through the irruptive and caesural event that is the contingency of worldly existence. Attunement to the world is becoming aware of this contingency and seeing the irruptions and caesura that make existence contingent.\textsuperscript{154} This allows Fishbane to bring the metaphor of music to bear on his understanding of attunement. He says, “Music is thus a training in attentive hearing, a cultivation of a certain mindfulness.”\textsuperscript{155} The “becoming aware” of attunement allows one to hear attentively. As well, attunement seeks to cultivate a certain type of person by allowing one to be mindful of one’s interaction with the world. This is because a large part of attunement is the cultivation of a self who is capable of being attuned to the other however that other may come.\textsuperscript{156} Part of this cultivation of the attuned self is the development of one’s ability to listen with attention and humility.\textsuperscript{157} Fishbane believes that this cultivation of an aware, mindful, listening

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\textsuperscript{153} Ibid., 60.
\textsuperscript{154} Ibid., 20.
\textsuperscript{155} Ibid., 28.
\textsuperscript{156} Ibid., 24.
\textsuperscript{157} Ibid., 147.
\end{flushright}
person is what prefigures theology by showing the interaction between the Other and the world.\textsuperscript{158}

Fishbane’s discussion to this point paints attunement as a mostly passive concept. However, he and this project see attunement as a passive-active idea. The active part of attunement comes in the response. While attunement does involve listening and hearing and taking in the other, it also actively engages the other through listening and responding. Responsiveness is a necessary part of what it means to be attuned.\textsuperscript{159} Fishbane brings out the responsive element of attunement in his discussion of how one is attuned to a text. He argues that the attunement to a text is not only one’s patient attentiveness but also the active subjugation of the self to the text in the formation of an interpersonal relationship where one picks up on the nature and work of the characters and themes in the text.\textsuperscript{160} One is attuned to the text in the interpersonal relationship that is formed with the text. This allows the ability to respond by carrying out the action that the text points to.\textsuperscript{161} The responsiveness of attunement comes in the transformation of the self. For Fishbane, in relation to one’s interpretation of religion, the attunement of one to God calls the person to become like God, being a Giver of Life, doing mercy, embodying a living theology that responds as one cultivated by God.\textsuperscript{162}

\textsuperscript{158} Ibid., 22.

\textsuperscript{159} Ibid., 27-28.

\textsuperscript{160} Ibid., 72-73.

\textsuperscript{161} Ibid., 149-50. Fishbane makes this statement specifically in relation to the interpretation of the Torah.

\textsuperscript{162} Ibid., 195-98.
Fishbane’s discussion of attunement begins to lead into the type of thinking that is involved in this project. It seeks ways of thinking that are passive-active in their desire to listen, hear, become aware, be mindful, as well as respond and be transformed. All of this goes into the thinking that the theological proposal that follows will embrace. I find improvisation as a concept that helps to think theology in this way. Unlike Vanhoozer and Begbie, I do not propose art forms that merely reinforce certain doctrinal positions. My thesis is that theology is improvisation in that it is concerned with attunement and the way that thinking proceeds from there. Thus, the second concept that is important to begin to describe is that of “improvisation.”

Gary Peters’ *The Philosophy of Improvisation* provides a helpful guide to understand the way that improvisation is being used in this project. His helpfulness comes through his use of Martin Heidegger and Jacques Derrida, among other continental philosophers, to think through the nature of improvisation. In doing so, his project shares many affinities with the current project. However, there is a twofold difference. First, Peters is engaged in philosophical analysis while mine is a theological proposal. Second, the current project uses the idea of attunement to think the nature of improvisation. In so doing, my project offers a point of connection between theology and improvisation by arguing for their shared way of thinking in attunement. Peters fails to develop such a point of connection between philosophy and improvisation. Due to this, Peters’ account tends push the very limits of his ability to think improvisation because he has not

explored the share ways of thinking in improvisation and philosophy. This is a limitation to his otherwise helpful proposal.

However, Peters’ work shares many similarities to my argument. The first such similarity is that improvisation is a way of thinking that avoids closure. In so doing, its way of thinking texts or pieces of music is constantly concerned with transforming them to be heard or read otherwise and anew. Peters points to the fact that it is difficult for an improviser to bring together a beginning and an end to an improvisation. The problem comes because the form of improvisation resists closing and, yet, the improviser needs to “end.” The result is not a final end but an end that simply delays the piece until it is picked up again. For Peters, part of the task of the improviser is to protect “the homelessness of the productive imagination from the conceptual structures that would limit its play.”\textsuperscript{164} The work has an “incessant self-interruption that constantly opens [it] to another beginning and another…”\textsuperscript{165} Thus, the improvised work is one that gives itself to be interrupted and begun anew always. This leads to the work’s resistance to any form of closure.

The second shared similarity is how one liberates a piece of work as a basis for improvisation; this allows a piece to be improvised upon by someone. For Peters, the way that one liberates a piece is to free it from “the cramped intentionality of the singular artist.” In so doing, the improviser ensures the “presence of the origin in the unfolding of the work.”\textsuperscript{166} Peters points to the fact that the author no longer dominates a piece within

\textsuperscript{164} Ibid., 43.

\textsuperscript{165} Ibid., 42-43.
an improvisation. However, the improvisation still wants to capture the original moment that allowed the work to be produced and to be repeated. Thus, the improviser works with what is given in order to allow it to be heard otherwise. The piece cannot be contained wholly within the life of the author but is freed to do something different. An improvisation does not just rehash what has been given in a piece but seeks to interrupt it. In so doing, the improvisation produces difference within the piece. The improviser looks to create difference by exploring the piece for the otherness at work within it. This creates tension within the performing of the piece and opens various caesuras to be explored within the piece. This all contributes to the way that a piece is opened to be improvised upon.

The third shared similarity between Peters and this project is the way that the interaction between saying something “new” and being faithful to a tradition occurs. The question of how one is faithful to the original piece while interpreting it in new ways is at the heart of improvisation. Peters argues that improvisation is a way of mediating the old and the new through “entwinement and entanglement.” For him, this means that in order to say something new in an improvisation one must rely on the old piece while attempting to repeat the old piece almost always results in doing something new with it. Peters says, “It is not so much working together to make something new out of the old but, rather, the more solitary act of ‘standing-within’ the old, occupying it in such a way

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166 Ibid., 60-61.
167 Ibid., 4.
168 Ibid., 16.
169 Ibid., 1.
that its own opening onto being or ‘thrust into the Open’ is preserved.” Thus, the interpretation of the old in the improvisation actually leads to new things if one allows the piece to always be open for exploration. Peters describes this further by pointing to the fact that improvisation is involved in the interplay between destruction and reconstruction. He argues that the improvisation finds the new in what has been obscured by the old. Thus, a reconstruction takes place through the destruction of the piece by mining what the old is obscuring. The reconstruction results in new ways of hearing and playing the piece.

The question of improvisation opens up the issue of what form(s) gives itself to being improvised upon. In order to explore this question within the context of the project, it is first necessary to gain an initial understanding of the idea of form. In order to do so, the last section takes up the account of form at work in Catherine Malabou’s *The Plasticity of Writing: Dialectic, Destruction, Deconstruction.* Within a discussion of this work, one can gain an understanding of the malleable nature of form and how this opens possibilities for theology.

Malabou’s thought revolves around her development of the idea of “plasticity.” For her, plasticity refers to the “spontaneous organization of fragments.” The model she uses for this process is the way that the human nervous system organizes data. She

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170 Ibid., 17.

171 Ibid., 48.


173 Ibid., 7.
says that the way that the brain takes in data and the way that various biological
mechanisms function open ways of thinking about how humans interpret and organize
information. She says this because these mechanisms are places that collect and gather
seemingly disparate information and organize it. In an experience, the person takes in
multiple sources of sensory data through the senses that are fragments of the experience.
The brain wants to make this experience intelligible in some way. In order to do so, the
brain gives some organization to these fragments, but it could change depending on how
the brain orders and reorders the data.\footnote{174} For Malabou, plasticity is best viewed “as a
structure of transformation and destruction of the presence and the present.”\footnote{175} It pays
attention to the self-deconstruction of forms and texts through this spontaneous
organization. She says that plasticity, as a form of reading, is based upon a text’s own
deconstruction. She argues that a “plastic reading of a text is the reading that seeks to
reveal the form left in the text through the withdrawing of presence, that is, through its
own deconstruction.”\footnote{176} The plastic reading defies the logic of presence by allowing that
exteriority of the text that cannot be interiorized as signification to come to the fore.
Plasticity “is the condition of meaning” that looks for this exterior other in the fragments
of a text or way of thinking and the subsequent organization and reorganization of
these.\footnote{177}
Malabou’s thinking on plasticity opens an analogous way of thinking form. Within a plastic approach to various phenomena, the way that form functions is quite important. The deconstruction that she wants to allow is based upon the plasticity of form. In saying this, however, she wants to undo the forms that dominate a discourse, text, or way of thinking. She argues that in order to find the exterior to a text one needs to exceed the form that the text is in. But, for her, form cannot be undone unless one calls on the “support of form.” The plasticity of form allows for the exceeding of form and also its convertibility into other forms or ways of thinking. For her, “The structure or form of thought—the alterity of philosophy to both its tradition and its own destruction—is both the specter of its history and the outline of something within it that is not yet born, something innate in the true sense.” Thus, the possibilities inherent to a form include the entire history of how it has been used along with the ways that it has not been used but are part of the nature of form. Thus, for Malabou, form disrupts and transgresses itself. This is what gives way to “trans-formation,” which she believes opens the depth of a new referentiality or another body in both the structure and in its dislocation. The form is ultimately something that exceeds itself through its own fragmentation and continued dislocation. This opens up new and various possibilities inherent to the form.

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178 Ibid., 46.
179 Ibid., 53-54.
180 Ibid., 50.
D. Conclusion: The Outline of the Argument

The discussion of attunement, improvisation, and form work as an entry point into the way that the argument that follows will proceed. These terms are basic to the nature of the argument. I make my argument by first offering an analysis of attunement through the philosophical resources I find in the work of Martin Heidegger and Jacques Derrida. Then I connect my analysis of the philosophers with the way of thinking in improvisation. By doing this, I construct a way of thinking that is predicated upon the notion of attunement. In the last part of the project, I show how theological thinking as attunement ultimately leads to the fragmentation and dislocation of form in theology. The result is a way of thinking theologically that is, at its core, improvisational as it is in a mode similar to that of the jazz musician improvising upon a piece.

The first part of this project outlines an understanding of attunement through an engagement with the philosophers Martin Heidegger and Jacques Derrida. The first chapter offers an account of Heidegger’s *Destruktion* of Western metaphysics. The current proposal outlines how this “destructive” way of thinking relies on and leads to a new understanding of attunement. The chapter makes its argument through three sections. The first section follows Heidegger in his attempt to pursue a path that reorients the nature of thinking. The way he does this is to critique metaphysics as onto-theological. He then says that thinking begins with one’s disposition. This leads him to the step back, which is dealt with in the second section. In the step back, Heidegger argues that what is needed for thinking is a step back out of metaphysics. He makes this argument by embracing the path of thinking that was first pursued by the Pre-Socratic
Greek thinkers. He also shows how onto-theological metaphysics ends up closing thinking. The last section of the argument of the chapter analyzes how Heidegger understands thinking as attunement. This section follows the progression of Heidegger’s thought on attunement from *Being and Time* to *What is Philosophy?*. Through this analysis, one can see the centrality of attunement for thinking rightly. This chapter clears the conceptual ground which this project will traverse along with beginning to shape an understanding of attunement.

The second chapter continues this train of thought developed in Heidegger by turning to Jacques Derrida. I argue that Derrida’s notion of deconstruction is predicated upon attunement. This is justified in the chapter by arguing that Derrida always seeks to open a text to the other and that in doing so, one becomes attuned to the other to interpret otherwise. This chapter makes its argument in four steps. The first outlines the idea of deconstruction as attunement through an analysis of the use of “rhythm” within Derrida’s corpus, most notably *Psyche* and “Différance.” In this section, I argue that Derrida’s idea of reading is predicated upon one finding and being in rhythm with the text. Finding this rhythm is predicated upon attunement. The second section turns to the idea of hospitality in Derrida and how he uses this to further his understanding of attunement. For Derrida, hospitality is attunement because of its concern to be for the other, welcoming the other. This welcome is only able to occur if one is attuned to the other. Thus, hospitality is built upon attunement. It is this hospitality that allows one to be aware of the deconstruction taking place in texts. The third section deals with Derrida’s notion of translation. Translation is the outcome of one’s attunement as it not only welcomes the other but also
wants to speak with the other. Translation transforms a text and risks an interpretation, one which may be inaccurate. However, for Derrida, deconstruction must translate as this is part and parcel of what happens in interpretation. The chapter on Derrida further solidifies the understanding of attunement at work within this project as well as projecting the way that the argument will take place in the final three chapters.

The third chapter focuses on expanding the understanding of attunement through an analysis of improvisation in Western forms of music. In doing so, the chapter shows how attunement is the way of thinking practiced in improvisation. The first section of the chapter focuses on the importance of listening for attunement and improvisational music. Listening is the central practice at the heart of attunement because it is both passive and active, allowing one to not only take in but also respond. Listening also keeps open the possibilities available for thinking. The second section of the chapter deals with the way attunement works in music through the interaction that occurs between piece and musician, musician and tradition, musician and other musicians, and musician and audience. In order for improvisation to occur, attunement must be at the heart of each one of these relationships. The third section makes the case that improvisation is concerned with transformation through the breaking of musical form. This idea follows the thought of Derrida in the previous chapter by arguing that interpretation requires translation or transformation of the form. Improvisation does this through the move to not allow closure, never ending a piece. Improvisation leads to the piece always being heard anew in different ways through different contexts and situations. This chapter,
then, offers a way of thinking that is based upon attunement through listening, with the result being a transformation of a piece.

The fourth chapter focuses on the work of David Tracy. This chapter begins by outlining Tracy’s overall project of thinking theology as conversation. In doing so, Tracy believes that he is able to counter two problems that be thinks plague theology: the problem of totality and that of plurality. By turning to conversation Tracy puts forward a way of thinking that is able to deal with both problems: first, a conversation is never closed so it should not slip into a totalizing form; and, second, a conversation includes a plurality of voices. The next section of the chapter examines how it is that Tracy thinks and names God. Focusing on his later work, the chapter turns to his recent interest the form of fragments. Tracy’s use of the form of fragments helps theology think God in a way that is non-totalizing as well as in a way that deals with the plurality of forms available for thinking God. The third section shows how Tracy deals with the plurality of forms. In order to think through how one goes about bringing various forms for thinking theologically together, he turns to the idea of the gathering. The gathering is the place where disparate discourses and forms can come together and critique each other while still being together. This turn to the gathering leads to the fourth section of the chapter. This section uses the gathering to show the importance of ethics within Tracy’s thought. In a manner similar to Derrida, Tracy offers an ethics of resistance. This chapter ultimately shows the need in theology for a non-totalizing discourse and a thinking of forms for naming and thinking God that are based upon the fragment.
The last chapter focuses on Augustine of Hippo. The uptake of Augustine is to show how he sees the necessity of multiple forms to think and name God. The three forms dealt with in this chapter are music in *De Musica*, rhetoric in *De Doctrina Christiana*, and narrative/autobiography in *Confessions*. The first section of the chapter outlines his use of music in constructing his theology. The importance of music to him is that it offers a way of viewing the world and God’s interaction with the world. The second section deals with the rhetoric he puts forward in *De Doctrina Christiana*. This text shows the importance of one’s disposition and orientation for thinking theologically. In this text, Augustine shows the necessity of attunement to God to do theology. He thinks this through a hermeneutic of love. The last section deals with the use of narrative and autobiography in *Confessions*. In this text, Augustine uses narrative to unstructure any forms that dominate thinking on God. He does this through a meditation upon how God creates by giving form, but consistently stays formless. In so doing, Augustine shows the unstructured form of theology. In his use of multiple discourses, Augustine shows the need for theology to engage a multiplicity of ways of thinking God, with no “one” way dominating in order to think God in a way that actually correlates to the belief in God.
CHAPTER ONE:

HEIDEGGER AND THE QUESTION OF THINKING

The first chapter of this project outlines the way of thinking that will be pursued in the following project through an analysis of the thought of Martin Heidegger. The project finds in Heidegger someone who articulates a path to understand what it means to think, especially to think God. Heidegger’s account of thinking leads this project into a more originary ground for the type of thinking that occurs in theology. Heidegger offers this unique position because through his critique of philosophy he shows the way to first think the origins of thinking from their very roots while, second, pursuing a line of thinking that grows organically from these roots. The focus of the chapter will be on his account of the Destruktion of metaphysics as it is broadly laid out in his text What is Philosophy? This text offers the insight necessary to understand how attunement stands

1 “To think” here is a phenomenological term that refers to the intuition that begins thinking about something, the pre-understanding and subsequent thinking through that occurs. Dominique Janicaud says, “In order to think, one must break away from ‘evidence’ that objectifies every noetic correlate into an object of representation.” Janicaud also encourages the idea of “free play” at work in Heidegger’s thought so that the philosopher thinks instead of represents. See Dominique Janicaud, “Heideggeriana,” trans. Michael Gendre in Dominique Janicaud and Jean-Francois Mattéi, Heidegger from Metaphysics to Thought (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995), 29.

2 Here, a brief listing of both philosophers and theologians who use Heidegger to think religion would include the likes of Karl Rahner, Paul Ricoeur, David Tracy, John D. Caputo, Mark C. Taylor, Thomas Carlson, and Charles Winquist, to name but a few.

3 This is not to articulate a foundationalism or, even, an anti-foundational foundationalism. As will become clear in what follows, the goal here is to get back into the originary ground of thinking, which is found in the term “attunement.” John D. Caputo echoes this sentiment and metaphor in his The Mystical Element in Heidegger’s Thought (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 1978), 57.
at the center of thinking. My analysis of Heidegger offers both a critique of onto-
theological thinking while laying a (non)foundation for the kind of thinking that I believe
should take place within theology.

The path (weg) of the chapter consists of three steps. The first is to follow
Heidegger’s Destruktion of philosophy through an internal critique which opens the path
for thinking to take. Second, it follows Heidegger in analyzing how the “step back”
contributes to a reconstitution of the nature of thinking through his account of the
ontological difference between Being (Sein) and beings (Seiende). Lastly, Heidegger
shows that to think Being as the ground of thinking, one must be attuned to Being. From
this argument, the chapter broadly accomplishes the following: first, it shows the critique
of onto-theology by Heidegger and how this opens the possibilities for thinking, second,
beginning to outline what is meant by attunement in the project; third, the chapter
gives a preliminary understanding of multiple terms which articulate attunement, like
Destruktion, Befindlichkeit, Bestimmung, dia-logue and thinking-through; and lastly the
chapter shows how the orientation to musical forms taken up in subsequent chapters

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5 Mark A. Wrathall offers a definition of onto-theology, saying, “[Onto-theology] means that
metaphysics tried to understand the being of everything that is through a simultaneous determination of its
essence or most universal trait…and a determination of the ground or source of the totality of beings in
some highest or divine entity…” Mark A. Wrathall, “Introduction: Metaphysics and Onto-Theology,” in
Religion after Metaphysics, ed. Mark A. Wrathall (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press,
2003), 2. Merold Westphal also offers a concise definition, saying, “Onto-theology is the affirmation and
articulation of a highest being who is the key to the meaning of the whole of being.” Merold Westphal,
“Aquinas and Onto-Theology,” American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly 80, no. 2 (Spring 2006), 175.

6 S. J. McGrath says that “[t]he target of Heidegger’s critique of onto-theology is…any mitigation
or foreclosure of questioning with a premature answer.” S.J. McGrath, The Early Heidegger and Medieval
Philosophy: A Phenomenology for the Godforsaken (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America
Press, 2006), 20.
opens through Heidegger’s thinking. Thus, this chapter sets the trajectory for how the rest of the project will articulate how theology is “improvisation.”

A. Pursuing the Path of Thinking

There is an initial problem when one begins to think one’s thinking: one is already involved in whatever it is that one tries to think. Thinking thinking is aporetic. Heidegger offers a way to navigate the aporia through an embrace of the problem. By embracing the aporia of thinking Heidegger opens a path to pursue a more originary thinking that is the ground upon which one thinks. For Heidegger the way to the ground of thinking is through an internal critique of philosophy.

The internal critique that Heidegger performs is a *Destruktion* of Western metaphysics. This *Destruktion* of philosophy begins by asking the question “what is philosophy?” He says that “the aim of [the] question is to enter *into* philosophy, to tarry in it, to conduct ourselves in its manner, that is, ‘to philosophize.’” The path for asking the question of philosophy takes the form of an internal critique of philosophy through doing philosophy. The internal critique comes from standing within philosophy while being open to alternative paths that arise from the foundations of philosophy but were overlooked or ignored by Western philosophy, beginning with Plato.

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8 John D. Caputo notices a difference in Heidegger between philosophy—an academic discipline—and philosophizing—the throwing into question of the very nature of the self. Caputo says, “Philosophizing must maintain itself as a radical questioning that answers questions in such a way as to keep them open, indeed to open up ever-new spheres of questionability.” See John D. Caputo, *Demythologizing Heidegger* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), 49.

9 Janicaud says, “…whoever wants to think with—or against—Heidegger must ask whether he or she stands in the same field of openness. No longer is there any pretension to think correctly.” See Janicaud, “Heideggeriana,” 24. Janicaud brings to the fore that Heidegger’s thinking begins from a
believes that this is an internal critique because it comes from the very foundation of philosophy through doing philosophy. This is to cut through the “philosophy” that has been built upon the ground of what Heidegger seems to term metaphysics and to come to a place of a more originary thinking. This is the movement of Destruktion for Heidegger.

For the moment, however, it is necessary to point to how Heidegger opens the path into this Destruktion. Dominique Janicaud says that as a task, Destruktion shows “the connection between the interpretation of Being as question and the reinterpretation of the Being of beings within its history [through analysis of Plato, Aristotle, Descartes, and Kant].” The Destruktion of Western philosophy performs the internal critique of philosophy through an immersion within the tradition of philosophy. The way into the ground of philosophy is through attunement. Destruktion seeks to become attuned to the ground of thinking at its most originary point, which Heidegger found in the thinking disposition of openness instead of through an intention to represent. As this chapter proceeds this will become more clear.


11 Heidegger uses Destruktion as a way of getting into the issue of the “ontological differentiation” which exists between beings and Being. The phenomenological reduction helps Heidegger to think this differentiation, while Destruktion and reconstruction allow him to clear the onto-theological ground to again think the uncovering of Being. See Janicaud, “The Theological Turn of French Phenomenology,” 60-61.


of the Pre-Socratic Greeks. When Heidegger thinks philosophy, he is trying to think with those philosophers who thought before they knew they were doing philosophy. It is their thinking that actually gives rise to what is termed “philosophy.” Heidegger believes that philosophizing has covered over their originary thinking though. So, the necessity exists to get “behind” (temporally) all of the material and “thinking” that has been placed between now and the original thinkers who gave rise to philosophy. Through being open one can now become attuned to these thinkers which allows one to hear philosophy as it is said for its first time in its origin, as philosophia.

In order to be attuned to the originary modes of thinking, Heidegger argues that one should be familiar with the history of philosophy so that one is able to distinguish the originary Greek voice. Heidegger advocates a “thinking-through” of philosophy with the Pre-Socratic Greeks in order to enter onto the path of philosophy with those whose thinking has cleared the path for an unconcealing of Being. To think-through is to listen to a thinker and be able to engage a problem in the same way and in a manner that holds to the “spirit” of the way of thinking opened by the thinker: thus, thinking through

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14 Heidegger, What is Philosophy? 39. For Heidegger, the most originary philosophers are not Plato and Aristotle, but the Pre-Socratic philosophers who come temporally before philosophers know they are philosophizing, like Pythagoras and Anaximander. These thinkers are thinking. Thus, in what follows, I will follow Heidegger in referring to the Greeks as those thinkers that are Pre-Socratic. If I mean to discuss anyone coming after these thinkers, I will name them by name.

15 I am not saying that Heidegger wants to do an historical-critical analysis to get to the true ideas of the Pre-Socratic Greek philosophers. Rather, Heidegger argues that philosophy should begin with the Pre-Socratics because they are the ones that begin the path of philosophy while also asking the questions that Heidegger believes are necessary to the philosophical endeavor.

16 Ibid., 29.

is not just a repetition of someone’s previous thought. Thus, Heidegger believes it is necessary to traverse the path with the Greeks by thinking-through the philosophical problems that have plagued humanity since their time.\textsuperscript{18} Thinking-through allows one to enter the path of another by being open to the possible ways someone else might have thought. Heidegger believes that thinking-through enters into the force of earlier thinking as one is moved the way earlier thinkers were moved by the force within philosophy that opens thinking.\textsuperscript{19}

The thinking-through that occurs in philosophy is through the practice of dialogue. Dialogue is the means by which philosophy proceeds. This is seen in the etymology of the word “dialogue.” The first part of the word comes from the Greek \textit{dia} which means “through.” The second part is from the Greek \textit{logos} which means “word” or “reason.” However, Heidegger does not want to leave \textit{logos} as meaning strictly “word” or “reason.” The meaning of \textit{logos} for Heidegger must be extended further. The reasoning that occurs in the \textit{logos} is not just reasoning like the type that occurs in a scientific proposition or geometrical axiom. The reason of the \textit{logos} is gathering or a bringing together of two partners in the dialogue. The gathering of the \textit{logos} allows the partners to exist together through a living in difference, not through a synthesis reminiscent of the Hegelian dialectic. Dia-logue is a discourse that necessitates two


entities, then, as one “thinks or reasons through” with the other while having contrasting ways of thinking.\textsuperscript{20}

The dia-logue begins with the Pre-Socratic Greeks because they began the questioning that opens the way for philosophy. The dia-logue begins with an attempt to listen to the Greeks in what they think.\textsuperscript{21} Listening is the first move made in order to enter into a thinking-through of philosophy\textsuperscript{22} as this action opens one to hear what is giving itself in this history and to tread a path already worn by the Greeks.\textsuperscript{23} However, listening is not a passive acceptance of what the Greeks articulate; rather, listening entails hearing what is is opened for thinking through their thought.\textsuperscript{24} Listening allows one to enter in the originary ground of philosophy and thinking because in listening one becomes involved. Listening is the first action of the dia-logue with these historical others as it allows one to accept and appropriate by thinking-through. Thus, listening is always part and parcel of what it means to actually think.\textsuperscript{25}

If listening is part and parcel of thinking, this changes how thinking is understood by Heidegger. The path laid by Heidegger uses listening to point to the fact that the


\textsuperscript{22} I could argue that John D. Caputo uses the verbs “hearing” and “listening” as the “methodological key” to the type of thinking that Heidegger engages in. See John D. Caputo, \textit{The Mystical Element in Heidegger’s Thought} (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1978), 73-75.

\textsuperscript{23} Heidegger, \textit{What is Called Thinking?} 25 and 168.

\textsuperscript{24} Ibid., 138.

\textsuperscript{25} Ibid., 127.
nature of thinking is to become open\textsuperscript{26} and not to find a correct methodology or correct proposition (things that close thinking). Thinking seeks to be open by listening to the rhythm and voice within philosophy and how this opens various possibilities to the thinker. The idea of philosophy in Western thinkers has avoided this wholeheartedly in its quest for a complete metaphysics.\textsuperscript{27} The thinking of philosophy as seen in its pursuit of onto-theological metaphysics fails because it does not listen and, subsequently, is not open: it is marked by the pursuit of closure. Kevin Hart iterates that metaphysics seeks a cause for everything through a calculative reasoning that relies on epistemological principles of sufficient grounds while, in contrast, Heidegger pursues an ontological form of thinking that avoids closure.\textsuperscript{28} In following Heidegger’s notion of thinking-through one can offer a path to open the way of thinking in metaphysics.\textsuperscript{29}

Heidegger begins his thinking-through of the nature of metaphysics by turning to the way that the Pre-Socratic Greeks began. And, in Heidegger’s mind, the Greeks began with astonishment.\textsuperscript{30} Heidegger sees the beginning of philosophy to be the wonder and awe that the original Greek thinkers had when thinking about the world. For the earliest Greek thinkers nature was “the emerging, arising, enduring presence of Being. It was an overpowering presence; it was not yet something which had been conquered in


\textsuperscript{28} Kevin Hart, \textit{Trespass of the Sign: Deconstruction, Theology and Philosophy}, 243.


\textsuperscript{30} Heidegger, \textit{What is Philosophy?} 81-3.
thought.”31 Their attempts at describing were meant to convey this feeling through an opening of those who read, listened and thought with them to the same astonishment. For Heidegger, if philosophy is going to truly rethink its ground, it must begin where these earliest Greek thinkers did—with astonishment.

Astonishment becomes the impetus for philosophy and thinking on the Heideggerian pathway. As such, astonishment pervades philosophy by working its way through the history of metaphysics. The problem with philosophy is that it has neglected this astonishment through embrace of a way of thinking that embraces closure. Astonishment embraces a way of thinking that values openness as it pursues that which is other. Heidegger names what falls outside the system of metaphysics “transcendence.” Astonishment leads to an understanding of transcendence in that it opens one to the inability of any way of thinking to offer a way of explaining everything. Instead, astonishment always opens the thinker to more through the embrace of the awe and amazement that comes from that which one cannot explain. Astonishment offers Heidegger a way to call into question every system by being attentive to that which breaks or surpasses such closed ways of thinking.32

For Heidegger, transcendence calls into question human ways of thinking by acknowledging the limitations of humanity. There can be no explanation of all things predicated by a person. The attempt to do so is not only misguided, but is futile. For


thinking to occur, then, there needs to be an acknowledgement of the thinker’s limitations. This acknowledgement leads one to embrace astonishment as it allows one to dwell in the amazement that occurs from gazing upon those things that consistently seem to be on the outside, just out of reach. Transcendence leads the thinker to the place of being amazed at that which calls into question hegemonic and totalizing forms of thinking. Transcendence becomes the recognition that there is always something other that breaks the conceptions one has of the way things are or the way they have to be.  

Thinking begins by residing in a disposition. Heidegger shows this when he says that astonishment is not a way of positing a mystery or accounting for a feeling; rather, astonishment is a way of existing which leads to thinking in a certain way. For Heidegger, the thinker should live in a state of being amazed/ astonished at that which appears. The thinker is amazed because that which appears always seems to be-more-than what can be described. Thinking comes from this disposition of being-astonished.

Being-astonished arises from the very existence of things through the fact that there is something rather than nothing. This astonishment is what allows Being to be pursued and to unfold itself. In astonishment, Being can unfold itself because the philosopher no longer tries to categorize Being but only to be astonished and dwell in the unfolding of Being. Philosophy ceases to be a search for facts; rather, it pursues that


34 Heidegger, What is Philosophy? 85. I will discuss the importance of Being as opposed to beings in the next section.
which allows facts to come into Being.\textsuperscript{35} Thinking takes on the role of allowing existence to come to the fore by being-open to how Being unfolds and discloses itself through listening and being attentive to these disclosures. This becomes the role and task of thinking.

B. “Step Back”\textsuperscript{36}—Opening the Path to Being

The previous section laid out the path of thinking for Heidegger, specifically how he orients the thinker into a disposition of openness. This section will analyze how this openness to the outside of philosophy leads him to the “step back.” The “step back” is the move Heidegger makes to get out of the ways of thinking of onto-theological metaphysics. As Kevin Hart articulates, “The \textit{Destruktion} of philosophy as metaphysics involves recovering what has remained \textit{unheard} in a philosophical text during the history of philosophy and putting it to use in the project of overcoming metaphysics.”\textsuperscript{37} What Heidegger terms the “step back” accomplishes this \textit{Destruktion} through its disposition of openness and its desire to listen and allow the unfolding of Being.\textsuperscript{38}

The disposition of being-astonished leads Heidegger to the second move in his program of the \textit{Destruktion} of philosophy: the positing of the ontological difference


\textsuperscript{38} When I capitalize the word “Being,” I am referring to the translation of the German word “Sein” However, when I do not capitalize the word “being” (small \textit{b}) or use it as a plural, I am referring to the German word “Seiende.”
between Being and beings. Heidegger argues philosophy misses the true object of its thought by pursuing the thinking of beings instead of Being.\textsuperscript{39} Janicaud says that the negative side of \textit{Destruktion} is the “difficult process” that is “the rupture from the forgetfulness of Being, as the manifold probing that thought must perform in gaining access to each epoch and its configurations…”\textsuperscript{40} For thinking to be truly thought it needs to overcome its forgetting of Being by thinking Being in its difference from beings.\textsuperscript{41} This is the task that Heidegger sets forth for thinking in the second move of \textit{Destruktion}.

Heidegger posits this ontological difference because he understands Being to be the place where beings are gathered together. As such, Being is what gives the astonishment the Pre-Socratic Greeks use as the basis for their thinking; beings become only those things that show that there is something rather than nothing. Thus, Being is what gives beings. Further, Heidegger says that “Being gathers being together in so far as it is being. Being is the gathering together—\textit{Logos}.”\textsuperscript{42} The \textit{logos} is the articulation, or the putting into language, of that gathering together that occurs in Being. As Heidegger famously says, “Language is the house of Being.” However, language is the “house of Being” because this is where the person “ek-sists by dwelling, in that he belongs to the truth of Being, guarding it.”\textsuperscript{43} Humanity encounters beings through language, but this

\textsuperscript{39} In calling Being the “object” of philosophy, I do not intend to invoke the subject/ object split. Rather, object is used in its most general form, in that philosophy is a search into Being.

\textsuperscript{40} Janicaud, “Overcoming Metaphysics?” 4.

\textsuperscript{41} Heidegger, \textit{What is Called Thinking}? 227.

\textsuperscript{42} Heidegger, \textit{What is Philosophy}? 49.
language is also what points toward Being and away from beings. The gathering that is
language (as *logos*) is not meant to construct a whole predicated upon the entire
population of beings; rather, the goal is to point to Being. Language as *logos* is what lets
the truth of Being appear in its difference from beings.⁴⁴ An attentiveness to this
appearing is what begins the movement of the “step back.”

In order to be attentive to Being, Heidegger argues that one must navigate the
ontological difference between Being and beings. The ideal place to begin is with
Heidegger’s famous lecture “The Onto-Theological Constitution of Metaphysics.” Here,
Heidegger opens the path for thinking through and after the “step back” from
metaphysics. Heidegger navigates the lecture by having a dialogue with Hegel.⁴⁵
Heidegger wishes to enter into a conversation with Hegelian thought⁴⁶ in order to think-
through the problem of ontological difference.⁴⁷ In order to think-through with Hegel,
Heidegger shows that there are three concerns that Hegel’s matter of thinking opens in
relation to the difference between Being and beings. In posing these, Heidegger opens a

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⁴⁵ Thomas A. Carlson shows that part of Heidegger’s engagement with Hegel is to critique two tendencies toward totalizing thinking: both Hegel’s attempt to think outside of time and his attempt to
overcome finitude through the absolute self-certainty of Spirit. Carlson argues that Heidegger’s critique of
these also helps him overcome the representational thinking that Hegel espouses. See Thomas A. Carlson, *Indiscretion: Finitude and the Naming of God* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1999),
50-79, esp. 63ff.


⁴⁷ For a brief discussion on Heidegger’s reading of Hegel and the implications for metaphysics and
theology, see Jeffrey W. Robbins, “The Problem of Ontotheology: Complicating the Divide between
Philosophy and Theology,” *Heythrop Journal* 43, no.2 (April 2002), 143-44.
way of thinking that can pursue the ontological difference in its duality. The first concern Heidegger poses to Hegel is in relation to the concern of thinking, which Hegel sees as finding the absolute concept while Heidegger believes that it is concerned with articulating the ontological difference as difference.\(^48\) Next, Heidegger shows that Hegel enters into a conversation with the history of philosophy to catch the force of each thinker’s thought, while Heidegger enters into conversation with the history of philosophy to think the unthought in the ontological difference between Being and beings.\(^49\) This leads Heidegger to the third concern, which he sees as articulating how the step back occurs. He says that Hegel enters the conversation with the history of philosophy in order to come to an absolute foundation (\textit{Aufhebung}), while Heidegger enters into the conversation of philosophy to think the ontological difference which leads to the “step back” in order to think that which has been skipped over by philosophy.\(^50\)

After articulating these three questions, Heidegger enters the conversation with the history of philosophy. For him, the problem with the history of metaphysics is that it has left unthought Being by conflating Being with beings. What has happened is that there has been a pursuit of a grounding ground for all things in metaphysics. For him, this is onto-theology.\(^51\) Onto-theology is the melding together of ontology and theology.

\(^{48}\) Heidegger, “The Onto-Theological Constitution of Metaphysics,” 47.

\(^{49}\) Ibid., 48.

\(^{50}\) Ibid., 49.

\(^{51}\) Jeffrey W. Robbins says, “[T]he problem of ontotheology is that ontotheology is always already a ‘closed’ system, knowing its beginning and end before it ever begins the task of thinking…Ontotheology is totalizing, irrespective of thought’s bounds, reason’s limits, or the proper domains belonging to
Metaphysics has become onto-theological in that it has pursued a grounding ground for all things, seeking what ontology does with its search for the nature of existence while also seeking an ultimate reason for this existence, the domain of theology. Metaphysics in its onto-theological form posits a God, but this is not the God of religion; rather, this is God as *causa sui*. This God is similar to Aristotle’s Unmoved Mover, a logical necessity to explain all things. In this type of thinking, logic is not the gathering place (like the Greek *logos*), but a hegemonic structure that is used to hold all things together. No longer are beings gathered together, astonished at their existence and then pointing to the beyond; rather, metaphysics has now offered a complete explanation in a system.

The problem that occurs is the fact that it is only through the ontological difference that Being can be rigorously thought. One begins by thinking the unthought of metaphysics through the articulation of the difference between Being and beings. Thinking the unthought begins with the realization that things *are*, so there must be a movement beyond pure beings. In saying that something, anything, *is*, that beings *are*, a distinction is drawn between beings and Being.

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53 Ibid., 59 and 72. Westphal says that part of the task of onto-theology is to give a “Self-Explanatory Explainer” that gives a reason to why humans are here and ultimately makes humanity the “intelligibility of the whole of being.” See Westphal, “Aquinas and Onto-Theology,” 179.


55 Ibid., 62.

56 Ibid., 50-1.
instability that exists inherently within the word *is*. The *is* coincides with many beings in that beings *are*, but the *is* encompasses everything that is able to *is* while also talking of what grounds their ability to *is*. Language, then, has not taken account of the fact that beings *is* and has forsaken the way of thinking that opens one to the *is*-ing of beings. The search for the ground of beings has caused onto-theology and metaphysics, specifically within Western forms of language, to cover over and conceal Being.

The concealment of Being by the search for the ground of beings has caused philosophy to consistently bypass the original astonishment of the earliest thinkers. Since the time of Plato and Aristotle, the quest of philosophy has abandoned the impetus laid out in the way that the Pre-Socratic Greek thinkers pursued thinking. Instead, philosophy has concerned itself with the principles and causes of beings and not with the search for Being. The result of this misguided search has been the continued concealment of Being by beings. The loss of astonishment and the ability to think-through has caused metaphysics to cease thinking in terms of the Greek *logos* by a failure to understand the gathering together that occurs in Being. This *logos* has been covered

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59 Ibid., 31-36.
60 For Heidegger, in this text, these thinkers are Heraclitus and Parmenides. See Heidegger, *What is Philosophy?* 61-5.
over (or concealed) by a search for the causes and principals of beings.\textsuperscript{63} The creation of a metaphysics that does not seek to gather together, but to gather one whole, results in the covering of Being.\textsuperscript{64} The task of thinking is to think Being outside of this creation of a whole of beings by moving into the more originary moment of Being through the ‘step back.’

The “step back” allows one to think this originary moment of Being in its unconcealment. This unconcealment of Being comes about due to the perdurance of Being. What is held in this perdurance is that Being is what grounds while beings are what is grounded. The need in the “step back” is to think Being and beings in their difference and duality by showing the difference that exists between the two and how this difference creates a tension. This tension between Being and beings opens the possibility for the unconcealment of Being; however, the thinker steps into this tension through beings, which \textit{are} only in the fullness of Being, allowing one to begin to open oneself to Being by listening to it through in existence of beings.\textsuperscript{65} In order to “step back” into Being through beings, one first clears away the thinking of beings that conceals Being. In the clearing away of beings, one becomes open to Being which is necessary to actually think Being in its difference from beings.\textsuperscript{66} The clearing of beings is the openness to

\textsuperscript{63} Ibid., 57.

\textsuperscript{64} Heidegger, \textit{Kant and the Problem of Metaphysics, 5\textsuperscript{th} ed. Enlarged}, trans. Richard Taft (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), 5-6.


something more than beings, which is what gives the possibility of letting Being appear.\textsuperscript{67}

The truth of Being is found in the ability to let Being appear through the clearing of beings or in the unconcealment of Being.\textsuperscript{68}

The Greek word \textit{alethia}, often translated “truth,” is where Heidegger finds both the unconcealment and truth of Being coming together. Heidegger says that from the time of Plato \textit{aletheia} has become associated with technical knowledge through a concern with beings.\textsuperscript{69} However, Heidegger understands \textit{aletheia} as unconcealment and says that it is “the clearing that first grants Being and thinking and their presencing to and for each other.”\textsuperscript{70} \textit{Aletheia} is the unconcealment of Being which gives it to thinking: this is truth in the Heideggerian mind. Thus, true thinking is lost when one reverts to the type of thinking that is overly representational and indebted to a logic that only seeks to totalize.\textsuperscript{71} This is to do the opposite of the truth sought as \textit{aletheia}.\textsuperscript{72} In seeking \textit{aletheia} one moves toward a kind of thinking that seeks to uncover the \textit{techne} and \textit{episteme} behind a thing.\textsuperscript{73} Thinking works to understand how it is that one encounters an object

\textsuperscript{67} Heidegger, “The End of Philosophy and the Task of Thinking,” 441.


\textsuperscript{69} Heidegger, \textit{Contributions to Philosophy (From Enowning)}, 230ff.

\textsuperscript{70} Heidegger, “The End of Philosophy and the Task of Thinking,” 444-45.

\textsuperscript{71} John D. Caputo says that Heidegger sees \textit{aletheia} being used in two ways. The first is as a representational form of thinking about a certain object. The second is more originary, talking of the openness that an entity must have in order to be experienced so that the correctness of an assertion depends upon the openness of the entity. See John D. Caputo, \textit{Demythologizing Heidegger} (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), 18.

\textsuperscript{72} Heidegger, \textit{Introduction to Metaphysics}, 127.
and how this leads to further understanding. This means that in order for thinking to occur, there is an attempt to go beyond the type of thinking that leads to enframing, which disguises Being and leaves it truthless. Heidegger pursues a type of thinking that is in-tune with how something gives itself and the way in which one can think that giving. This is to be attuned to the something else, which opens the thinker to Being in such a way as to pursue aletheia.

Heidegger turns to the idea of God as causa sui as a pointer to the way the “step back” from beings to Being should occur. There is a logic at work here. For Heidegger, God as causa sui is the God of the philosophers, similar to the Unmoved Mover of Aristotle. This is a God that cannot be sacrificed to or worshiped. This is a God that is not experienced in any originary way. The God as causa sui is merely the idea of God according to a totalizing logic. This is the God of onto-theology and, thus, a God he abandons to the realm of beings. In order to counter this onto-theologic it is necessary for a god-less thinking to occur. God-less thinking, for Heidegger, is akin to the God of religion, the God experienced by people in worship, the God people sing to and pray to, the God that astonishes, etc. This idea of God is more originary for Heidegger. The problem comes when people take this originary experience and place it in

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74 The notion of attunement is key to the argument of this entire project. Thus, it will be developed in more detail later. The third section of this chapter specifically shows the importance of attunement to Heidegger’s thought.

75 Ibid., 33-46.

within a hegemonic, metaphysical system. The “step back” in this case is a move from a place of metaphysical necessity and totalizing systems to the place of an originary experience that is not completely explainable but which gives rise to the arrival of things. The logic of the “step back” is one from the discourse of philosophizing and hegemonic discourse to a language built from the place of an originary experience.

It is in thinking the difference that emerges between beings and Being that gives rise to the ability to take the step back. The “step back” consists of thinking the difference between Being and beings, so that one can allow Being to unfold and unconceal itself, no longer trapped by the discussion of beings. But, this “step back” is a more originary move into thinking itself as it is not just a move away from thinking beings as a whole, but is a move outside of philosophy proper. The step back “rescue[s] language from its metaphysical tendency to objectify, idealize, or represent meanings. It would enable the thinker to ask not what words means, but about the event of mean-ing itself…” The “step back” is confounding in that it is never complete, closing a system; it gives rise to come into existence. The “step back” is concerned with leaving thinking open so that it may pursue aletheia. But, this “step back” allows the thinker to view beings as beings, gathered together in Being. The “step back” pursues an active responding to Being as it gives rise to itself in beings. The thinking involved here is an

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77 Ibid., 72.
78 Ibid., 63-4.
80 Heidegger, *What is Called Thinking?* 12-3.
openness that responds and not just receives. The reception of the rise of Being includes the response which is accomplished through this “step back.”

C. Thinking as Attunement

The “step back” leads Heidegger to a place outside of the onto-theological confines of much metaphysical discourse. This leads him to the last piece of the *Destruktion* of Western philosophy. The last piece is reconstruction which articulates how it is that one is aware of the unconcealing of Being. For Heidegger, this occurs in the development of the idea of attunement. Heidegger’s notion of attunement consists of listening to the voice of Being and in so doing to be “placed in a relationship with what is.” Attunement is being “tuned in” to a thought in order to understand the thought. Thus, attunement becomes not just “knowing” or “recognizing” Being when it becomes unconcealed, but to be tuned into the thought that arises from thinking Being. This section will analyze the idea of attunement in the Heideggerian corpus by following how he uses the German word *Befindlichkeit* in *Being and Time* and moves to the use of *Bestimmung* in later works.

This elucidation of Heidegger’s notion of attunement begins with his most famous treatise, *Being and Time*. However, there is an immediate problem when dealing with this text: Heidegger does not use the German word for “attunement”—*Bestimmung*.

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82 Ibid., 77.

83 Ibid., 77-8.

84 Offered here is a brief genealogy of Heidegger’s development of the idea of attunement. However, this is in no way an attempt to be complete: the goal is simply to track his thought on the subject from *Being and Time* to *What is Philosophy?*. 
Heidegger begins his thinking from the place of *Befindlichkeit*, usually translated as “disposition.” However, in her translation of *Sein und Zeit* Joan Stambaugh makes the conscious decision to translate *Befindlichkeit* as “attunement.”\(^85\) She does this to avoid the psychological associations that come with the English word “disposition”\(^86\) which would cause one to read Heidegger as advocating a phenomenology that begins from psychological disposition (a la Husserl).\(^87\) Through her translation, Stambaugh shows that Heidegger is concerned with a more originary, “gut-level” disposition of being attuned to the other/an-other in an initial moment of existence. S. J. McGrath reinforces this when he says, “Dasein always already finds itself in a particular emotional attunement, discovers itself responding to a world that it does not constitute and in a way that eludes its own theoretical grasp.”\(^88\) This becomes evident when Heidegger turns to initial moments of understanding like angst and fear. The thinking behind this is to elucidate an originary moment that allows the thinker to tap into the foundations of existence and, thus, Being.

In *Being and Time* Heidegger begins his thinking around the idea of attunement by linking it with understanding (*Verstehen*). Understanding in this instance refers more

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\(^85\) John Macquarrie is in agreement that “attunement” is a worthy translation as it communicates the idea that what is being discussed is the state that one finds oneself in at any given moment, specifically in one’s relation to the world. See John Macquarrie, *Heidegger and Christianity: The Hensley Henson Lectures 1993-94* (New York: Continuum, 1994), 23-24.

\(^86\) This is ironic since the word “attunement” has now become a popular word in the discourse of psychology, specifically neuroscience.

\(^87\) Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. Joan Stambaugh (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996), xv. All references to *Being and Time* will be to the Stambaugh translation. However, I will also include the German pagination—referenced by SZ (for *Sein und Zeit*)—so that a reference to *Being and Time* will look like the following: BT 173/SZ 185.

to that originary moment when one “understands” something at first glance. This is the “gut-level” moment when one has a pre-understanding of something before one fully comprehends it. The way that Heidegger talks about this is that it is an initial understanding that is there before one even knows it through one’s reflection. This understanding is a basic ontological structure of Da-sein that is often manifested in dispositions like fear, angst, and anxiety. The possibility for this kind of understanding comes from one’s attunement.\(^8^9\) One’s attunement is what makes understanding possible. Attunement allows the initial, pre-understanding to occur because it makes one aware of the fact that one inhabits certain “emotive dispositions” for reasons that are unclear.\(^9^0\) This initial understanding deepens as one becomes more attuned to the world and the ontological structures that allow one to encounter the world. Thus, the more that one understands, the more that one is attuned, and the more one is attuned, the more one can understand, and so on and so on.\(^9^1\) There is a reciprocity between attunement and understanding, where the increase of one leads to the increase of the other. The understanding at work in attunement is akin to that of understanding a situation or a piece of art or a poem or musical number.

One of the ways that Heidegger pursues thinking attunement is in the questioning of Da-sein as an ontological questioning rather than an ontic one.\(^9^2\) This leads Heidegger

\(^8^9\) Heidegger, BT 126/ SZ 135.


\(^9^1\) Ibid., BT 134ff./ SZ 142ff.

\(^9^2\) Ibid., BT 126ff./ SZ 134ff.
into a description of what he sees as the three ontological characteristics of attunement. First, attunement discloses Da-sein in its thrownness and its facticity. Da-sein is thrown into a situation or into a world. Part of that thrownness is to be attuned (or disposed) to the situation that one finds oneself within. Second, attunement discloses being-in-the-world as it is being toward something. Attunement is not directed toward nothing, but toward something and as such, discloses the world within which Da-sein finds itself. Third, in Heidegger’s elucidation, attunement allows inner, psychical experience where one is affected or moved. Here, Heidegger’s thought moves from a more outward attunement to one that is more associated with one’s inner nature. By being attuned, the person is affected and/or moved by those things that are encountered through one’s thrownness and subsequent being-in-the-world. The disclosure of the world is affective and this is a moment of attunement to that world. 

These three ontological characteristics of attunement become important for Da-sein in its constitution of the world. Specifically, attunement is a submission to the world so that the world can be encountered. This submission to the world comes from the fact that the world is what gives significance to Da-sein. Attunement becomes submission to the world in such a way that one can encounter the things that one cares for and is moved by. Here, Heidegger uses care as an ontological category that describes the very

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93 Ibid., BT 128-30/ SZ 136-38.

94 Thomas A. Carlson, *Indescription: Finitude and the Naming of God* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 119. However, the world which gives significance to Da-sein is also given significance by Da-sein. This is a fluid relationship.
structure of existence as being-in-the-world. This care comes from how Dasein finds one attuned (Stimmung) to the world in one’s facticity. Heidegger says, “Since being-in-the-world is essentially care, being-together-with things at hand could be taken in our previous analyses as taking care of them, being with the Mitda-sein of others encountered within the world as concern. Being-together-with is taking care of things, because as a mode of being-in it is determined by its fundamental structure, care.”

The one who is attuned has a certain care for the world in which one exists as “care lies ‘before’ every factual ‘attitude’ and ‘position’ of Dasein, that is it is always already in them as an existential a priori.” The reason that care is important is because it gives Da-sein significance as a being-in-the-world. Carlson says that Heidegger “defines the worldhood of that world (without which Dasein simply is not, and vice versa) as a primordial totality of referential relations that constitute the ‘significance’ (Bedeutsamkeit) in terms in which Dasein’s existential possibility is constituted and appropriated understandingly.” The world is such that the person cares for certain things in this world by being ontologically attuned to them from one’s facticity.

When one begins to meditate upon this nature of what one cares for, there are two subsequent modes of attunement that arise: fear and angst. For Heidegger, fear is a mode

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95 Heidegger, BT 129-30/ SZ 137-38. Macquarrie argues that care is important for Heidegger because this is a place for the gathering of all that he wants to examine in the first half of Being and Time. See Macquarrie, Heidegger and Christianity: The Hensley Henson Lectures 1993-94, 29-30 and 39.

96 Carlson, Indiscretion: Finitude and the Naming of God, 119.

97 Heidegger, BT 180/ SZ 193.

98 Ibid., BT 180/ SZ 193.

99 Carlson, Indiscretion: Finitude and the Naming of God, 117.
of attunement because it is mode of existence that discloses the world in such a way that shows the possibilities of its being threatening. Fear is an ontological category because it becomes not just a way of relating to the world but of initially understanding the world.\textsuperscript{100} For Heidegger, “what is feared has the character of being threatening.”\textsuperscript{101} One who is attuned as being-in-the-world understands how “fearfulness” is disclosed in the world because of the understanding that what is feared can draw near to one.\textsuperscript{102} This fear can even be extended to those one is being-with, the others who inhabit the same world. One fears for these others, that they may be threatened as the self is threatened.\textsuperscript{103} Fear is manifested in three different ways, becoming alarmed, horror, and/ or terror. These three are built on one’s fundamental existential attunement to the world through fear.\textsuperscript{104}

The other mode of attunement that Heidegger specifically mentions is angst. Angst is a mode of one’s fundamental, ontological attunement as a being-in-the-world. Authentic attunement occurs with the initial understanding of Da-sein’s being-toward-death and that one can neither flee nor cover over death as death is inevitable.\textsuperscript{105} The result of this understanding is ultimately unsettling and distressing, leading to angst. Here, angst reveals to Da-sein the ontological possibility of its own nothingness.\textsuperscript{106}

\textsuperscript{100} Heidegger, BT 131-34/ SZ 140-43.
\textsuperscript{101} Ibid., BT 132/ SZ 140.
\textsuperscript{102} Ibid., BT 132/ SZ 141.
\textsuperscript{103} Ibid., BT 133/ SZ 141-42.
\textsuperscript{104} Ibid., BT 133-34/ SZ 142.
\textsuperscript{105} Ibid., BT 240/ SZ 260.
\textsuperscript{106} Ibid., BT 245/ SZ 265-66.
Heidegger’s analysis of angst shows that in temporality Da-sein is brought before its own thrownness and is shown the uncanniness of its being-in-the-world. The attunement revealed in angst is an understanding of the world and one’s place within it, setting one’s own contingency and finitude in light of this world.\textsuperscript{107} From this angst arises the ontological structure of care while the fact that one cares about one’s own being gives rise to angst as well.\textsuperscript{108} Angst and care are related at an existential level. This is because angst leads to care because Da-sein, as the being concerned with its own being, moves toward its potentiality-for-being. This potentiality-for-being comes about because of how Da-sein projects itself into the future, seeing itself as it wants to be. This is not a psychological project, but takes place at an ontological and existential level as Da-sein lives into what it sees as its own potentiality-for-being. Da-sein is concerned (has care for) those places and positions in which it will exist in the future.\textsuperscript{109} This gives Da-sein a way of existing in the world and relating to it initially, and this initial relation is one which is fundamentally temporal. While projecting into the future, Da-sein is still in the present as a being-in-the-world which gives significance to Da-sein.\textsuperscript{110} Da-sein’s existence as its very possibility of being-in-the-world and understanding the world is predicated upon its temporality as a being projecting into the future yet simultaneously inhabiting the present. Da-sein understands this as it is attuned to the world through its

\textsuperscript{107} Ibid., BT 313-17/ SZ 340-46.

\textsuperscript{108} Ibid., BT 178/ SZ 191.

\textsuperscript{109} Ibid., BT 17 SZ 191-92.

\textsuperscript{110} Ibid., BT 179/ SZ 192.
own angst in its temporal situation. Thus, attunement becomes a constituent part of Da-
sein.\footnote{Ibid., BT 321/ SZ 350-51.}

From this understanding of attunement Heidegger moves into discussions of ways
that Da-sein is attuned inauthentically. For him, to be attuned inauthentically arises when
one stays within the horizon of the ontic and existentiell, not moving into one’s own
ground in the ontological and existential. The way that this inauthentic attunement
manifests itself for him is in the structures of idle talk, curiosity, ambiguity, and falling
prey to one’s own thrownness.\footnote{Ibid., BT 156-69/ SZ 167-80.} Fear and angst are existential and ontological because
they describe Da-sein’s fundamental attunement to one’s world as one exists and inhabits
such a world. In the inauthentic moments of attunement just listed the problem that
occurs is that one gets caught up in the series of structures that cover over one’s
authentic, ontological account of oneself. In doing so, one is attuned inauthentically by
not living into one’s own death. Rather, in this inauthentic attunement, one denies one’s
death and oneself as being-toward-death by using these other structures, like idle talk, to
cover over the temporal structures that actually give understanding to one of one’s own
finitude and death. In doing this, Da-sein leads an existence that inauthentic as it is only
centered about beings and not attuned to its authentic self in its concern as a being with
its own being.

In his thinking after \textit{Being and Time} Heidegger moves to a more explicit use of
the idea of attunement. I first analyze Heidegger’s essay from 1930 entitled “On the
In this essay, Heidegger turns away from the idea that thinking begins with an attunement that is disposition (Befindlichkeit) to a way of thinking that is attuned through Stimmende (a variation of Stimmung). The translator of the essay, John Sallis, renders the variations of Stimmung with the notions of “accordance” or “attunement.” As Sallis articulates in a footnote, this rendering of Stimmung bridges the nature of attunement that Heidegger articulates in Being and Time into harmony with the more explicitly musical idea of attunement found in the later What is Philosophy?. Sallis says that Stimmung allows Heidegger to bring together the ideas of attunement that occur when one tunes a musical instrument with the ideas of attunement as disposition or mood that he had put forward only a few years earlier in Being and Time. Giorgio Agamben agrees with Sallis when he argues that what Stimmung must be stripped of is its psychological associations. Agamben believes that Stimmung must carry with it its full “acoustic-musical dimension.” Agamben sees a connection existing between Heidegger and Novalis, who used Stimmung to convey an “acoustics of the soul.” Stimmung acts as a way of Dasein’s attunement to its thrownness to the world. In this essay, Stimmung carries the connotation of “according-with” or “in-tune-with.”

In “On the Essence of Truth” Heidegger explicitly bring attunement to bear on his understanding of truth by saying the only way to get to truth is through an accordance or


114 Ibid., 138; 142.

115 See n. 12, in ibid., 372.

Heidegger brings together two ideas of accordance: first, the idea of consonance of something with our pre-understanding of it and, second, the consonance between a statement and the matter about which it is said. There is a twofold nature to the approach to truth. First, there is an initial attunement to the idea of truth. This initial attunement comes from the first part of accordance which says that in talking or thinking about “what is true” one already has an initial understanding of truth. There is an intuition of truth that is prior to our reflection on truth. The initial way of understanding truth is that truth accords (Stimmende). This understanding of truth says that one has an initial understanding of whether a statement could be true or not due to its accordance with the matter at hand.

This initial understanding of accordance for knowing truth is further articulated by Heidegger through the use of the idea of comportment. Comportment is an openness that occurs through a relatedness and not through an opposition (like the subject/object split). This relatedness is an abiding in the presence of that which makes itself present. It is to stand in an openness to the fact that something presences itself and opens itself up, giving itself. This openness to the presencing of things is what allows us to know the truth of beings by becoming aware of beings. In a related way, openness to the

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117 Here, it is important to remember the idea of thinking-through developed earlier. We can be attuned with and accord with truth because we have thought-through with others.

118 Ibid., 138. I use language of “consonance” over “correspondence” here to avoid any associations with a correspondence theory used in epistemology.

119 Ibid., 137.

120 Ibid., 138-140.
presencing of beings gives the ability to make statements about beings in that the beings become capable of allowing themselves to be said. Truth is found in this place of openness, in the attunement to the presencing of beings that occurs through comportment. It is this openness found in attunement that allows truth.¹²²

The discussion of accordance and comportment allows Heidegger to conclude that the essence of truth is attunement.¹²³ This attunement comes from the openness of comportment which is involved in letting things be. As the essence of truth, attunement is interested in the disclosure of what it is that lets things be and how this letting-be brings into accord. By bringing into accord, the letting-be of attunement—through comportment—opens the thinker to one’s relatedness to the world which results not only in a way of relating to the world through one’s disposition, but also in being tuned into the world in which one lives.¹²⁴ This becomes even more evident as Heidegger discusses un-truth, where un-truth is to be un-attuned or dis-attuned instead of to speak or think wrongly. When one is improperly attuned, one is not able to find the truth. The truth becomes hidden, concealed.¹²⁵

There is a problem with Heidegger’s account in “On the Essence of Truth.” Through his association of attunement and truth with accordance and comportment he is unable to escape the idea of attunement disclosing beings as a whole. Heidegger’s

¹²¹ Ibid., 141.
¹²² Ibid., 141-42.
¹²³ Ibid., 147-48.
¹²⁴ Ibid., 147-48.
¹²⁵ Ibid., 148ff.
account of un-truth shows how he continues to describe how Being is covered over through the ways that comportment and attunement result in un-truth. Heidegger explicitly brings this out with the problems of concealing and errancy. In concealing, the question of Being is covered over by denying the question of beings as a whole. Concealing bestows on the absence of the question of Being a type of presence. The result is a replenishing of one’s world with new standards and measures of happiness. Thus, concealing covers over the truth of one’s being-in-the-world by not being attuned to the world.\textsuperscript{126} This is a problem in Heidegger’s scheme. In a similar manner, errancy leads to dis-attunement and un-truth in that it is the counteressence of the originary experience of truth in attunement. This is because errancy is part of the inner constitution of the person in that one falls into error not just once, but through an entire means of constituting oneself. This errancy is seen in the problem of metaphysics, as it tries to constitute the person without recourse to an ontological questioning that throws the person into question.\textsuperscript{127} Through the problem of un-truth one can glimpse the nature of attunement. If one is attuned wrongly the result is concealing and errancy. If one is attuned rightly leads to the ability to think through the nature of truth through one’s being-in-the-world. Thus, attunement becomes the thinking that opens the way for accordance.

Heidegger will further the understanding of thinking as attunement that he lays out in “The Essence of Truth” in his lecture-turned-book called \textit{What is Philosophy?} In

\textsuperscript{126} Ibid., 148-50.

\textsuperscript{127} Ibid., 150-52.
this text Heidegger makes an explicit move to articulate attunement through a turn to the
“musical” metaphor of Bestimmung. John D. Caputo argues that Heidegger turns to
Stimmung because it gives precedence to the affective sphere of being human as it
‘means mood and has a strongly intentionalist quality. Literally, Stimmung means
‘tuning,’ the way factual life is tuned to the world, its attuning, and hence its being-
toward the world.”¹²⁸ Heidegger will use attunement to bear directly on what it means to
take the “step back” and think Being. Thus, for What is Philosophy? the thinking needed
to do philosophy is attunement as directed toward Being and, thus, the possibility for
thinking Being.

Heidegger begins by trying to understand how it is that one can be attuned to
Being if it is always concealed and hidden. He argues that in order to be attuned to Being
the thinker must find those other thinkers that have been able to think Being. Of course,
Heidegger finds those who were able to think Being to be the Pre-Socratics. It is in these
thinkers’ astonishment at Being where Heidegger finds the first and best instances of
attunement. Heidegger believes we must enter into a conversation with these thinkers,
not just recapitulating their ideas but learning to think-through with them.¹²⁹ The way to
enter into this conversation with these thinkers is to learn their language.¹³⁰ When one
learns the language of the Pre-Socratics one can learn what path they took on the way to

¹²⁸ Caputo, Demythologizing Heidegger, 69.
¹²⁹ Heidegger, What is Philosophy? 45 and 67.
¹³⁰ For Heidegger, as he uses it in this context, language here does not just mean the language one
uses to communicate, like French, English, German, Latin, etc. Rather, language here refers to the entire
way of thinking of a thinker or a group. Thus, Heidegger believes one needs to enter into the thinking and
the world of the Greeks in such a way that one learn from them how to think Being. This learning allows
one to engage in thinking with them so that one can travel the avenues of thought that they have opened.
thinking Being.\textsuperscript{131} It is the language of the Greeks, then, that allows attunement to Being.\textsuperscript{132}

Due to this, Heidegger posits two Greek words that work in tandem to help articulate the path to the attunement to Being. First, he discusses \textit{logos}, which he briefly describes as the gathering together of all things that exist.\textsuperscript{133} In previous texts, Heidegger has pointed to the Greek \textit{logos} as what grounds the essence of language because it is the place where the gathering together of language occurs. Thus, the apprehension of truth that comes through accordance and comportment is caught up in this gathering, which means that \textit{logos} becomes the place where truth is found and, consequently, where attunement occurs.\textsuperscript{134} The second Greek word he discusses is \textit{sophon} which he finds saying that “all being is in Being …being \textit{is} Being.”\textsuperscript{135} Both of these words point to the same thing—that for the originary Greek thinkers language was the place where all things were gathered up together so that one could see the appearance of Being.\textsuperscript{136} The place where attunement to Being begins to occur is when a harmony exists between the originary language and one’s thinking, when one is able to “think through” with the

\textsuperscript{131} Heidegger, \textit{What is Philosophy?} 45-53.

\textsuperscript{132} Ibid., 93.

\textsuperscript{133} Ibid., 49.

\textsuperscript{134} Heidegger, \textit{Introduction to Metaphysics}, 179-91.

\textsuperscript{135} Heidegger, \textit{What is Philosophy?} 49.

\textsuperscript{136} Ibid., 49.
Greeks because one understands their language. Attunement becomes available when the thinker finds the harmony that exists between his or her thinking and the thinking of the Greeks.

The way one enters into the language of the Greeks is through listening, as this opens the way for translation. Attunement gives one over to Being in listening because one listens beyond the chatter of beings as a whole, tapping into the more originary moment of Being. One can hear the “saying” of Being through the noise created by beings as a whole. The necessity is to be able to articulate this saying of Being. For Heidegger, this is a problem of translation. The problem of translation stems from the fact that it is difficult to say Being as one exists in the world of beings. Thus, there needs to be a moment where one can translate what one hears of Being in the originary moment of listening. For Heidegger, the only way to translate the word as it is said or written or played is to listen to it and be attuned to it. One’s ear is attuned to the word through listening and this makes possible the moment of translation.

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137 Ibid., 51. This is not to say that one cannot think with the Greeks if she does not know Greek, but only that thinking occurs in language and in understanding the language one is able to have a dialogue and think with the Greeks.

138 Ibid., 51-53. The problem for philosophy after the originary Greek thinkers is that it strives after Being through the examination of beings without finding a harmony to Being. Heidegger says this begins with Plato and Aristotle.

139 Heidegger, *What is Called Thinking?* 141.

140 Ibid., 176-77.

141 Ibid., 192.
process of opening up what has been said by the word for an/other so that the other may hear it with a similar impact for thinking.\textsuperscript{142}

In \textit{What is Philosophy?} Heidegger utilizes the notion of attunement most explicitly. He does this by relying on listening as what opens one to thinking-through with the Greeks. John D. Caputo says that Heidegger wants to listen in an attentive and close way that allows him “to hear what is drowned out for the rest of us….the primal voice which is ‘speaking’…”\textsuperscript{143} This speaking speaks across historical periods and allows the thinking of Being with different thinkers in different places with different ideas. Through this conversation the thinker learns to become disposed to where Being speaks and tuned into how this speaking occurs.\textsuperscript{144}

Heidegger believes that the “thinking through” that occurs in the conversation with these thinkers should lead one to find new ways within his or her situation to think the unfolding of Being.\textsuperscript{145} In the contemporary world, Heidegger finds astonishment at Being in the language of poetry. This is because he finds poetry the language that comes closest to the thinking of the Greeks, even though there is an enormous abyss that exists between thinking and poetry.\textsuperscript{146} Poetry is a meditative and responsive thinking that “is called forth by that which is ‘thought-provoking.’” The question for poetry is “What

\begin{itemize}
  \item[Ibid., 211.]
  \item[Ibid., 77.]
  \item[Ibid., 93-5.]
  \item[Ibid., 95.]
\end{itemize}
calls forth thinking?” To be called forth as the poet is to embrace a certain kind of thinking that responds with thankfulness—the thinker looks to give thanks for what has been given.\(^\text{148}\) The next step for embracing this responsive thinking is to engage in language that actually responds to the being-called-forth. For Heidegger poetry is the language that accomplishes this.\(^\text{149}\) As Carl Raschke says, “Poetry is the speaking that allows what-is to gather itself in its fullness...Poetry is what permits Being to lift its veil and show its face as the truth of both language and thought.”\(^\text{150}\) The poet is the one to facilitate the coming forth of Being in language.\(^\text{151}\) For Heidegger poetry becomes a place where the type of thinking as attunement is at work. He does not wish to view poetry and philosophy as the same but believes that both begin thinking through the astonishment that comes from the fact that there is something instead of nothing.

Heidegger turns to language because he believes this is where both thinking and poetry have their experiences. He says that they both dwell in the same neighborhood as both are concerned with similar experiences.\(^\text{152}\) For Heidegger, “Neighborhood means...”


\(^\text{148}\) Ibid., 82.

\(^\text{149}\) Ibid., 84. Carl A. Raschke even says that poetizing is thinking for Heidegger: “Poetizing is the ‘letting be’ (Seinlassen) of what-is through ‘attunement’ and ‘cor-responde nce’ with the logos.” Raschke shows that the outcome of Heidegger’s thinking is attunement and this is what leads to thinking as poetizing. Poetizing is different from poetry, though. Poetizing is an action that is akin to thinking while poetry can cover over proper thinking, similar to what happens in Western philosophy. See Raschke, *The End of Theology*, 124.

\(^\text{150}\) Raschke, *The End of Theology*, 63.

\(^\text{151}\) Ibid, 63.

dwelling in nearness. Poetry and thinking are modes of saying. The nearness that brings poetry and thinking into what we call Saying…‘To say’…means to show: to make appear, set free, that is, to offer and extend what we call the World, lighting and concealing it. This lighting and hiding proffer of the world is the essential being of Saying.”

Heidegger argues that Saying is the essential nature of language. Both poetry and thinking are languages of Saying because they seek to allow the appearance of the originary moment of one’s experience. For this reason, Heidegger posits that both thinking and poetry act as neighbors. The reason that one often does not see them as such is “…because we are caught in the prejudice nurtured through centuries that thinking is a matter of ratiocination, that is, of calculation in the widest sense, the mere talk of a neighborhood of thinking to poetry is suspect.”

Poetry and thinking both embrace a language that is outside the typical one of ratiocination and calculation. This means that their experience with language, while attempting the Saying, inevitably leaves certain elements unsayable. The Saying is trying to unconceal that which is unsayable, but never can fully. The reason that poetry is important for thinking about thinking is for this very reason: it is a language that attempts to think the Saying of language while also acknowledging that which is unsayable. Heidegger finds in Georg Trakl’s poetry the ambiguity which resides in the attempt to

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153 Ibid., 93.

154 Ibid., 70.

155 Ibid., 69.
Say that which is ultimately unsayable. Heidegger says, “The ambiguous tone of Trakl’s poetry arises out of a gathering, that is, out of a unison which, meant for itself alone, always remains unsayable. The ambiguity of this poetic saying is not lax imprecision, but rather the rigor of him who leaves what is as it is, who has entered into the ‘righteous vision’ and now submits to it.”\textsuperscript{156} Trakl’s poetry makes apparent the nature of the gathering of beings together in Being as something that one tries to Say but always remains unsayable. The unsayable nature of the language, though, is due to Trakl’s rigor in thinking through what it means to let a phenomenon appear. Poetic language is a prime language for opening the type of thinking that is able to accomplish this.

In order to think through the nature of what kind of language is able to engage in thinking, Heidegger also turns to musical metaphors. In \textit{On the Way to Language} Heidegger uses two musical metaphors to think Saying. The first is made apparent when Heidegger says that in Saying “it comes to pass that the World is made to appear. The sound rings out in the resounding assembly call which, open to the Open, makes world appear in all things…The sound of language, its earthyness is held with the harmony that attunes the regions of the world’s structure, playing them in chorus.”\textsuperscript{157} Heidegger thinks the Saying as the sound that rings out throughout the World. This sound also gathers the World together by allowing the different regions of the experience of the World to play together and, subsequently, be heard together as a chorus. The musical metaphor of the harmony that occurs in the chorus of this ringing of the sound of the sound of the Saying

\textsuperscript{156} Ibid., 192.

\textsuperscript{157} Ibid., 101.
offers Heidegger a way of thinking the nature of language as that which brings together multiple tones and rhythms to let them be heard together. This is the gathering together accomplished in the *logos* that Heidegger was concerned with throughout his career.

The first musical metaphor leads to the second one that Heidegger uses for Saying. He says, “Saying is the mode in which Appropriation speaks: mode not so much in the sense of *modus* or fashion, but as the melodic tone, the song which says something in its singing. For appropriating Saying brings to light all present beings in terms of their properties—it lauds, that is, allows them into their own, their nature.” The gathering that occurs in the Saying is now described in terms of a “melodic tone, the song which says something in its singing.” What the song “says” though is not really said; what Heidegger brings to the fore is that this melodic tone allows the appearing of beings. The tone and song of Saying bring beings forth into their own nature as beings. These beings are brought into the poetic language of rigorous thinking. The originary experience of language is again thought through the form of the Saying. This time it has been accomplished through the use of musical metaphors.

Heidegger uses the above musical metaphors simply as metaphors to speak about language. By using these musical metaphors, he can accentuate various elements of the poetic language of thinking, like rhythm, timbre, cadence, etc. His concern is with the nature of a poetic language that allows beings to open thinking Being. Heidegger turns away from his musical metaphor (*Bestimmung*) to develop the literary metaphor of the

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158 Ibid., 135.
poetic.\textsuperscript{159} He does so because he finds in the poetic that approach to the world that is most in line with thinking. In doing so, however, he leaves behind certain elements of the nature of language that only the musical metaphor is able to bring out.

Most explicitly he loses the thinking associated with \textit{Bestimmung} found in his development of the notions of consonance, resonance, and listening among others. While these are also prevalent in poetry, the contention of this project is that the type of thinking that occurs in the musical is more apt to allow for these to come to the fore. The musical calls to be embraced in its sound through listening. As one listens, one is tuned in to the music and can begin to hear the different ways the piece is consonant with others or the way that it resonates. By turning to poetic language Heidegger tends to cover over the way that the phenomenon calls the thinker to listen. This turn to the poetic also tends to cover over what is unsayable in the Saying by bringing to the fore what language actually says. The musical can think the unsayable because it does not have to “say” anything in its Saying. Rather, the musical can evoke by catching one’s attention through its consonance and resonance. Ultimately, the musical opens the type of thinking that Heidegger wants to engage within without covering over elements that are key to this thinking.

\textsuperscript{159} Giorgio Agamben makes a mistake similar to Heidegger in his reading of Heidegger by conflating the musical and linguistic elements of Heidegger’s thought into one form, the metrical-musical. In doing so, he describes the problem of language to be musical as this moves poetic language back to its “inaccessible originary moment” and points to the “unspeakability of language”. The poetic describes that point in language where \textit{Dasein} becomes aware of itself. However, the mistake that Agamben makes is not to use this musical nature of language as a critique of Heidegger’s turn to poetry. In what follows, this project will argue that Heidegger’s turn to poetry keeps him staying in language and does not adequately think through the originary moment that he wants to. See Giorgio Agamben, \textit{Language and Death: The Place of Negativity}, 77-78.
The other element that Heidegger loses is that of the gathering. While poetry is a place where gathering may take place (as he shows with the discussion of Trakl), music is a site where a gathering can occur that allows multiple beings to resonate at once. In the metaphor of the harmony of the chorus that Heidegger uses the idea of the gathering is one where beings can speak at the same time. In poetry, every line is only able to be the thought of one voice; only one voice can speak at a time, even if multiple voices are included in the poem. The result in poetry is not the harmony of the chorus but a number of voices doing a solo. In the musical the thinking of the gathering through the chorus can occur where beings are able to sing in one harmony, even if the voices are singing different lines. The chorus can sing as one in their difference. The gathering is able to take place as what brings together the differences in one harmony or song.

D. Conclusion

This chapter fits within the overall goal of this project by beginning to clear the ground of totalizing and hegemonic discourse in order to open the pathway for the types of thinking that will be engaged throughout the project. The turn to Heidegger was used because he is the thinker who most adequately thinks through the so-called “end of metaphysics.” In doing so he opens avenues for thinking other than onto-theological, metaphysical discourse. The task of this chapter was to offer an analysis of Heidegger’s Destruktion of Western philosophy. This Destruktion clears the path for thinking theologically through improvisation.

The argument in the chapter followed three broad steps. The first was to follow Heidegger in his initiation of the Destruktion of philosophy through an internal critique.
In doing so, Heidegger opens the path that the project will take. The first section of the chapter follows Heidegger as he thinks Being by thinking through with the Pre-Socratic Greek thinkers. By doing so, he finds astonishment that there is something instead of nothing to be at the center of the way that they think. The thinking through that occurs is to move on the same path of thinking as the Pre-Socratic Greeks in a way that is more than just repetitive. Thinking through entails thinking in the same way as the Greeks. This thinking through seeks to be open to and listen to the way that they thought so that one can tap into the originary moment of experience that gave rise to philosophy. The originary thinking of the Pre-Socratic Greeks teaches a disposition of openness and listening as what is necessary to begin the task of thinking.

The second section of the argument consists of an elucidation of the “step back.” The “step back” is necessary because the history of Western philosophy, since the time after the Pre-Socratic Greeks—the times of Plato and Aristotle—has covered over the originary experience of Being. Instead, philosophy has asked the question of beings, confusing this with the question of Being. Heidegger believes that philosophy has conflated the question of Being with the question of beings. In order to rectify this conflation, he advocates the step back. The step back is a movement out of the onto-theological thought that is focused strictly on beings. He argues that one must step out of the onto-theological disposition Western philosophy finds itself within to a place where it is again possible to think Being. For Heidegger, one way of doing this is through the focus on gathering which says that beings must be gathered somewhere and the place they are gathered is in the logos of Being. The step back becomes possible because of the
disposition of openness created in the first part of the argument; the step back continues this disposition by not only being receptive but also embracing the responsiveness necessary to think Being.

The third part of the argument deals with Heidegger’s notion of attunement as it is developed in *Being and Time*, “On the Essence of Truth,” and *What is Philosophy?*. Attunement is the outcome of the step back as it is the way that one responds to Being. Attunement means being tuned-in to the way that Being arises and responding to it. Heidegger’s development of the notion of attunement relies on the musical nature of the word (*Bestimmung*). The series of metaphors around the notion of attunement deal with openness, consonance, resonance, and listening, among others. Heidegger attempts to use these to find a type of language which brings all of these to bear upon what it means to think. He turns to poetic language. In the poetic he finds a language of attunement that allows for the gathering of beings into Being. The poetic also is a language of Saying that does not cover over the unsayable. As such, this is a language that allows thinking to take place.

I also critiqued Heidegger for his choosing of the poetic over the musical in order to think thinking. The reason for this critique was because of Heidegger’s focus in his notion of attunement to elements such as consonance, resonance, listening, and rhythm as elements necessary to think Being. While the poetic does include these, it also covers over them by focusing on the Saying. Also, the poetic does not allow the harmony of the chorus of Being to come to the fore in the gathering. Heidegger, then, is an inadequate guide, even though he starts the type of thinking I engage in within this project. This is
why I turn to the work of Jacques Derrida in the next chapter. Derrida offers a
completion to the project started by Heidegger in his explicit use of musical ideas to put
forward his notion of deconstruction. Derrida ultimately shows the adequacy of the
musical notion of attunement to the type of thinking necessary for theology. He does so
through the development of a disposition that is in-tune with the rhythm, cadence, and
timbre of the Other is what allows one to think. This will open the path to thinking
theologically as improvisation.
CHAPTER TWO:
DERRIDA AND ATTUNEMENT: USING DECONSTRUCTION
TO FURTHER THE IMPROVISATIONAL NATURE OF THINKING

The next phase of the argument picks up the thought of Jacques Derrida. Derrida’s thought, often termed deconstruction, is similar to that of Heidegger’s Destruktion. However, Derrida extends the notion of deconstruction (Destruktion) to all discourses. He believes that deconstruction is always occurring in discourse, so that what the thinker does is to notice or be aware of the deconstructive nature of different texts. Thus, deconstruction is not a method. Rather, it is a disposition that one takes in regards to the text through a way of reading that comes from the inherent instability of texts. Deconstruction is both a condition of discourse and includes the disposition of the reader to notice its occurrence. The argument in what follows is that Derrida’s explication of deconstruction, and how it functions in his thinking, opens a way of thinking for theology which takes seriously the place of attunement. The concern in this chapter is to extend the discussion on Heidegger and attunement by explicating the thinking of attunement through an analysis of deconstruction.

In order to accomplish the goals of this chapter, the argument will consist of three steps. First, I make the claim that Derrida’s deconstruction is concerned with attunement. This is seen specifically in reference to two works: his famous essay “Différance” and his two-volume Psyche. Part of this first section will be to notice the active-passive nature of
thinking, along with how one becomes attuned to the rhythm of texts. The second part of
the chapter works out a notion of attunement through an exploration of Derrida’s work on
hospitality. The goal of this section is to develop the thinking on the nature of the
disposition of the thinker in relation to the Other and how this occurs through an analysis
of the welcome, call/ response, invitation/ visitation, and event. This leads to the third
section, where the notion of hospitality allows Derrida to develop a way of interpreting
through his discussion of translation. For Derrida, this becomes an ethical act because
interpreting is a “risk” one takes for the other due to the attunement one has to the other.
Here, the development of the risk and responsibility of translation will be shown as an
outcome of the deconstructive thinking developed in the first two sections.

A. Deconstruction as Attunement

Derrida’s deconstruction flows out of a concern of being in rhythm with, or in-
tune with, the other of the text. Deconstruction is reliant upon the rhythm of texts. This
is seen especially in the article “Différance” and _Psyche: The Invention of the Other_. In
these texts one sees that the turn to deconstruction helps to think through the nature of
discourse and to show that at the heart of Derrida’s enterprise is a concern to be attuned.
The way that he does this is through the articulation of how one is aware of the rhythm of
texts by being disposed in a certain way toward a text.

Before the discussion of Derrida’s two texts, it would be helpful to offer a brief
foray into the essentials of Derrida’s mode of operation. At the center of his criticism is
the idea that metaphysics is logocentric in that it tries to endow being with presence. He says that deconstruction calls into question the foundations of metaphysical thinking by pointing out the inherent destabilization and complications of such thinking. For him, all totalities are inherently unstable and self-deconstructing. This is because the signs used to signify a full presence inherently come before the presence: the presence is always coming but never here. Thus, as Derrida says, “There is neither symbol nor sign but a becoming-sign of the symbol.” What becomes necessary is a supplement where “the sign is…the supplement of the thing itself.” This supplement always moves away from full presence or full absence. It is deferred, exceeding the language of metaphysics. Deconstruction, through the noticing of the supplement, calls into question the binary oppositions that are often evoked in metaphysical thought and shows that the opposition

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2 John D. Caputo says, “Deconstruction is organized around the idea that things contain a kind of uncontainable truth, that they contain what they cannot contain” [John D. Caputo, *What Would Jesus Deconstruct? The Good News of Postmodernity for the Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007), 29].

3 Kevin Hart notices that Derrida’s deconstruction is a critique of texts in the metaphysical tradition as well as the institutions that arise from these texts [See Kevin Hart, *The Trespass of the Sign: Deconstruction, Theology, and Philosophy* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2000), 116-17]. Thus, this chapter assumes deconstruction is aimed at both texts and institutions/traditions. See also James K.A. Smith, *Jacques Derrida: Live Theory* (London and New York: Continuum, 2005), 10-11.

4 In describing this view of signs, Kevin Hart says, “…the sign trespasses over its assigned limits, thereby blurring any qualitative distinction between the concept and the sign.” For Derrida, this is what marks the sign with presence and absence. See Kevin Hart, *The Trespass of the Sign: Deconstruction, Theology, and Philosophy*, 14.


6 Ibid., 145. Again, Hart points to the necessity of the sign to have a supplement as “regardless of what hermeneutic is applied to [a text], there will always be an undecidable word generated by the operation of the hermeneutic upon the text…” See Hart, *The Trespass of the Sign: Deconstruction, Theology, and Philosophy*, 84.
between them is not as great or as miniscule as is often thought. The then he makes explicit that there is a gulf between concepts that are often thought as almost synonymous because each contains a trace of the other. Thus, deconstruction occurs as one is attentive to the other within the text, noticing the beginning of the trace and how the trace becomes “occulted” by metaphysics. Thus, the coming of the other in the trace calls into question the logocentrism of a thinker or text.

One of the ways that Derrida questions the logocentrism of texts is through is notion of différance. This notion is taken up most explicitly in the essay “Différence” which explicates the mode of thinking Derrida is pursuing. He turns to the notion of différance because it is something that resists the claim to a totalizing definition through

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7. For Derrida, deconstruction notices the inherent instability of texts. One of the sites of instability is in the binary oppositions that many texts assume, like those of good and evil, love and hate, etc. Deconstruction shows that these oppositions are not either/or situations, but each contains the other.


10. Derrida, Of Grammatology, 47. Simon Critchley makes the statement that deconstruction is only and always about a text [See Simon Critchley, The Ethics of Deconstruction: Derrida and Levinas, 2nd ed. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999), 22-23]. While this is mostly accurate, Critchley misses the way that Derrida deconstructs certain concepts—like justice, gift, hospitality, and translation, to name but a few—through an analysis of classic texts that are foundational for these concepts. John D. Caputo is more correct when he says, “Deconstruction…insists that there is no reference without difference, no reference (il n’y a pas) outside of a textual chain (hors-texte).” [John D. Caputo, The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida: Religion without Religion (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1997), 17].


its play or movement. \(^\text{13}\) This is seen through Derrida’s etymology of \textit{différance}. He takes \textit{différance} to be the combination of the double meaning of the French word \textit{différer}. \textit{Différer} has two meanings which often operate differently. The first is “to temporize,” to make temporal and to give space to. This also includes the idea of delay. Here, he brings out the metaphysical definition of \textit{différer}. The second meaning concerns otherness, as in to make not identical. This element of otherness becomes key to the definition. \(^\text{14}\) In using the neologism \textit{différance}, Derrida wants to keep both meanings together simultaneously. He joins the two by turning to the idea of the sign and the problematic nature thereof. \textit{Différance} is unable to be a sign because it is a constantly deferred presence, never attaining the presence necessary in the logocentric nature of the sign, which shows the sign to be reaching for a presence that never comes. \(^\text{15}\) Thus, language becomes a series of differences as signs signify in their difference from one another. This allows Derrida to view meaning in difference as historical, constituted, and trapped within systems of differences. \(^\text{16}\)

Derrida furthers his analyses by showing how \textit{différance} makes signification possible. He argues that signification is not static but is dynamic, associated with movement (or rhythm). The movement of signification comes from the fact that a sign only signifies when it is relating “to something other than itself.” This allows the sign to

\(^\text{13}\) Ibid., 5-7.

\(^\text{14}\) Ibid., 7-8.

\(^\text{15}\) Ibid., 9.

\(^\text{16}\) Ibid., 12. Here Derrida says, “…we will designate as \textit{différance} the movement according to which language, or any code, any system of referral in general, is constituted ‘historically’ as a weave of differences.”
carry with it the meaning it held in the past, the meaning it holds in the present, and to cast its meaning into the future. This sign is always in motion in its spacing of itself between the past and the future. There is a constant need for the pursual of spacing and difference in this movement of signification.\(^\text{17}\) This leads Derrida to the idea that \textit{différance} is the “active” moving discord of differences that was first brought to the fore by Nietzsche in his opposition to systems that seek to govern or totalize.\(^\text{18}\) This active discord is seen in the fact that \textit{différance} points to the deconstruction of systems through its dual nature, where it simultaneously points to the economy of presence which a sign always tries to point back to, while also pointing to the “impossible presence” of an “expenditure without reserve” where presence is never attained.\(^\text{19}\) While this may seem illogical, it is the logic of \textit{différance} which operates in the displacement of the metaphysical tradition.

Derrida uses the logic of \textit{différance} because it breaks the dualism of presence and absence. He undertakes an exposition of the deconstructive nature of metaphysics/onto-theology because within this discourse there has been a consistent move to establish presence. Derrida shows that absence is in the attempt to establish presence while presence plagues any move to absence. The two cannot be disunited. \textit{Différance} operates in a way that breaks this opposition by pointing to the non-possibility of pure

\(^{17}\) Ibid., 13.

\(^{18}\) Ibid., 18.

\(^{19}\) Ibid., 19. This echoes Augustine in Book XI of the \textit{Confessions}. 
presence because of the necessity of absence within presence.\textsuperscript{20} It is this breaking of the binary presence/absence in a text that allows for interpretation. \textit{Différance} opens the way for the reader to see the presence in the absence and vice versa. There is always alterity in the logic of \textit{différance}. Through this logic of \textit{différance} Derrida establishes a disposition which allows one to move with a text’s movement, allowing one to read not only what shows itself, but what is hidden, absent.\textsuperscript{21}

This hidden, absent, almost nonexistent other of the text is what Derrida refers to as the trace.\textsuperscript{22} Derrida says of the trace that it is “not a presence but the simulacrum of a presence that dislocates itself, displaces itself, refers itself, it properly has no site—erasure belongs to its structure.”\textsuperscript{23} The presence of the trace only comes in its own economy of signification. The trace is known by entering the movement of signification through attunement. The trace appears as a counter-movement or an under-current, something that does not appear at the outset, but comes to be in the midst of moving within a discourse through the economy of signification. The appearance of the trace may also be in its absence. Thus, the trace shows the limit of the text and the fact that the text breaks this limit. The trace is recognized through one’s attunement to the text where

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\textsuperscript{20} Ibid., 16-7.
\textsuperscript{21} Ibid., 20-1.
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\textsuperscript{22} Brenda Deen Schildgen discusses the meaning of the trace as it is found in the absence of the sign. She says, “The meaning of a sign is a matter of what a sign is not, so that its meaning is always in some sense absent. Meaning cannot be fixed because it is fragmented or scattered throughout a large range of possible meanings; it is never completely ‘present,’ but wavers back and forth between absence and presence.” She goes on to say, “…the trace is not the signified but another signified inviting the reader to make meaning of it…Because the ‘voice’ of the text is absent once it has been inscribed on a page, any notion of the presence of the word…is only a creative possibility…” Brend Deen Schildgen, “Augustine’s Answer to Jacques Derrida in the \textit{De Doctrina Christiana},” \textit{New Literary History} 25, no. 2 (Spring 1994), 384-85.
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there is a recognition of the rhythm and movement of a text. This attunement gives the ability to notice whether there is a “stutter” or “error” or “difference” or “other” in the text.24

This other of a text or discourse causes Derrida to ask how it is possible to see or know what is outside of a text.25 For Derrida, it is only through the attempt to be disposed to the other by listening for and hearing the other in its calling that one is able to see the outside of the text. As Derrida ends the essay “Différance” he is caught in the problematic play of *différance* in that the word does not really signify anything and it is unnameable. Derrida is unable to escape his own play. The way out of the play of *différance* is found in Derrida’s search for an outside. In his search, which seems to ultimately trap him, he is able to point to an/other that can break the limits of such a text. He finds that taking a certain disposition or approach to the text allows him to get outside of the problematic play.26 The approach that Derrida takes is to be attuned to the other, in-tune with the movement of a text or tradition in such a way that one can see the outside limit and allow the limit to call into question one’s thinking, giving a different way to “move.”

A bind occurs here, though. The question that comes to the fore is: what allows the attunement to the other to occur? What allows one to be attuned? How does one become aware of what is to be attuned to? Here, there is a need for a supplement to

24 Ibid., 24-25.

25 Ibid., 25.

26 Both Caputo and Smith also notice the role of deconstruction in creating a certain disposition for thinking and interpreting; see Caputo, *What Would Jesus Deconstruct? The Good News of Postmodernity for the Church*, 54-55; see also Smith, *Jacques Derrida: Live Theory*, 12.
Derrida’s *différance*. This is found in the notion of “rhythm” at work in his two-volume *Psyche*. In this text, Derrida’s thinking attempts to explicate how it is that one is able to pay attention to the other of the text. He paves a way for navigating the question of how to be disposed to allow a deconstruction to take place. The way he does this is through the idea of rhythm. By being attentive to the rhythm of the text and how the text varies rhythms and gestures, there is attunement to the text.

Derrida turns to rhythm as a way of thinking through the idea of deconstruction because it resists the implicit move of metaphysics and ontology to totalization. Through the notion of rhythm, Derrida is able to open a path of thinking through texts that resists any attempts at closure. His understanding of the rhythm of a text gives Derrida a focus on the inability of a reader to construct a border around a text. There is a continual openness at work here in that there is “an infinite extension of metaphoric supplements.” Derrida shows that one follows these supplements in the creation of a rhythm that allows one to read and follow a text in such a way as to constantly allow it to unfold. By being aware of the rhythm, one gets a feel for the beat, pulse, and meter of

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28 Now, a caveat must be made. In what follows, my proposal is not an attempt to articulate what Derrida thought or would have argued. Rather, the project here is to pick up on a theme, a gesture, in one of his texts and let this open a path for thinking. Through his use of the idea of rhythm in *Psyche*, Derrida opens a way of explicated the idea of attunement which is important for the majority of this project.


30 Caputo agrees that deconstruction is always concerned with leaving open and avoiding closure. To see how Caputo does this in reference to the sovereignty of God, see Caputo, *The Weakness of God: A Theology of the Event*, 28 and 32ff.

the text. Thus, the importance of rhythm is its use in the construction of a way of thinking that does not allow one to dominate by performing a hegemonic thinking of closure.

The reason that one cannot dominate a text or way of thinking is due to what Derrida calls the inherent “iterability” of texts. Iterability refers to the ability of a text to be repeated and disseminated outside of its original context. Iterability is almost synonymous with *différance* as the iterability of a text leads to its inherent destabilization. Derrida says that it is this structure which allows every mark “to withdraw from a context, to free itself from any determined bond to its origin, its meaning, or its referent, to emigrate in order to play elsewhere, in whole or in part, another role.” At work is the role that iterability plays in putting a rhythm to work in the text. Iterability allows the different marks in a text to play by moving beyond their initial determination so that a text is in constant flux. The “meaning” is unstable. As such, there is a necessity to be aware of the play of the text by “listening” to the rhythm of the text as it comes through in its iterability. The iterability of the text is what allows it to be rhythmic, changing pace and tone so that one is open to the fact that the meaning is at play. The goal of the interpreter is to be disposed so that one is aware of how the marks in the text are at play.

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Derrida’s essay “The Deaths of Roland Barthes”\textsuperscript{34} offers a look at how Derrida is not looking for the stability of a way of reading but is following the rhythm of Barthes’ work. He begins his discussion by pursuing the musical nature of Barthes’ work, saying that an interpretation of Barthes must begin “…with an ear to music…”\textsuperscript{35} The reason for this is because Barthes’ work is plural. Barthes uses plurality to embrace the incomplete nature of thinking. For Derrida, this plurality of ways of thinking necessitates an approach that is musical in that it follows different movements and themes. This opens Derrida to the option of pursuing a way of thinking that embraces the fragment, understanding an approach to Barthes’ as one that must be fragmentary because of Barthes’ plural voice.\textsuperscript{36} As such, Derrida advocates that one should pay attention to the “obscure figures” of Barthes by not only being aware, but of seeking out the “pace, step, style, timbre, tone, and gestures” of his corpus.\textsuperscript{37} By being attuned to Barthes and reading through this attunement, Derrida becomes open to the fact that Barthes is “playing” a certain music in his texts which opens into a plurality of voices, none of which have the ability to dominate or overcome the other.

The referent of the text seems to always be escaping. The only way for Derrida to “catch” this other in its reference is to listen for it, aware of its rhythm by being attuned to the text in such a way so that he hears the other as it interrupts. The listening opens


\textsuperscript{35} Ibid., 264.

\textsuperscript{36} Ibid., 265.

\textsuperscript{37} Ibid., 268.
him to the other through the disposition of being actively passive, performing the action of listening which causes him to passively wait for the other to break in.\textsuperscript{38} Derrida’s reading picks up on what he sees as the “ghost” of Barthes’ texts, which is their fragmentary form as a composition, specifically in the vein of a sonata or fugue. For Derrida, this opens up the idea that Barthes is a “musical” writer. Barthes has constructed a series of texts that ask to be read as an accompaniment which gives rise to the “voice of the other.”\textsuperscript{39} The fugue/sonata composition\textsuperscript{40} of his work comes from the polyphony at work in his writing. These forms open up the impetus to pay attention to the way that Barthes’ plays in the text, the cadence at work, the rhythm which gives the texts their form.\textsuperscript{41} The texts are in a form which “disorganizes all studied discourses, all theoretical systems and philosophies.”\textsuperscript{42} The possibility for this reading is an attunement to the way that Barthes’ constructs the works, as well as the way that texts play the music that Barthes has set before them. Derrida offers a way of reading that seeks the play at work in the corpus which allows a voice of the other to come to the fore.

Noticeably lacking in the above discussion of “The Deaths of Roland Barthes” has been an analysis of how Derrida understands rhythm and how this opens certain possibilities for the possibilities of thinking. This lack is fulfilled by turning to a second

\textsuperscript{38} Ibid., 268-69.

\textsuperscript{39} Ibid., 273.

\textsuperscript{40} Here, it is interesting to recall that Heidegger structures his Contributions to Philosophy (From Enowing) as a fugue. It is also necessary to note that Derrida is the one to combine the fugue and sonata. I believe this is because Derrida sees both of these compositional elements at work in Barthes.

\textsuperscript{41} Derrida, “The Deaths of Roland Barthes,” 272-73.

\textsuperscript{42} Ibid., 278.
essay in *Psyche*—“Désistance.” In this essay Derrida develops a more explicit understanding of rhythm and textuality through an analysis of the French thinker Philip Lacoue-Labarthe. In this essay, the importance of being attuned to the rhythm of a thinker in order to offer a way of reading and thinking becomes clearer.

Derrida begins his reading of Lacoue-Labarthe with a similar exhortation as that which began his reading of Barthes: the reading should begin with a hearing of the rhythm at work in the writings of Lacoue-Labarthe. The task in this reading is to listen to the writer in his texts, to follow his rhythm, listening for the possibilities open to the reader. Derrida is looking to discover how these texts unfold and fold back in their movement between disclosing meaning and hiding meaning. This leads Derrida to look for the way that the voice of these texts plays rhythmically. The rhythmic play of the voice of the text stems from the fact that Derrida reads Lacoue-Labarthe in a middle voice, neither active nor passive. This middle voice—that of “désistance”—lives in the gap that exists between the way that the text speaks and the way that one should receive that speaking through listening. The rhythm of the text leads into the aporetic nature of interpretation due to the necessity to decide how and what to interpret. One is attuned to this through the passive-active disposition one takes in regards to the text in its

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44 Ibid., 198.

requirement to actively listen so that one can encounter the meaning(s) at work in the thinking of the other.\textsuperscript{46}

Derrida points to the fact that in order to read the texts of Lacoue-Labarthe\textsuperscript{47} one should be tuned-in to the rhythm of these texts. This attuning comes through reading and rereading of the texts to become aware of the major themes and also the incidentals at work in the text. These are what gives the text its shape and color along with its general tone. Derrida says one should “submit to their strategy, made up of audacity, cunning and prudence…” The nature of attunement being pursued by Derrida is twofold: first, it is active in engaging texts and thinkers but, second, becomes simultaneously passive in the submission of oneself to these texts and thinkers as one takes in how they have unfolded themselves. The one who is attuned pursues a reading that is attentive to the nuances of thinking by being aware of the pace and tone of a thinker and her texts. It is this being tuned-in that opens the possibilities for thinking by allowing one to tap into the “manner and maneuver” of a thinker and her texts.\textsuperscript{48}

At this point in the essay, Derrida finds it imperative to enter into a direct discussion of the idea of rhythm through an elaboration of the Greek “rhuthmos.” He enters this discussion specifically as he sees it at work in Lacoue-Labarthe. For Derrida,

\textsuperscript{46} Derrida, “Désistance,” 198-200.

\textsuperscript{47} This comes to the fore in his reading and meditations on many other thinkers as well. For example, he points to the choral nature of the architecture of Peter Eisenman in Jacques Derrida, “Why Peter Eisenman Writes Such Good Books,” trans. Sarah Whiting in Psyche: Inventions of the Other, Volume II; he also points to the idea of the beat and the two beats at work in Jean-Luc Nancy in Jacques Derrida On Touching—Jean-Luc Nancy, trans. Christine Irizarry (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005), 28ff. and 195ff.

\textsuperscript{48} Derrida, “Désistance,” 209.
the main idea of rhythm in Lacoue-Labarthe is that there is “no rhythm without repetition, spacing, caesura…and thus repercussion, resonance, echo, reverberation.” Rhythm is at work in each person, constituting the person. Part of the nature of thinking is in the active-passive idea of désistance that Derrida has been articulating. The rhythm that constitutes thinking is that of the movement between the active and passive in oneself and in other thinkers and texts. The rhythm of each thinker and of each text is what signs the texts and thinking of a person. As such, it is this rhythm which makes possible the noticing of a deconstruction at work inside a way of thinking. If deconstruction is to notice the structural aporias in a text then the rhythmic nature of the text, in the movement between the active and the passive, points to such problems. Deconstruction becomes possible in this rhythmic movement of thinking.

Attunement comes through the rhythmic necessity of the caesura. Derrida says, “There is not rhythm without caesura.” However, he is quick to note that the caesura itself is not rhythmic, or anti-rhythmic for that matter. If it was, this would make it some part of a dialectical logic. Rather, the caesura is that which “interrupts alternation.” The caesura is the gap, that mark of the withdrawal of the text or of the movement of a way of thinking into something else. The caesura points to the breaking points of texts,

49 Ibid., 222.
52 Ibid., 229-30.
53 Ibid., 230.
to the borders that are crossed, to the rhythmic movements that do not always make sense. The caesura opens possibilities and makes possible the movement of a textual rhythm in new directions. This is due to the fact that caesurae within these texts show the textual gaps which give an openness to the possible meaning at work. The caesurae point to the rhythms that make up these gaps. As the logic of the active-passive at work in désistance makes apparent, the gap brought forth through various caesurae also points to the inner breaking of each person who is thinking. If one is constituted by rhythm and rhythm is marked by this gap, then this gap is part of the constitution of one’s thinking. The middle voice pursued by désistance is not rhythmic as a movement from active to passive but is rhythmic in its very existence. This means that by necessity the reader/thinker is caught up in the gap. This person is actively engaged in passively receiving the other as the other gives and yet, can never fully receive because of the gap that exists between the two. There is no way of reconciling this.

This situation points to the double bind of rhythm. Rhythm seems to be a movement between two things; but, this would place it within the logocentric, dialectical thinking which Derrida is actively working against. Derrida navigates this bind through a turn to the undecidable, which gives rise to thinking rhythm through the caesura. The caesura points to the gap where there may be no rhythm. Since the caesura is a gap in the text, there would be no rhythm here to be attuned to. However, in order to find the caesura in the text, one needs to be aware of the movement that opens the gap. To do this, Derrida posits that a movement—a rhythmic device—is what opens the gap. Thus, the absence of rhythm in the caesura—the arrhythmic—actually brings with it the
necessity of rhythm. For Derrida, then, rhythm is even at work in the non-rhythmic, in its own absence. The nature of désistance allows Derrida to avoid the logic of calculation.\textsuperscript{54}

The gap that exists between the reader and the text leaves open the undecidable. This gap between the two necessitates the need for a movement in rhythm as there must be some point of contact which opens the back-and-forth between the reader and text. This allows the overcoming of the gap, but not the destruction of the gap. The caesura remains only because once it is covered over the thinker relies on a logic of calculation that necessitates forcing a text to be read within a system or way of thinking. If the thinker stays vigilant with the caesura then there is the realization that one can never cross this gap and must rely on the logic of désistance at work. This allows one to tap into the rhythm of the text. This indecidability does not allow closure but a way of thinking that embraces the gap and the openness that is part of the gap.\textsuperscript{55}

The caesura points to the need for a certain disposition on the part of the reader. Derrida finds an example of such a disposition in the work of Lacoue-Labarthe. Derrida notices that the rhythmic nature of Lacoue-Labarthe’s thinking upon and reading of others is necessitated by his “rigorous compassion” and not by the imposition of an outside logic or system. Lacoue-Labarthe “institutes himself as a subject” as one who is “haunted by rhythm and music.”\textsuperscript{56} Derrida follows Lacoue-Labarthe in that he places

\textsuperscript{54} Ibid., 225. An isomorphic example is that of a black hole. Technically, a black hole is a nothingness, akin to a physical caesura in space. However, scientists can still find this nothingness by noticing the absence that exists in space. The study of space leads to the discovery of the black hole because it is only in the awareness of space that one can see the absence of space. Thus, it is the absence of space that actually points the reality that is the black hole.

\textsuperscript{55} Ibid., 228.

\textsuperscript{56} Ibid., 229.
himself into the void, the gap, that exists between the text and himself. He embraces this as the opportunity to engage the other at work in the text. Derrida believes this brings one “…as close to and as far from…” the other text as possible but always works in the movement of a rhythm.\textsuperscript{57} What is really necessary is the attunement that occurs through that reader’s initial disposition of taking up the middle voice. The middle voice is both active and passive, actively engaging something while also passively taking it in. This allows the opportunity to stand in the gap of the caesura, actively standing here while passively waiting to engage the other in this gap. This opens the possibilities for engaging the other through the other’s engagement of oneself.\textsuperscript{58}

The disposition of attunement that Derrida advocates opens the reader to read the text within its own rhythm and movement. The problem that arises comes with the question of what would happen if a rhythm changed or if the text is “off beat.” Here, Derrida posits the need for a “stutter,” similar to the way that a jazz musician may stop on a line and stutter it by repeating it and seeing what possibilities for the line exist. The player gets “stuck” in a moment, on a line, a note, a chord, or something else, and then plays on top of this. Derrida does something similar. In his reading of Lacoue-Labarthe, he stops at one point and asks “How can I write this?” His reading and subsequent elucidation of Lacoue-Labarthe seem to get stuck on a parenthesis in the work of Lacoue-Labarthe. He is not sure what to do with this parenthesis. As a parenthesis, it is not necessary to the rest of the argument. And yet…and yet, it is there. It catches him off

\textsuperscript{57} Ibid., 229.

\textsuperscript{58} Ibid., 227-30.
guard and pushes his reading to “a point of incomprehension.” He is stuck on the parenthesis; his attunement to the rhythmic play of the text has caught him, making him stop and write on that which does not seem to matter. And yet, he writes and comments. He shows how this parenthesis is what opens his reading of Lacoue-Labarthe by taking up the ideas of rhythm and the disposition of the subject in interpreting. Thus, the stutter becomes the impetus for Derrida’s reading by picking up that which seemed unnecessary and yet opens the possibility of thinking.\(^{59}\)

Through this elaboration of both \textit{difference} and the role of rhythm in \textit{Psyche}, one can posit that deconstruction is primarily concerned with being attuned to the other. This attunement to the other through the rhythm of the text opens the possibilities of the text. For Derrida this means one must \textit{il faut} do justice to the other. This does not mean to calculate or control the other of the text\(^ {60}\) but to understand where the other comes from and how this other calls into question the very concept being brought forth by the text. The other is “heard” in the text and this “hearing” leads to an understanding of how one may open up a place where the other comes to the fore.\(^ {61}\) The necessity of “hearing” this other in a text is akin to what has been termed “attunement.” It is a thinking of the other as other through the being open to the other in and through a text.\(^ {62}\)

\(^{59}\) Ibid., 208-9.

\(^{60}\) Derrida, “Force of Law…,” 244.

\(^{61}\) Ibid., 248.

reliant upon the coming of the other and says to this other, “come.” Deconstruction seeks to do justice to the other. The justice at the heart of deconstruction is concerned with allowing this other to come \([viens]\) and to listen/ hear this other as it comes.

B. Hospitality as Attunement

In this section I outline the notion of attunement more thoroughly through an analysis of hospitality as it is at work in Derrida. Hospitality necessitates openness to the other and does so by embracing the active-passive mood of engaging to be engaged. It is this attunement to the other which allows one to notice the deconstructive movements within texts. In fact, Derrida goes so far as to say that deconstruction is hospitality. This is because deconstruction is for the other by being hospitable to the other as the other comes in whatever the other comes, even the other beyond the other. For Derrida, deconstruction is concerned with the allowing of the other to come which is also the primary concern of hospitality.

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65 In this section, again, necessity is not meant to be logical necessity as much as an ethical duty or responsibility.


68 Jacques Derrida, “Hostipitality,” 364ff. Later in this essay, Derrida will explicitly link hospitality to improvisation (408), which we will deal with more in the next chapter.
deconstruction as a mode of resistance against hegemonic structures and forms.

Hospitality shows the possibility for thinking through the continued allowing of the other to come and being in tune with this other so that there is no possibility of closure in relation to a text or system. ²⁰

For Derrida, the beginning of hospitality is the moment when one is engaged in being-open to the other. ²¹ This begins with the idea of listening. For Derrida, the other must come from somewhere, whether the past, future, or another place. Listening fulfills the active-passive logic Derrida emphasizes in that it actively engages some phenomenon while being able to only interact with that which has been given to be heard. ²² Derrida explicitly links this notion of listening with the Heideggerian notion of *Stimmung* by showing how listening is not strictly concerned with knowing the words that were said but also wants to be tuned-in to the way in which the words are said or written, to the tone and rhythm of the phenomenon or text. ²³

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²¹ Martin Hägglund has recently tried to mitigate some of Derrida’s more radical claims to openness. He interprets Derrida to say that one may be open, but does not open oneself to one’s own destruction or lethality. He believes that Derrida opens the path for both hospitality and necessary violence. See Martin Hägglund, *Radical Atheism: Derrida and the Time of Life* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008), 31-33. Others in agreement with the reading of Derrida put forward here would be John D. Caputo, Simon Critchley, Bruce Ellis Benson, and Thomas Carlson, among others.


²³ Ibid., 57-8.
As the beginning of attunement, listening initiates the movement of hospitality so that one can come to what Derrida terms “the welcome.” As he describes it, the welcome is a “tending toward the other, attentive intention, intentional attention, yes to the other.” Derrida says that the welcome is the first gesture towards the other. Drawing from the work of Emmanuel Levinas (specifically *Totality and Infinity*), Derrida shows that “hospitality becomes the very name of what opens itself to the face, or, more precisely, of what ‘welcomes’ it.” Hospitality and the welcome are synonymous as both are predicated upon being open for the other to come. In fact, the being-open is the necessary step of hospitality in welcoming the other and, thus, being attuned to the other.

He furthers the understanding of the welcome by showing it to be an operational concept that speaks of the first gesture one takes toward the Other. This is a movement of being open for the coming of the other in a non-thematizing encounter. Derrida describes this encounter as both a movement without movement and as a waiting without waiting. The action of the welcome is to be passive by allowing the other to come. It is only in this passive activity of directing one’s attention toward an/other

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77 Ibid., 25.

78 Ibid., 22-3.

without necessarily trying to find the other that the welcome begins the movement of hospitality. With the welcome operating in such a way, it becomes the condition of the possibility for one’s encounter with the other. This is because if one is not open to the other, available to be encountered by the other, then the other has no way to encounter the person. This encounter of the other in the welcome becomes the beginning of attunement, where the thinker welcomes the fact that an/other may come and be experienced.

In the mode of the active-passive, the welcome extends the invitation to be encountered, to have the other come (although this invitation is an invitation to be interrupted and encountered). The invitation is just that—a true inviting of the other to come. In this act of invitation one offers a sincere invitation to come. The welcome necessitates an extension of a warm, friendly invitation, opening oneself, home, life to this other. Hospitality welcomes the other without limit and stipulation. Hospitality necessitates the unlimited opening of the self and subsequent embrace of the other. Derrida goes so far as to say that this can be an unexpected visitation, reaching beyond the logic of invitation. Rather, to show that the welcome of hospitality is at work even when it seems to not be needed, the visitation of the other also necessitates the welcome: this is hospitality without limit.

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80 Derrida, Adieu to Emmanuel Levinas, 25.
Part of hospitality, in its most pure/impossible form, is the unexpected nature of the coming of the other. In order to practice hospitality in its most pure form (an impossible hospitality), it becomes necessary to welcome the one that was never known to be coming. This becomes the impossible hospitality because there is an offering of hospitality to the one who comes within an unforeseeable arrival, “whose visitation...is such an irruption that I’m not prepared to receive the person.” Hospitality would be quite easy if it were only looking to receive the one that was known to be coming, who had responded to the invitation with an RSVP, coming within a controlled invitation.

with Jürgen Habermas and Jacques Derrida (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 127ff. The proposal advanced here would counter Derrida, saying that the invitation can be extended whether one knows it or not: it does not need a formal invitation, but one’s entire life can be lived as an invitation to the other. In this way, the visitation, while unexpected and disruptive, is still able to be welcomed “with a smile.” Even when one shows up unexpectedly at the door, one must still invite him in, welcoming him. This, then, seems to show that even the unexpected visitation has the invitation at its heart.

84 The logic of the impossible tends to dominate much of Derrida’s later thought. In its most basic form, the impossible is a logic that allows the positing of some transcendental, pure possibility that is really impossible. Derrida’s thinking on the gift brings to this fore most explicitly. Here, he says that the giving of the gift is impossible because it is always caught in an economy of exchange that destroys the nature of the gift. This is because when the giver gives the gift to the receiver, there is always a reciprocal giving on the part of the receiver, whether in a “thank you” or a card, etc. The gift indebts the receiver. As such, the gift becomes impossible because it always does the opposite of what it should—it puts the receiver in the debt of the giver. Thus, the gift is impossible. But, for Derrida, it is the striving for this impossible gift that breaks the economy of exchange that actually allows the gift to occur in that it breaks this exchange, we just can never fully explicate this. See Jacques Derrida, Given Time I: Counterfeit Money, trans. Peggy Kamuf (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1992) and the conversation between Derrida and Jean-Luc Marion in Richard Kearney, “On the Gift: A Discussion between Jacques Derrida and Jean-Luc Marion,” in God, the Gift, and Postmodernism, ed. John D. Caputo and Michael J. Scanlon (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1999), 54-78. For a good secondary explanation, see John D. Caputo, “Apostles of the Impossible: On God and the Gift in Derrida and Marion,” in God, the Gift, and Postmodernism, ed. John D. Caputo and Michael J. Scanlon (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1999), 185-222; see also Mark Manolopoulos, “If Creation is a Gift: From Derrida to the Earth (An Introduction),” Colloquy 9, no. 2 (2005), 109-22. Thomas C. Carlson uses the discussion of gift between Derrida and Marion to think the naming of God; see Thomas C. Carlson, Indiscretion: Finitude and the Naming of God (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 190-237.

However, hospitality, as Derrida construes it, must be a welcoming of the other who one cannot know is coming, who one does not have time to prepare for, who cannot be controlled, but upsets the host’s life, interrupting it. It is only when there is a cost that hospitality comes to be. When the other comes and disrupts life then hospitality occurs. Thus, hospitality becomes a “welcoming beyond my capacity to welcome,” offering beyond the capacity to offer, opening beyond the capacity of the self to be open.

The coming of the other is an event. This event is marked by interruption, which Derrida calls that which “regularly puts an end to the authority of the Said, the thematical, the dialectical, the same, the economical, and so on...” The interruption of the coming of the other is that which breaks open the systems often used to and embrace the closure of the other. Derrida’s thinking on the event is such that the event is an event because it does break open these hegemonic systems of closure by shattering the bounds often placed on meaning and interpretation. The event opens space because it comes in

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87 Ibid., 451-52. As will be seen in chapter 4, there is great agreement here between Derrida and David Tracy. In fact, Tracy’s work on the fragment is very consonant with the thinking of Derrida here. Tracy’s fragment comes unexpectedly, must be welcomed, and also breaks systems. Derrida’s hospitality becomes a way of allowing the fragment to come.


89 Ibid., 161.
the “incalculable unconditionality of hospitality.” Here, Derrida is saying that the event occurs because of the fact that hospitality occurs, because hospitality is unconditionally offered to the other (whoever it may be) and that in doing so, there is not attempt to calculate. The other is allowed to come as other and interrupts, disturbs, and breaks systems open so that there is no possibility of closure.

The event of the coming of the other in the welcome necessitates a response on the part of the one who welcomes. One must continue the welcome in a response to the interruption that is the coming of the other. This is evident in Derrida’s (in)famous essay “How to Avoid Speaking: Denials.” Here, Derrida articulates the problems he associates with negative theology, specifically as represented by Pseudo-Dionysius. In so doing, he briefly opens one’s thinking to how the ultimate other—God—would break hegemonic systems. He turns to the thought of God as the Other who calls before one can respond. God, as Other, calls first and the necessity is for a response. The call of God precedes any speech about God, thus necessitating a speech that can respond in some sort of fashion. Speech in the apophatic tradition of Christian mysticism always is preceded by God but also proceeds from God in that it is only in the response to the coming of God that one can and does speak. For Derrida, this example shows that the welcome is at work to be open to the call of God, the Other, which then allows God to interrupt one’s

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91 Ibid., 149-50.

thinking. This interruption by the Other calls for a response in a new way of speaking of God which is what apophatic theology seeks.

The response becomes an act of faith to the other in the hope that the other will come and also the hope that the other refuses to harm or destroy. The decision to respond to the other is not able to be calculated. At some point, one must simply act. No one can calculate every possible variable. To decide for the other by responding to the other must be a decision based upon a (well-informed) act of faith.93 There is no certainty in the action; but, this lack of certainty is what opens up the ability to act. This action is predicated upon the fact that the other may not respond and that there may be nothing else from the other. The response to the other cannot expect the other to reciprocate; this response must simply be a response. The necessity is that while one wants the response of the other there needs to be an acceptance of whatever decision the other makes.94

Derrida accepts the other however the other may come because he wants to counter the common move to allow the other to come but then to place stipulations upon the other as the other comes.95 He seeks to show that in hospitality thematization of the other should not occur if one wants to continue practicing hospitality.96 The other cannot

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93 Derrida, The Politics of Friendship, 16. Here, Derrida is not saying that we act out of no knowledge at all, but simply that since the other is incalculable, then at some point our calculations lack and we must simply act.

94 Ibid., 174.

95 Caputo captures this when he says, “To surrender to the other, to love the other, means to go over to the other without passing the threshold of the other, without trespassing on the other’s threshold. To love is to respect the invisibility of the other, to keep the other safe, to surrender one’s arms to the other but without defeat, to put the crossed swords and arrows over the name of the other. To love is to give oneself to the other in such a way that this would really be giving and not taking, rather than a stratagem, a ruse of jealousy, a way of winning, eine vergiftete Gift” (Caputo, The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida: Religion without Religion, 49).
be reduced to some theme or common denominator.\textsuperscript{97} In reducing the other so that “I” am in control of the appearing of the other is to calculate the way that the other can come. In that event hospitality ceases.\textsuperscript{98} However, there is a certain tension within Derrida when it comes to the idea of thematization in hospitality. Derrida wants to avoid dominating thematization, but pushes the idea of thematization by arguing that it can only occur with hospitality in that hospitality is the condition of the possibility for encountering the other and one cannot thematize the other without this encounter. Hospitality, thus, becomes the condition of the possibility for thematization.\textsuperscript{99} In light of this, we gain a better understanding of attunement in that it is an action of allowing the other to come and accepting this coming as best as one can.\textsuperscript{100}

For Derrida, hospitality works to break open any attempt at closure through the showing of the fact that closure of the other is not possible. This is seen explicitly in multiple places in Derrida’s corpus, under different themes like gift and justice.\textsuperscript{101} In this line of Derrida’s thinking, hospitality does not become itself until it is enacted through

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{96} Derrida, \textit{Adieu to Emmanuel Levinas}, 21.
\item \textsuperscript{97} Ibid., 21.
\item \textsuperscript{98} Ibid., 50.
\item \textsuperscript{99} Ibid., 48. Derrida acknowledges, though, that as the condition of possibility for thematization, hospitality runs the risk of being perverted. In the risk of being-open, there is the risk that one may not seek pure hospitality, but, after being hospitable, then pervert the other for different means. This is not to say that it is necessarily bad (for Derrida, the law is unhospitable), but that it breaks with the singular acknowledgment of the other. \textit{See Adieu to Emmanuel Levinas}, 35.
\item \textsuperscript{100} It is important to remember that for Derrida justice is defined as allowing the coming of the other as other (see “Villanova Roundtable, 17-18).
\item \textsuperscript{101} See, for example, how the gift breaks economy for Derrida in his, “At This Very Moment in This Work Here I Am,” 148; idem, \textit{The Politics of Friendship}, 179; idem, \textit{Specters of Marx}, 30; idem, \textit{Given Time I: Counterfeit Money}, 6-7, 12-13, 24, 43-44, 62. See how justice works with gift and by itself to break thematization in Derrida, “Villanova Roundtable,” 19; idem, “Force of Law…,” 244; idem, \textit{Specters of Marx}, 32-33, 58-59; idem, “Autoimmunity: Real and Symbolic Suicides,” 133.
\end{itemize}
the responsibility—or duty—of a response with and for the other. Deconstruction is predicated upon the demand for justice, which is what makes deconstruction a movement of hospitality. Hospitality is the structural logic used to bring justice for the other. However, hospitality’s logic necessitates a conclusion of taking responsibility for the other by responding with the other. The necessity of hospitality is to not only the welcome into one’s own home, but to also clear the space for the other to break into one’s own world. One then stands with the other in this inbreaking, allowing the other to call into question one’s own world.

In order to further articulate this, Derrida uses the example of religion as a place of the enacting of hospitality. In religion he finds the importance of responsibility and duty for/ to the other to also come to the fore. For religion, this response is twofold. First, as in the welcome of hospitality, there is a response to the coming of the other. For religion, the necessity is not only to respond to the coming of the divine other, but then to

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103 Derrida, “Force of Law…,” 249.

104 Hägglund offers a competing idea of justice at work in Derrida. Essentially, he argues that Derrida’s use of justice is to place the person in one’s temporal finitude, thus, endorsing an explicit atheism [See Hägglund, Radical Atheism: Derrida and the Time of Life, 40-44].

Stephen Minister makes a similar argument through his critique of Derrida’s notion of hospitality. Minister argues that Derrida’s call to justice has no commitment while the call to hospitality is the call to an explicit commitment for the other [Stephen Minister, “Derrida’s Inhospitable Desert of the Messianic: Religion within the Limits of Justice Alone,” Heythrop Journal 48, no. 2 (March 2007), 227-42]. Minister fails to notice the explicit link that Derrida makes between hospitality and justice, with each inferring the other. This link is what allows Derrida to see both justice and hospitality as necessary to the work of deconstruction, even saying that deconstruction is hospitality and that deconstruction is doing justice to the other.
take responsibility for this response through the bearing of witness or testimony. To elucidate this more fully, Derrida turns to what he sees as the ultimate act of hospitality—the story of Abram/ Abraham (Gen. 16). Derrida says that the visitation of God to Abram is “radically surprising and overtaking.” The identity of Abram is “fractured” because “he receives without being ready to welcome.” God visits Abram in such a way as to completely disrupt Abram’s life (he is telling of the gift of Isaac) and to disrupt it in such a way that Abram can no longer be seen as Abram, but has been transformed into someone new, Abraham. This is the ultimate act of hospitality on the part of Abram as he is open to God in such a way that while he was not expecting to encounter God—and not ready to do so—that when he does encounter God, he allows himself to be overwhelmed and even transformed by this God. After this, Abraham becomes the one to bear witness to God. For Derrida, this is the story of hospitality par excellence.

This responsibility of hospitality is a duty for one to act in the name of the other. By taking on responsibility for the other, it is not that one acts for the other, but that one acts with the other. For Derrida, acting with the other on behalf of the other,

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105 See Derrida, “Faith and Knowledge…,” 64-65. While here Derrida critiques this mode of thought, I would argue that ultimately Derrida uses the logic of religion to work through his notion of hospitality, while eliminating certain religious elements from this notion. For example, his turning to Genesis 17-18 and the person of Abraham as the place for the taking place of hospitality seems to have important implications and furthers my argument here.

106 Ibid. 372.


109 Martin Hägglund misses this point by denying that Derrida looks to put the self at risk. Hägglund cannot move past the idea that the other may do harm to one’s self. For Derrida, it is the risking of the self for the other that actually is hospitality. See Hägglund, Radical Atheism: Derrida and the Time of Life, 88-89.
tears at the very fabric of current structures by calling into question what has always been thought as possible. One is bringing the other into the world as a questioning of one’s own world. This breaks the systems that have engulfed the other by destroying otherness and difference for the move to a sameness and similarity. By taking responsibility seriously as a practice of hospitality, a different way of existing is brought forth. This world where hospitality is possible is the very world that deconstruction asks one to live into, expecting something that never gets here.

Hospitality is a leap from knowledge into the decision, into the necessity of being with others through the welcoming of the other. This leads deeper into an understanding of attunement. No longer is attunement about just a disposition, but is now concerned with the movement to a decision of being for the other. This decision is not predicated upon something that is definitively known (like that the sky is blue), but that is on a best guess, a good judgment. While the decision comes from a probable, it is still a decision that is not predicated upon concrete knowledge. The possibility for one to act comes because one knows that one must act in accordance with the other, having faith that the action opens the space for the other to be other.

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111 Derrida, Paper Machine, 139. This also plays with Derrida’s work on the messianic, which one can see at work throughout Specters of Marx.

The ultimate result of hospitality and the attunement that comes through it is a gathering. For Derrida, the ultimate example of such a gathering is a pure democracy. In such a democracy, there would be simply the existence and equality of many differences where these differences are all gathered in a mutual interplay. Derrida talks of the fact that democracy tends only to be open to those who want to be my brother or compatriot and excludes those who are foreign, outside, beyond the borders. He implies that a pure democracy must also embrace these others on the outside or as the foreigner. For democracy to be pure, it must allow the voice of all to speak while practicing the act of listening. The pure ethics of hospitality occurs in a pure democracy because this is the only structure that supports the other as the one who is absolutely unlike. Thus, democracy is a place where hospitality is the ethical norm, which leads to a place of gathering which we would term democracy.

The discussion of hospitality opens a useful logic for my project. This logic builds on the work by Derrida in regards to *différance* and rhythm. Through these, we see the necessity to be in tune with the other in the text. In the first part of the chapter, I argued for the necessity of attunement and now, through the discussion of hospitality, I

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113 The idea of the “gathering” is another place of similarity between Derrida and David Tracy. As such, the notion of the gathering will be explored more thoroughly in chapter 4. For the place of “gathering” in Derrida, see *The Politics of Friendship*, 199.


115 Derrida, *Rogues*, 63. It is important to remember, though, that this is not some liberal ideal for Derrida, as liberalism actually negates differences.

116 Ibid., 60.
attunement is necessary in order for deconstruction to take place as it opens one to the other. Derrida’s notion of hospitality opens a way of thinking that is predicated upon the necessity of attunement to an/other in such a way that this other breaks hegemonic categories, one’s own thinking, and calls into question the system that leads to totalization. The way Derrida does this is through the actions of welcome, openness and listening.

C. Risking Interpretation—The Example of Translation

Derrida’s thinking on attunement culminates in his analysis of the nature of translation. For Derrida, the final move made in hospitality is to risk responsibility for the other. Similarly, in the deconstruction of texts, the last move is to risk an interpretation of the text. In both hospitality and interpretation attunement calls one to risk for the other so that the other may come to light. Attunement is of no use in either situation if it does not articulate the place of the other in new place and in a new way of thinking. Derrida calls this move to articulate in new places and new ways translation. The last section of this chapter, then, is an analysis of Derrida’s notion of translation and how this shows the risking of interpretation.

For Derrida, the importance of translation comes from the fact that all writing and thinking begin from the encounter with the other, however that encounter may occur.

117 For a good analysis and evaluation of Derrida’s explicit move to translation, see Catherine Kellogg, “Translating Deconstruction,” Cultural Values 5, no. 3 (July 2001), 325-48. For an understanding of how the task of translation relates to the rest of Derrida’s thought, see Marc Crépon, “Deconstruction and Translation: The Passage into Philosophy,” trans. Matthew H. Anderson in Research in Phenomenology 36 (2006), 299-313. Both of these essays point to the fact that Derrida’s notion of translation is not only concerned with moving from one language to another but is also concerned with interpreting texts that exists in one’s own language. Interpretation and translation are nearly synonymous for Derrida.
Thinking begins from interrogating this encounter with the other in hospitality. This other comes, whether in the text or in a structure, and dislocates the reader and the text. The necessity is to respond to the coming of the other. This is what writing and thinking accomplish in their encounter with the event of the other’s coming. Writing and thinking interrogate this coming. This interrogation can result in the suppression of the other if one subjugates the other to a systematic or hegemonic discourse. However, if thinking takes its impetus from the encounter with the other, then it responds to the other by both raising and attempting to think about the questions that the coming makes pertinent. The response gives rise to the other by showing the way that the other has come in a text or structure.  

Derrida argues that translation is the way to respond to the coming of the other. He turns to translation because he views translation to be the task of philosophy as a discipline concerned with interpretation of texts and arguments. Derrida sees translation and interpretation as synonymous due to the inherent iterability of texts. The text is marked in such a way as to be able to be read and communicated, but never with the full knowledge of why it was written, who wrote it, and to whom it was

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118 Bruce Ellis Benson shows the link between justice and translation in deconstruction. See Bruce Ellis Benson, *Graven Ideologies: Nietzsche, Derrida and Marion on Modern Idolatry* (Downer’s Grove: IVP Academic, 2002), 140ff.

119 Derrida, “At This Very Moment in This Work Here I Am,” 150-51.

120 Kellogg points to the importance of translation to the task of deconstruction: see Kellogg, “Translating Deconstruction,” 327.

written. For Derrida, this leads to the fact that the text can be repeated anywhere, in any context at any time. The text is no longer tied to any controlling presence. From here Derrida concludes that it “can break with every given context, engendering an infinity of new contexts in a manner which is absolutely illimitable. This does not imply that the mark is valid outside of a context, but on the contrary that there are only contexts without any center or absolute anchorage.” Derrida argues that the iterability of a text opens into the place where it has no internal presence, only the presence given to it in its moment of finding a new context(s) which is what then gives it meaning. The goal of translation is to give a new interpretation in a new context.

However, Derrida says there is no way to get a “pure” translation or interpretation because of the absence of the author and the specified receiver. The text is always meant to be repeatable even in the absence of anyone who may have originally contributed to its production. The text is marked by absence. Due to the instability of texts at their core, a text does not function in the same way over the period of time; neither does it “mean” the same over a period of time. The fact that a text can be repeated in different context means that it will be interpreted differently as it finds itself placed in different

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122 Ibid., 5-7, 18.

123 Ibid., 12.

124 This stems from Derrida’s idea that the text has meaning in its internal caesura, which is what leads to the action of interpretation and, thus, translation. See Sovereignties in Question, 69.

125 Derrida, Limited Inc, 49. Here, Derrida uses his famous (and slightly humorous) example of the shopping list, that it functions in the absence of his memory to remember, but would function similarly and differently if he dropped it and it was found by someone else.

126 For Derrida, this is the problem of people like Searle and Austin. They believe that a text will be the same over time, unaware of the fact that it is constantly functioning differently, otherwise in different places and times. For a fuller treatment and critique of Searle, et al, see Limited Inc.
situations. Thus, the interpreter never gets to offer a full, pure representation of the text. The result of this is that translation can never exhaust or even comprehend the other text fully. Rather, the text, in its own language as other, is incomplete and offers no room to be saturated.

For Derrida, every text must be not translated because of the fact that it is never a saturated whole as it always operates in an absence of author, receiver, and original context. This synonymous nature of translation and interpretation is seen specifically in Derrida’s attempt to deal with Plato’s pharmakon. Derrida notes that Plato’s use of the word pharmakon is fraught with both the necessity and problematic nature of translation. First, in order to interpret a text, one must translate pharmakon. However, due to the polysemy of the word, it is impossible to offer a complete translation. Derrida shows that pharmakon within Plato can have two possible meanings. The most likely (and most traditional) is that of “remedy” or a “beneficient drug.” However, Derrida notes that pharmakon could also mean something that causes illness and that this is possible within the context of Plato. Derrida points to the impasse at the heart of translation and interpretation as there are two possible meanings. To translate the term “remedy”, as is

127 Ibid., 61-62.


131 Ibid., 99-102.
often done, is to miss the problematic, dynamic nature of the word. Thus, for Derrida, the *pharmakon* shows the inner tension of texts. As he describes it, Derrida’s goal oftentimes has been to show the internal tensions, contradictions and heterogeneities that found in such texts and structures. This due to his belief that the inner tension is what allows the possibilities of meaning to be pursued. Derrida shows, then, that there is not a moment, nor a text, that people do not interpret and make decisions as this is the necessity of thinking.

For Derrida, there is a necessity for one to engage in translation and interpretation. He brings this out most thoroughly with the example of foreign idioms and metaphors. These are, in a sense, untranslatable because their meaning can never be exhausted. The need is still present within these to “say something” but the meaning always exceeds what could be said. Due to this, Derrida argues that the untranslatable nature of idioms and metaphors is the very condition of the possibility of their translation. He finds that the economy of both of these allow one to offer a “loose translation” that does not attempt to represent word for word but to open the iterable meaning of the idiom anew. An example of this kind of idiom that Derrida points to is Paul Celan’s use of

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132 Ibid., 113.
136 “Say something” is a term that jazz artists use in regards to their making of music as they want the music to “speak” to the listener. This will be explored more thoroughly in the next chapter.
137 Derrida, *Monolingualism of the Other; or The Prosthesis of Origin*, 56ff.
“Shoah” in some poems. For Derrida, the “Shoah” is not translatable outside of German because it was the German language that was the privileged witness to these events. The poem bears testimony to these events, offering a witness to the atrocities. It is the bearing witness that gives meaning to the idiom as it is used in German. The testimony of the poem is what allows the poetic force to come through the word “Shoah” without calculating or reducing the meaning to some formula. The force, through translation, is allowed to confront and impede the reader through the translation. Thus, it becomes imperative to offer an understanding of what the text says or does and how this opens up possibilities for different forms of meaning.

This brings Derrida’s argument to the place of needing to explicate how it is that attunement plays a role. As has been shown, Derrida uses the other within the text as the disrupting force that calls attention to the fact that translation is necessary. Texts are haunted by the other, who must be brought to the surface due to the welcoming of the other that occurs in hospitality. Attunement is the way that the person is aware that the other is operating in the text. Attunement only comes to full fruition through the offering of an interpretation of the other in translation. In order to see how this account of attunement is accomplished in Derrida, the argument will briefly follow the discussion in “Des Tours De Babel.”

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139 For an example of this, see the discussion in Derrida, Specters of Marx.
Derrida begins “Des Tours De Babel” by articulating the way that the story recounts the “internal limit to formalization.” The story of Babel is constructed in such a way as to show the necessity of translation because there is always a multiplicity of tongues. Babel is a story of confusion. However, the confusion does not just arrive through the multiplicity of tongues, but because the name of God haunts language at the center of language. The name of God is the origin of tongues, of multiplicity because God scatters the speakers. God, as proper name, divides among the speakers, becoming engrained in the different languages as YHWH, Allah, God, etc. This leads people into the necessity of placing the divine within language, but such that the idioms and metaphors used for the divine are not the same, do not function the same, and eventually lead to confusion. As proper name, God disrupts language. The necessity, for Derrida, is to be able to “render” this proper name in a language through translation.

The idea of God becomes a problem for language because it is untranslatable. For Derrida, it is at this limit of the untranslatable that one can enter more fully into the way that translation takes place. By necessitating the rendering of God into another context or language, Derrida offers the way that he will go about thinking through the problem of translation. In doing so, Derrida broadly follows the contours of Walter

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141 Ibid., 105.
142 Ibid., 108-9.
143 Ibid., 109.
144 Ibid., 112.
Benjamin, specifically his article “The Task of the Translator.” Derrida notes that Benjamin sets out four tasks for the translator. First, the translator does not follow a form of reception of a text, even though it may contribute to a theory of how a text is received. Second, the goal of translation is not necessarily communication, just like the goal of the original is not communication, but is dependent upon the communicability of language. Third, a translator is not attempting to produce an image or a copy of an original text; rather, the translation is something other and different. Translation becomes another form of text and different than the original. Fourth, the translator finds oneself in the predicament of not being committed to the author of the text or to a model that must be represented and reproduced. The question becomes what one is committed to in translation. The commitment, in translation, is to the survival of the text. The translator is in debt to the text in that it is the text which is being translated; but, the text is also in debt to the translator as it is dependent upon the translator to actually translate.

The problem becomes one of the economy of translation. Derrida navigates this economy by analyzing the idea of God at Babel as the name given to be translated. However, this translation cannot be universalizable as God cannot be reduced to a language. As a proper name, God is always untranslatable and resists the tendency to be


147 Ibid., 117.

148 Ibid., 118.
placed in a conceptual language. For Derrida, the translator needs to find a way through the economy of translation by offering a finite project for a text whose meaning is never closed. The solution that Derrida finds is that the translator cannot seek to offer a copy or original “because the original lives on and transforms itself. The translation will truly be a moment in the growth of the original…”149 The translation is not wholly other than the original but is a complement to the original as it offers a reinterpretation of the original into a new context. The original text has already lived and grown and by being translated into another language, the thinking of the text is transformed into a new way of thinking through. 150 The translation becomes a transformation of the ideas in the text.151 Thus, translation becomes an outgrowth of the original that lives on in the translation.

In order to complement the original, the translation must be in-tune with the core of the text.152 The core of the text is that which “can bear translating and further retranslating.” This is due the fact that the core always resists a full translation and so always attracts more translation as there is no possibility of its meaning ever being exhausted. 153 One comes to understand the core by being attuned to the text, listening to the rhythm of the text, hearing its tenor.154 Attunement becomes the impetus for both the

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149 Ibid., 121.
150 Ibid., 123.
152 Crépon notices the necessity of noticing the rhythm of a text and of Derrida in order to practice translation. See Crépon, “Deconstruction and Translation: The Passage into Philosophy,” 301.
154 Ibid., 125.
role of the translator and the translation. The translator, by being attuned to the original
text, is able to know the core. The text allows itself to be heard which gives it new life in
being asked to be interpreted and in calling the translator to rethink the text. The goal of
the translation is to develop a language that gives the original over to a new context by
articulating the way that the core functions in this new context. Derrida articulates that
the translation leads to the Babelian event of a multiplicity of languages and
interpretations. The same way that God, the wholly other, disrupts the universalizing
tendency to create and justify only one language,^{155} so does the original disrupt any
totalizing language by calling for a constant reinterpretation. This constant
reinterpretation leads to a multiplicity of languages—or ways of thinking—that develop
from the text which is what leads to the continual growth of the original outside of
itself.^{156}

The turn to translation, then, functions as a way of offering an interpretation of the
coming of the other. Translation works to communicate the problem of difference and
otherness to those who may not understand or come into contact with this otherness—
thus, it is not just meant for foreign languages or unknown idioms and metaphors. Thus,
translation becomes the impetus for speaking with the other through the attempt to
communicate this other in a different place and context. The translator, then, does not so
much reproduce the work as allow it to grow in a new world, to be heard in a new key or

^{155} Caputo points to the disruptive nature of the wholly other in Derrida when he says, “Everything
about deconstruction requires that we let the [wholly other] tremble in undecidability, in an endless, open-
ended, indeterminable, undecidable translatability, or substitutability, or exemplarity, where we are at a
loss to say what is an example of what, what is a translation of what.” See Caputo, *The Prayers and Tears

^{156} Ibid., 130-31.
from a different instrument. It is to allow the text, as other, to invade and reshape a world while also being invaded and reshaped by this world. This occurs through the retaining of the “core” of the text. The core is never lost, but is reworked and interpreted in new ways. This is the task of both translation and interpretation.\(^{157}\) The goal, then, is to create a harmony between the multiple languages, so that the core is not lost but allows for the thinking of the text to continue, only in new ways.\(^{158}\)

D. Concluding Remarks

The goal of this chapter has been to expand upon the argument started in the first chapter. Specifically, the above discussion of Derrida has further clarified the notion of attunement through the use of explicitly musical modes of thought by him. Within the context of the argument of the entire project, this chapter has further articulated the idea of attunement at work in what comes subsequently. The elucidation of Derrida’s thought builds upon Heidegger’s *Destruktion* of Western metaphysics while also pointing to the ways of thinking engaged in the subsequent chapters on improvisation, David Tracy, and St. Augustine. The chapter does so by focusing on how Derrida’s focus on the other and how this other comes has implications for the way that thinking should proceed. The chapter proposes that deconstruction is a way of attunement and that, as such, opens possibilities for the way that thinking should be conducted. The chapter made this proposal in three sections.


\(^{158}\) Ibid., 131. The discussion above is not to gloss over the problematic nature of both interpretation and translation for Derrida. Rather, it is to show how Derrida goes about risking interpretation.
The first section focused on the role that rhythm plays in Derrida’s thought. This section focused on the essay “Différance” and *Psyche: Inventions of the Other*. The exposition of “Différance” focused on how Derrida uses the concept of *différance* to become attuned to the other in the text. *Différance* also allows Derrida to become aware of the rhythm at work in texts. This bringing together of the other and rhythm is brought out more explicitly in *Psyche: Inventions of the Other*. In the essays that make up this text Derrida puts forward an understanding of reading other text that is reliant upon the notion of rhythm. For Derrida, to be aware of the rhythm of a text is what allows one to notice the other in a text. This happens because the other upsets the rhythm or plays differently in the text. This is due to the *différance* at work in the text which allows the other to come to the fore. When one is tuned-in to the text and aware of its rhythm, one then notices the other. For Derrida, the coming of the other is what gives the ability to undo the totalizing and metaphysical structures much thought finds itself within. Also, it is through attunement to the other that one is able to be involved in deconstruction.

The second section of the chapter involved an exposition of the nature of attunement through an analysis of Derrida’s notion of hospitality. The concern of hospitality in Derrida’s writings is to be open to the coming of the other. Hospitality is the disposition one takes so that the other may come. The coming of the other is a disrupting and interruptive force and, yet, Derrida’s imperative in hospitality is that one must welcome the other. Hospitality leads to attunement. When hospitality welcomes the other, it does so through being open and creating a disposition where the other can come. The beginning of attunement is the creation of such a disposition. Attunement
also includes the welcoming of the other in a way that encounters the other as other instead of trying to make the other the same. As such, attunement deals with the other’s otherness and difference. Attunement does justice to the other. This justice is done by taking responsibility for the coming of the other and in the duty to be for the other. This responsibility and duty is what allows one to ultimately think with the other. By doing justice to the other, attunement sets one on the track of being able to interpret and create room for the possibilities of meaning available to a text or phenomenon.

The third section of the chapter finishes the exposition of attunement. The first section laid the foundation by showing how one becomes aware of the other through the rhythm of the text. The second section analyzed how one is attuned to the other through the elucidation of Derrida’s thinking on hospitality. The third section finishes the chapter by describing how one takes responsibility for the other through translation. Translation is the end of attunement because it actually allows the other to be heard. The other is heard in translation when one interprets a text and places it in a new context and, thus, transforms the way it may be read or heard. For Derrida, this is translation. He argues that one can never have a “perfect” or “full” translation because the text, although finite, has an inexhaustible meaning. Translation tries to convey this inexhaustible meaning within the confines of a finite apparatus. This means the translation always needs more and, due to this, there is an other at work within the text. When one is attuned to the text, one can translate this other into new contexts and situations where the meaning of the other can be extended. Thus, attunement results in an infinite amount of interpretation and translation since neither can ever be complete.
Through the use of rhythm, hospitality, and translation in Derrida’s corpus this chapter has laid the foundation for the way that the rest of the project will think attunement. This chapter has also continued the push into a way of thinking that actively resists closure. The chapter sets the direction for the rest of the project by pointing the way of thinking that one engages in when one is attuned. Deconstruction becomes the preferred mode of operation from here. The next chapters will continue to build on the framework of attunement built here while also engaging in a deconstructive approach to theological thinking. The result will be a place where one can think theology as improvisation.
CHAPTER THREE:
SKETCHING ATTUNEMENT AS A WAY OF THINKING
IN IMPROVISATIONAL MUSIC

The two preceding chapters have focused on the philosophical issues surrounding the notion of attunement. They gave the critical apparatus for thinking attunement. It is now possible to offer an analysis of attunement as a way of thinking within improvisational music. Two goals emerge from this analysis. The first is to give a thorough understanding of the notion of attunement as it is at work within improvisational forms of Western music. The accomplishment of this first goal continues to build on the thought of Heidegger and Derrida while also giving an account of attunement in improvisation. The second goal is to begin developing a non-conceptual language that can be used in theology. This second goal is not primary but is important within the greater argument of the project. In all, this chapter offers an understanding of attunement that begins to build upon the non-conceptual modes of thought found in improvisational music.

In order to accomplish these two goals, the chapter contains three sections. The first sketches the primary place of listening for the activity of music making. The second section is an elucidation of the multiple places a musician is attuned to in order to create music. This section contains subsections on the attunement of a musician to a piece of music and the musical tradition that piece resides within, the attunement of the
musician to other musicians, as well as the attunement of the musician to an audience. All three of these places of attunement are necessary in order for improvisation to be good improvisation. The last section shows how improvisation breaks forms through a process of unstructuring where the impetus is on innovation by pushing the boundaries and limits of a piece and tradition. What is discovered is that in improvisation attunement functions as a way of thinking that opens a musician(s) to the possibility of taking apart and reorienting a piece so that it may be heard anew.

Within the broader scope of the project as a whole, this chapter offers a form of theological thinking that deals with the fragmentary nature of the contemporary world. Improvisation is a form where fragmentariness and unstructuring is part of its very nature. The elucidation of attunement allows the ability to see the form of unstructuring at work in improvisation. Specifically, in articulating the logic of attunement at work in improvisation, one can see the unstructuring activity at work and how this opens the possibilities for new ways of thinking within the music and how this can then be extended to the site of theology. Through this understanding of improvisation as attunement, what we find is that improvisation serves as a new form for answering the question “what is theology?” The answer to the question now becomes that theology is improvisation as it pays attention to the unstructuring of theological forms at work when thinking God.

A brief excursus is necessary here. The above outline of the chapter points to the unstructuring and fragmenting of pieces that takes place in improvisation. This chapter will explain this by pointing to how improvisational musicians transform a piece of music
into something other so that it can be heard otherwise. The way that the discussion proceeds has affinities with much of the contemporary dialogue around “metaphor.”¹ Improvisation is a way of thinking that avoids closure in order to keep open possibilities for their continued transformation. Metaphor has a similar impetus within it.

Within the discussions surrounding metaphor, the first move made is to offer an account of what it actually is. Ricoeur, who may be the most influential thinker on metaphor since Aristotle, says that metaphor is a form of discourse.² By arguing that metaphor is a form of discourse, Ricoeur makes context central to the discussion. He says that the meaning of a metaphor comes from its place within a text or in its broader social context.³ Ricoeur even goes so far as to say, “The dictionary contains no metaphors; they exist only in discourse.”⁴ Here, he is showing the nature of metaphor as something that cannot be defined by a literal meaning.⁵ By definition the metaphor avoids any set, literal meaning. Instead, metaphor changes the meaning of a word or a


³ Ibid., 169.

⁴ Ricoeur, Rule of Metaphor, 97.

group of words. 6 The way that metaphor leads to this change is through the dual nature of its copula “is.” Metaphor carries with it both the “is” and the “is not.” 7 These are held together in a tension within the metaphor, creating a “clash” between two things that do not belong together. This “clash” creates meaning.

What makes the discussion of metaphor parallel improvisation is the similarity that exists between the kind of interpretation it takes to deal with both. The question of how one interprets both the metaphor and improvisational music has been quite problematic. On the side of metaphor, Ricoeur argues the first move that one should make to understand is to understand the (con)text within which it is being used. 8 The nature of the metaphor is to disrupt and add the possibility of meaning differently. The way it does this is through its context as metaphor makes words mean otherwise than they would normally. By doing this, metaphor begins to extend the meaning of words into places that may not have been imagined. As Ricoeur says, “In the case of metaphor, none of the already codified acceptations is unsuitable; it is necessary, therefore, to retain all the acceptations allowed plus one, that which will rescue the meaning of the entire statement.” 9 Thus, Ricoeur is showing that the meaning of metaphor cannot be fixed;

6 Ibid., 169-70.

7 Ricoeur, Rule of Metaphor, 249. See also McFague, Models of God, 33. An example would be “God is a rock.” As a metaphor, this statement makes two claims at once. The first is positive and states that “God is a rock.” The second is negative and says, “God is not a rock.” Within the metaphor both of these are true and it is in their being held together that meaning is created within the metaphor.

8 Ricoeur, “Metaphor and the Central Problem of Hermeneutics,” 176.

9 Ricoeur, Rule of Metaphor, 131.
rather, the metaphor extends meaning beyond the bounds of what is possible to reorient the entire text.

The way that one goes about interpreting a metaphor is to understand how it is that one can “translate” it to other people while still conveying the excessive meaning contained therein. The question of translation asks how one can communicate the meaning of the metaphor to an/other. The translation of the metaphor wants to bring that which has remained “inapparent, hidden, or latent” into the open. Translation is the process whereby one can fulfill the metaphor’s need to enunciate and bring to light a new way of thinking. The problem of translation comes from the fact that the metaphor is never “stable” but that its meaning is “guessed” in every situation. This translation of the metaphor is an attempt to give a similar constellation of the world that the metaphor gives. The reason translation attempts this constellation is because metaphor reorganizes the perceptions of people. The metaphor offers an alternative “realm” by opening various possibilities in front of the text. In translation the initial constellation of the world that one has is confronted by the alternative offered by the metaphor. The metaphor opens up new possibilities for existing by reorienting one’s own constellation of the world and calling one to change.

Jacques Derrida points to the major problem that exists for any discussion of metaphor: that “philosophizing” about metaphor ultimately traps it within a metaphysical


11 Ricoeur, Rule of Metaphor, 79.

12 Ibid., 236.
system. This is a problem since the metaphor actively avoids closure. The metaphor becomes metaphysically closed when one tries to “comprehend” or “grasp” the nature of the metaphor and, thus, to retain a sense of mastery over what a metaphor may say. Part of this stems from the linguistic nature of the metaphor. While the metaphor has a surplus of meaning, it is still limited by the bounds of the language being used. The more that one conceptualizes the nature of the concept of the metaphor, the more that one will continue to place it within linguistic bounds. In this vein, the words used in a metaphor cannot do anything other than what the words allow. Similar to this is that the context controls what will happen in the interpretation of the metaphor. Through this Derrida notices the difficulties of thinking metaphor outside of the metaphysical system inherited in Western language. The difficulty arises because the more that one uses a metaphor for a conceptualization to grasp an object, the more that it becomes one more metaphysical construct. This metaphysical construct eventually can be used to establish a totalizing and hegemonic nature to the discourse. The metaphor then loses its nature as excessive and becomes one more way of thinking that is totalizing.

As will be shown in what follows, improvisation helps a thinker to resist metaphysical thought. Improvisation will be used to point to the fragmentary nature of thinking and the unstructuring of forms used to dominate discourse. In improvisation, the goal is to never repeat. To make one’s improvisation “the way” to interpret a piece

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14 Ibid., 224-35.
15 There are two notes needed here. First, the term “metaphysics” is used in the onto-theological way that Heidegger articulated. Second, like Derrida, the project does not assume that one can “get out of” metaphysics. Rather, the project establishes a way of thinking that calls metaphysics into question by bringing up its inability to actually accomplish its goals.
would be to destroy the very nature of improvisation as this would make the improvisation a composition. Thus, improvisation avoids the problem of metaphor in that it cannot be tied to a linguistic structure and an improvisation cannot be used as a conceptual tool to undergird a metaphysical construct. Rather, the improvisation avoids these through its continued use of the transformation of a piece of music. In this, not only the piece itself, but even the context of the piece is changed. The improvisation never closes but always undoes itself to be heard otherwise. In this way, improvisation offers a way of thinking that the philosophical texts on metaphor do not.

A. The Centrality of Listening for Attunement in Music

An account of the nature of music should begin with the role of listening, especially if one is dealing with the nature of attunement. Listening is the center of the musical process. The importance of listening is brought forth explicitly by Peter Szendy in his *Listen: A History of Our Ears*. The first point made by Szendy is “You have to listen!” is the imperative of all music. The mode of thinking in music is predicated upon listening. This type of thinking is the beginning of what has been termed “attunement.” Don Ihde says that listening’s importance is because it is the most original experience, preceding even sight and speech. For the musician, the first sense that is developed is that of hearing, where one wants to be able to listen effectively, to hear the pattern of notes, to hear the rhythm and timbre, etc. In order to do so, the

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18 Ibid., 115.
musician must be actively engaged in listening to others usually through recordings and in person. The imperative to listen begins the movement of attunement.¹⁹

Listening produces attunement it opens one up to the other and finds meaning elsewhere through both the resonance of sounds (music) and that to which the sound refers.²⁰ Jean-Luc Nancy continues in this vein, saying both that listening opens one up to the resonance of a phenomenon²¹ and this openness allows one to be attuned to the meaning of a phenomenon.²² Nancy says that the resonance of a phenomenon comes from that phenomenon’s rhythm and timbre. To be attuned through listening is to tune into a phenomenon’s rhythm and timbre, being able to follow the phenomenon as it moves and does things.²³ Nancy furthers his articulation of listening by arguing that the subject is one who is constituted by one’s own listening. Listening tunes one into the resonance of a musical work or auditory phenomenon. The subject, in order to encounter this phenomenon, is constituted through listening both for and to the object.²⁴

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¹⁹ An interesting side note here is that of Jason Stanyek who argues that the creation of intercultural communities occurs because of listening. This is especially true when the goal is to create a musical community that is intercultural in nature. Stanyek shows that these groups are brought together because of their developed attention to one another, built through listening. See Jason Stanyek, “Transmissions of an Interculture: Pan-African Jazz and Intercultural Improvisation,” in The Other Side of Nowhere: Jazz, Improvisation, and Communities in Dialogue, ed. Daniel Fischlin and Ajay Heble (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2004), 111.


²¹ Ibid., 21.

²² Ibid., 27.

²³ Ibid., 36-7.

F. Joseph Smith echoes Nancy in *The Experiencing of the Musical Sound: Prelude to a Phenomenology of Music*. Smith argues that the basic attitude for any phenomenology is one of listening. He believes that listening creates a sense of openness, which allows a phenomenon to be and then to be encountered. This means that the phenomenologist “does not pre-categorize anyone’s work but lets it be what it is.” He says that any attempt to understand a phenomenon begins with listening because listening is a way of being open to the other, however that other may appear. Don Ihde also makes this point, saying that listening is inclined to follow a phenomenon through the flux and flow that may be experienced. A phenomenon is never static to one’s experience but requires an ability to “be moved with.” Thus, listening is a way of being attuned to a phenomenon in order to flux and flow with it.

The way that listening opens one up to the phenomenon is through its nature as event. Listening is not just hearing something, the way that one hears everyday, mundane noises. Rather, listening is tuning into something that catches one’s ear, being in tune with something in such a way as to “flux and flow” with it. In this attunement through listening there is an event; but, this event is shrouded in a sense of indeterminacy which comes from not knowing where the music will go or how a sound

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26 Ibid., 17-8.

27 Ibid., 17.

28 Don Ihde, *Listening and Voice*, 64.
will continue. This stems from the fact that one is not in control. This is especially true in improvisational music where the event is the listening (whether as audience member or fellow player) to something that “I” cannot control, but that is going where it is going to go. This results in an “enlivening” of a piece of music as listening finds the reference of a piece in its “pregnant significance” as the carrier of the possibility of meaning. Listening opens possibilities for the music that enliven it in unique ways, opening places that can be “interesting and personal.”

At this point one may notice the dual nature of listening in that it is both active and passive. To this point, the exposition on listening has been mostly concerned with the passive nature of listening. The passive nature of listening comes from the fact that, to an extent, music forces one to pay attention by claiming one’s gaze or ear. Music was created to be heard and thus claims the attention of the listener(s). The goal of music is to catch one’s attention by summoning the one who will listen and to offer new possibilities to the one who is caught.

Listening also includes an active element. Peter Szendy points to the active nature of listening when he says that there are two components, or two ways, of listening.

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33 Szendy, *Listen*, 142.
First, one listens to music but, second, one becomes aware of one’s listening by listening to others’ listening of a work. Szendy understands listening in a very active mode because it is involved in the process of music making. Listening does not just take sound in but also necessitates being an active part of configuring the music. For Szendy, this is most evident in the new technologies that can be used to configure one’s music or through the same technologies as they are used to make music. The use of these technologies is an intentional act to actively engage the music. Listening is active in its response to the music by “choosing” to what one engages. Listening responds to what is heard. Bruce Ellis Benson makes this responsive nature of listening apparent when he says “and it is in the act of truly listening that we have a genuine experience in which we make content with what we hear.” Thus, listening is not just a passive hearing but is also an active process whereby one is open and is involved in giving content to what is being listened to.

The way that listening leads one into the place of being able to make content in the way Benson points to is through the openness that listening brings with it. In his meditations upon the nature of music, Vladimir Jankélévitch echoes Benson. Jankélévitch believes that music creates a certain state of mind in the one who listens, a

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34 Szendy, *Listen*, 10. Jean-Luc Nancy, in an endnote to his foreword of *Listen*, says that jazz is the first clear cut example of a music that listens and then listens to itself listening. See Nancy, “note 9” in Szendy, *Listen*, 146.

35 Ibid., 141.


state that is “ambivalent and always indefinable.” This state of mind comes from the limitless nature of music as its inexpressiveness becomes apparent within the “innumerable possibilities of interpretation” for any given piece. Listening transgresses all the limits of “intellectual speculation” placed upon a piece of music. Instead, listening opens the listener up to the play of music. The listener notices the polyphonic nature of the musical phenomenon and that the way one enters into making this phenomenon meaningful is through a conversation. This conversation involves the give-and-take that occurs as one listens to a piece of music: the piece gives something to be heard that the listener takes while the listener gives attention and takes the music. An example of how such a conversation occurs is in one of the pedagogical devices used in jazz. Here a player learns to play by first listening and imitating what is being listened to. The jazz player then seeks to branch out in one’s listening by engaging the music as well as the audience and interacting with these people. The music is polyphonic as it has numerous possible interpretations depending upon the place that it is played and who hears it. Listening becomes the basis for playing by opening one up to the music and


39 Ibid., 119. The metaphor of “conversation” or “dialogue” is used frequently when discussing the relationship between music and the listener. This will be touched upon more in the next section on the attunement of the musician to the musical tradition, other musicians, and the listener(s).


41 Dana Reason, “‘Navigable Structures and Transforming Mirrors’: Improvisation and Interactivity,” in *The Other Side of Nowhere: Jazz, Improvisation, and Communities in Dialogue*, ed. Daniel Fischlin and Ajay Heble (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2004), 74. This will be articulated more thoroughly in the next section, “The Place of Attunement in Improvisation.”
being able to then be attuned to how it can be played. Ultimately, listening is central to improvisation as it is what opens the musician up to be able to be attuned to the musical tradition one plays within as well as the other musicians one plays with and the audience one plays to.

B. The Place of Attunement in Improvisation

The nature of music is built upon the construction of the conversation or dialogue that takes place between piece/tradition, musicians, and audience. Bruce Ellis Benson seeks a way of understanding the musical dialogue that does not fall into the traps of Gadamer’s “fusion of horizons.” For Benson, the beginning of this dialogue comes from the force that is exerted from the listener, composer, and performer. This force holds together the dialogue. This project has sought to term this force attunement. In this section, I analyze how attunement occurs in the making of music. My analysis centers on the idea that music comes from a “triple attunement.” This triple attunement—of the musician to a tradition (including the composer and piece), the musician to other musicians, and the musician to the audience—results in the construction of the way that music is interpreted and the way that it is then portrayed. In reality, this triple attunement is what allows meaning to come to the fore in a way that is polyphonic. This multiplicity of meaning results in a transformation of the form of music.

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42 Nancy, Listening, 36-37.

43 Bruce Ellis Benson, Improvisation of Musical Dialogue, 169-71. Earlier in Improvisation of Musical Dialogue, Benson says that in an improvisation, music is a conversation which is not controlled by anyone (x). However, music is not the only art form which has dialogue and conversation as a central component to its activity. See Daniel Belgrad, The Culture of Spontaneity: Improvisation and the Arts in Postwar America (Chicago and London: University of Chicago, 1998), 45-46; 111; 161; 165; 208.
1. Attunement and the Tradition

For the improvisational musician, the first kind of attunement that takes place is to a tradition. In order for the musician to be able to improvise, there must be an immersion into the music where one learns the “language” and “dialogue” that occurs within the tradition. One is conversant when the attunement to the tradition is well enough that one can actually dialogue with others both musically and verbally about the music.

The reason that jazz improvisation begins with one’s attunement to the tradition is because this is where one is initially introduced to the various strands that form this music. This tradition includes a lot of material, including composers/musicians, standard pieces, and a series of musical ideas around various scales and modes. The musician needs to immerse oneself more fully in the types of thinking that occur within the tradition and not be content with one’s factual place. Paul Berliner points to this by bringing out two specific ways attunement to a tradition occurs. First, he says that for many jazz musicians, their early home life was an environment that was almost musical by nature. Berliner describes how many improvisational musicians learn the art of improvisation through an attunement to the fundamental nature of jazz music at social events in their early years, especially the more explicitly African American forms of the music. These musicians’ home lives were filled with parents, grandparents, aunts,

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uncles, and cousins getting together and listening to or even playing music. This began to expose the musicians to the musical tradition.

Berliner also notes another place where musicians were often exposed to music: church. He notices how church becomes a primary place for learning a tradition that seeks to stir people’s souls and feelings. In these church services, they learned the tradition of taking a piece of music and building and raising the tension through improvisation to come to a climax and release.\footnote{Ibid., 29.} This musical structure was taken in by musicians from an early age, listening to the church service, to the preacher, and hearing how the different emotive elements worked together to stir people. Paul Berliner summarizes a conversation with Max Roach where Roach explained that “in church, young musicians were judged on the basis of ‘their abilities to stir the congregation’s feelings’ rather than on ‘their technical proficiency’. The emotional intensity of performances at black ‘hallelujah possession churches,’ where hymns build to ‘fantastic climaxes’ over forty-five minutes until ‘sinners shout and preach,’ epitomizes this value.”\footnote{Ibid., 29.}

For many musicians, these places help develop an “intuitive intelligence” which leads to a “quest for knowledge and inner exploration” that is necessary for one to improvise effectively.\footnote{Monson, “Oh Freedom: George Russell, John Coltrane, and Modal Jazz,” 154-55.} By developing one’s musical tradition within these social structures, the result is a musician who is aware of and tuned into the social environments...
one occupies in playing.\textsuperscript{49} George E. Lewis enforces this when he says, “In my own view, the development of the improviser in improvised music is regarded as encompassing not only the formation of individual musical personality but the harmonization of one’s musical personality with social environments, both actual and possible.”\textsuperscript{50} The first mode of attunement to the tradition takes place through the different social places that a musician first hears music.

The second place where Berliner outlines how the jazz musician becomes attuned to the tradition is within the jazz community itself. The jazz community acts as an educational system committed to “producing, preserving and transmitting musical knowledge.”\textsuperscript{51} The community trains improvisers in the musical knowledge that has come before them so that these musicians can then perpetuate the tradition. The teaching of the tradition comes through the transmission of not only certain scales, melodies, harmonies and rhythms, but also of practices that allow the musician to cultivate and practice the art of improvisation. An example of this is George Russell, who was both a teacher and a musician. Russell developed what he called the “Concept” which was an attempt on his part to systematize ideas about harmony through the relationship between chords and scales. He hoped the result would be greater musical freedom through practice of how modes and scales shape and form chords. This gives the musician the

\textsuperscript{49} This shows the social nature of the development of the musician, while pointing to the third place of the musician’s attunement, which is to the listener/audience. This will be dealt with more thoroughly below.


\textsuperscript{51} Berliner, \textit{Thinking in Jazz}, 37.
knowledge and familiarity with the music necessary to be as free as possible. The example that Russell offers is a case of one who, within the jazz community, develops a way of playing and then passes it on through the community.⁵²

Jeff Pressing, a cognitive scientist, has researched extensively the role that this immersion in the tradition and its habit of practice has on improvisation. He says that the amount of time spent training and practicing the different methods of jazz learned in the educational process is what opens the possibility of improvisation.⁵³ The education that occurs through the immersion in the tradition and through practice is what leads to the development of the different cognitive needs for improvisation.⁵⁴ These different cognitive elements ultimately lead to a complete immersion in the music, where one may not actually be conscious—or, said phenomenologically, intending—to “say something” but one does because this is how the music goes. For Pressing, this immersion results in a musician who has developed the cognitive ability to be so deep in the music that one stops playing the music and the music begins to play them.⁵⁵ One who is so immersed in the music develops an ability to perceive the most subtle and contextually relevant information within a musical piece in order to “play” on it.⁵⁶ The result is that one’s


⁵⁴ See Ibid., 50-58.


⁵⁶ Ibid., 166.
cognitive development is so thorough that one has the ability to hear variations before playing them and this opens the possibility for improvisation to take place.\textsuperscript{57}

This educational process teaches that improvising is built upon some ground or foundation. As Derek Bailey says, “An ability to improvise can’t be forced and it depends, firstly, on an understanding, developed from complete familiarity, of the musical context in which one improvises, or wishes to improvise.”\textsuperscript{58} He shows that improvisation is built upon a familiarity with the musical world in which one wants to play. Carol S. Gould and Kenneth Keaton say, “All improvisation in musical performance relies upon the foundations of the particular musical tradition in which the work exists.”\textsuperscript{59} Philip Alperson echoes this sentiment, saying, “The truth, of course, is that even the freest improviser, far from creating \textit{ex nihilo} improvises against some sort of musical context. In fact, learning to improvise is often, in large part, learning to master that tradition.”\textsuperscript{60} Improvisation comes from playing upon a piece or tradition. This ability comes from the development of one’s personal “bank” of riffs, licks, and grooves.\textsuperscript{61}

\textsuperscript{57} Pressing, “Psychological Constraints on Improvisational Expertise and Communication,” 60.


\textsuperscript{59} Carol S. Gould and Kenneth Keaton, “The Essential Role of Improvisation in Musical Performance,” \textit{Journal Aesthetics and Art Criticism} 58, no. 2 (Spring 2000), 146.


Through one’s immersion in the tradition, the musician learns to “think through” the music with the voices in the tradition.\textsuperscript{62} One’s development, both socially and cognitively, leads to the development of a musical understanding that opens possibilities for playing with the form of various pieces of music, along with general themes within the tradition. This “thinking through” with the tradition is what allows the musician to then be able to improvise on the tradition, to hear the tradition anew and to create anew, not leaving the tradition but rethinking the tradition in a new space.\textsuperscript{63} The musician now pushes the very limits and, ultimately, the form of the music as it was presently constructed.

Part of this tradition is that of the composer and piece of music. Both of these do not come \textit{ex nihilo} but from the educational system of one’s own tradition.\textsuperscript{64} The one who improvises never starts from nowhere but comes to improvisation from some place.\textsuperscript{65} This place is that held by the composer and the musical piece, which are both part of the musical tradition. The piece acts as a starting place for the musician.\textsuperscript{66} For Charles Mingus, the belief in the necessity of the composer and the piece was so strong

\textsuperscript{62} One place that has been neglected to this point is the role of recorded music in one’s attunement to the tradition. This will not be developed in this project as the general tenets laid out here will not generally change. For more on the role of recorded music in a musician’s development, see Ted Gioia, \textit{The Imperfect Art: Reflections on Jazz and Modern Culture} (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 63-66.

\textsuperscript{63} Berliner, \textit{Thinking in Jazz}, 59.

\textsuperscript{64} Benson, \textit{Improvisation of Musical Dialogue}, 25.


that he denied that “free improvisation” was even possible. He thought the musician must begin somewhere with something and this gives the impetus to open into the form of improvisation. However, first, there must be an attunement to the tradition, including its composers and pieces.

The composition functions as the basis for an improvisation but is not an improvisation in itself. According to Lee Brown, the composition differs from an improvisation in three fundamental ways. First, a composition has a different situation than an improvisation. The situation of a composition is such that, if the composer feels compelled, she can go back and erase parts, retool them, etc. The improviser, on the other hand, inhabits a situation where there is no room to correct mistakes or to rewrite the music. The second difference between the two comes from how choices are made in each. In a composition, there is no forced choice as a composer can take the time necessary to figure out what she wants in the piece. The improviser, on the other hand, must choose in the moment one is playing. Lastly, there is the role of the script or notation of a piece in the music. The composer has many possible notes, inflections, tones, etc. at her fingertips, but is always guided by the script that is at hand in the piece being composed. This piece demands certain avenues. The improviser does not play with a set script but with a series of possibilities that are opened and closed within the playing of the music.

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68 Brown, “Feeling My Way….” 114. This is also not to deny the role of the composer as an improviser. However, there seems to be a difference between a composition and an improvisation,
With these differences between improvisation and composition laid out, it is important to see how composition is similar to improvisation. For Bruce Ellis Benson, the composer is an improviser; or, at least, the composer improvises when one takes material from another composer and begins to shape it and move it so that it would fit in with one’s own work. John A. Sloboda echoes Benson’s sentiment by arguing that the composer in most cases is working from the place of an improviser by trying new things while working with existing material. The improviser works like the composer in that this kind of musician does not invent new licks or phrases, but strings together a set of learned material in new, yet appropriate, ways. By doing this, the improviser slides into the role of the composer by playing on a piece, transforming it and letting it be heard anew. This is not a composition which is meant to be disseminated as much as a moment in time that offers different possibilities. The improviser and composer work with a similar mindset.

especially when music is performed. Rather, the composer, in composing, performs a certain amount of improvisation in order to compose. See Benson, The Improvisation of Musical Dialogue, 33-76.


Of course, with the rise of recording devices, it becomes much more problematic to claim that live music is not meant to be disseminated. In fact, if one looks at many groups in the modern “jam band” scene, one can see many groups who allow live “taping” of shows to be disseminated among fans—the two most famous examples being The Grateful Dead and Phish. This allows people not at the concert to be able to hear the variations proposed in the improvisations that took place on any given day.

Peter Szendy points to Stravinsky as a master composer who “practices improvisation” in his composition. Szendy says that Stravinsky is a master at collecting fragments from other pieces of music.
From the above discussion, it could be said that the composition acts as a guide for improvisation. Jerrold Levinson says a composition acts as a “means of production” for the pattern of sounds that a composer has put together.\textsuperscript{74} Roland Barthes even says that “to compose, at least by propensity, is to give to do…”\textsuperscript{75} The composition is a pseudo instruction manual for how a piece is to be played. However, even as a means of production, it is not limited to only one way of being played. In fact, a central component to any composition is that it offers the inclusion of certain musical “variables.” These variables are elements within a composition that are not fixed or constant.\textsuperscript{76} Rather, a composition leaves a certain amount of “play.” This play leads to the acknowledgement that the composer loses control of the composition. Due to the variables at work in the composition, even those that the composer may not have had any concept would be a variable,\textsuperscript{77} the intentions of the composer do not play a role in how a piece should be played.\textsuperscript{78} Rather, the composer acts as someone who opens musical possibilities through the production of a piece of music. Then it is the responsibility of the musicians working and then rearranging these fragments in his own compositions so that they can be heard differently. See Szendy, \textit{Listen}, 87-88.


\textsuperscript{76} Richard Cochrane, “Playing By the Rules: A Pragmatic Characterization of Musical Performances,” \textit{Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism} 58, no. 2 (Spring 2000), 137.

\textsuperscript{77} Here, think of all the instruments used in a modern composition not used by composers even 200 years ago. This is especially true in relation to the electronic nature of music now, which was not even a thought for composers before the turn of the 20\textsuperscript{th} century.

\textsuperscript{78} Benson, \textit{The Improvisation of Musical Dialogue}, 95.
on the piece to play the piece in interesting ways that are still faithful to the composition and its tradition.

The fact that a composition is never definitively set leads to a discussion of what a composition actually is. Benson prefers to refer to a composition as a musical work rather than a piece of music. He does so because a piece is something that cannot be taken out of its contextual whole. For him, a piece shows the incompleteness of the musical composition while a musical work communicates the idea of a whole. Thus, a piece of music conveys both the incomplete nature of what is to be played as well as the inability of being able to take any part of the composition away from all other parts. He says, “…whereas a work suggests something complete in itself at the moment of its completion, a piece would seem to be inherently incomplete, for the musical context in which it exists is in flux.”

For Benson, a piece of music has a living existence. This indeterminate nature of the piece leads Eddie Prévost to the conclusion that an improvising musician contributes more to the piece than the composer, even if this can only be measured quantitatively. Thus, both Benson and Prévost place improvisation at the heart of a piece of music.

A piece of music offers a guide to an improviser in his or her interpretation of the piece by projecting a certain mood. The improviser becomes attuned to this mood of the piece and this gives a way for an appropriate performance to occur within the bounds of

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79 Ibid., 132-33.

80 Ibid., 133.

the improvisation. A piece of music “configures in themselves their reception, their possible appropriation, even their listening.” It gives something to be played upon that is open to interpretation. Improvisation is the musical interpretation of the piece. Thus, improvisation occupies a space between composition and performance. This space is created through the giving of the mood or configuration of the music by the piece and the subsequent playing of this in a performance. The performance does not control the piece but opens possibilities. The piece gives way to “co-creation” through the interaction that occurs in improvisation between a composition and a performance. The goal of the musician in the improvisation is to use one’s attunement to the tradition and the musical agility developed through this understanding of the tradition to translate the ideas of the piece by drawing upon the tradition in unique and interesting ways.

Through the attunement to the tradition at work in a composition the musician understands that the piece presents a “world” wherein she can dwell. The space that the piece of music opens is a world that is “not self-contained. Rather, it is a world within a world, a musical space that is created within and out of a larger musical practice.”

82 Berliner, Thinking in Jazz, 203.
83 Szendy, Listen, 7.
85 Smith and Dean, Improvisation and Hypermedia…, 14.
86 Berliner, Thinking in Jazz, 177.
one to learn about this space and to dwell in it the musician needs to learn to read between the lines of the piece and hear the spirit of the piece of music.\textsuperscript{89} As Ingrid Monson says, “In other words, it is not enough for a musician to play through a tune with only its melody and harmonic structure in mind...; the player must be so thoroughly familiar with the basic framework of the tune that he or she can attend to what everyone else in the band is doing.”\textsuperscript{90} Monson shows how one dwells in the world of a piece of music in her discussion of Jaki Byard’s playing of the standard “Bass-ment Blues” on his famous recording of the piece with his band on April 15, 1965. She points to how Byard brings over 25 years of experience to his playing of this piece. This experience, though, was not only as a performer, but also as a listener and composer. However, his listening and composing is to the entire tradition, not just to this piece. So, when his group plays “Bass-ment Blues,” Byard brings all of this to his playing, “quoting” other pieces in the tradition through his opening of the possibilities inherent in the piece.\textsuperscript{91} Monson’s analysis of Byard demonstrates how improvisation “encourages multiple readings of improvised potentialities, locating and decoding such structures in order to understand and appreciate the kinds of exchanges that take place as new community formations occur.”\textsuperscript{92} Thus, improvisation is the event of one’s playing upon the piece of music.\textsuperscript{93}

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{88} Ibid., 148.
\item \textsuperscript{89} Ibid., 105-7. Paul Berliner describes this phenomenon of learning to dwell in the space created by the piece of music as the development of a “third ear.” In the use of this metaphor, Berliner points to the need to listen to the world, the mood, that is configured by the musical piece. See Berliner, \textit{Thinking in Jazz}, 92-94 and 207-16.
\item \textsuperscript{90} Monson, \textit{Saying Something}, 83.
\item \textsuperscript{91} Ibid., 185.
\end{itemize}
2. Attunement and Other Musicians

If the attunement to a tradition opens up how a piece can be performed, it becomes important to examine how that performance occurs. While the previous section implied certain ideas about performance, this section makes these ideas more explicit through an explication of the notion of performance. The attunement to one’s musical partners is necessary for improvisation to take place.\(^94\) This does not mean that people just sit down and play with no interaction, but that interaction with different players is always left uncertain, no matter what may have been decided (if anything) in advance. Attunement to other musicians results in a musical dialogue, where the different people involved can propose ideas, affirm or deny ideas, and push the boundaries of each other’s playing.

Many of the musicians performing in settings where improvisation is the norm see themselves as operating in a community. Eddie Prévost says that music, and especially the improvisational music he plays, is intrinsically collective. This collective nature of the music leads Prévost to assert that music operates under a “socialist ethic” where musicians derive strength from each other and also give strength to each other.\(^95\) In the

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\(^95\) Prévost, “The Aesthetic Priority of Improvisation…,” 32.
Western world, this collective nature of the music is seen most explicitly in jazz. In jazz, musicians look to support each other at all times in the music. Jazz is a tradition which perpetuates a legacy where all musicians work together for the good of the music, whether soloist or rhythm player. Thus, jazz becomes a process of playing together by building a group where a dialogue arises from the various “rhythms of interaction” that occur during a performance. The musicians all work together as a collective which gives rise to the musical performance that occurs in improvisation.

The social interaction between the musicians occurs through what Alfred Schutz calls a “mutual tuning-in.” In order to articulate how this “mutual tuning-in” occurs between the musicians, he extends the discussion of the “I” and “Thou” by saying that these two can be tuned into each other in such a way that the “I” and “Thou” combine to form a “We.” This “We” of the musicians is what gives rise to the performance, especially those classic performances of the music. The “We” of the musicians only form in their mutual tuning-in to each other. Without this mutual tuning-in, the “We”

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97 This is true even in the context of the solo, where the rhythm section needs to keep time and, perhaps, another player leads through the chords that the soloist plays within.


99 Ibid., 104.


101 Ibid., 106ff.
would not come to fruition. Schutz argues that the relationship of the mutual tuning-in that occurs among musicians is based upon the “sharing of the other’s flux of experiences in inner time, thus living through a vivid present in common…” The musicians tune in to each other through the process of improvising together. Over time they develop a rapport and can try new ideas. This playing together gives the collective experience necessary for forming a “We.”

The dialogue that takes place among the performers is one built upon the attunement to each other and the attunement that each have to the tradition. Through knowing and interacting with the tradition and being tuned in to each other, each musician can dialogue musically with the others in a way that no one controls what will happen. There is an inherent freedom to the music that is played among the musicians. The free dialogue that occurs between the musicians is one where all people involved are able to have a voice and be conversant with none taking a more or less important role. The free dialogue of jazz flows from a musical aesthetic that is “open enough” to allow a multiplicity of viewpoints and perspectives to converge in the activity of the musicians making music. The openness is created by the musicians

\[102\] Ibid., 115.


\[104\] Ibid., 171.

\[105\] Ibid., 175.

being attuned to each other to create a collective body where a musical conversation can take place. Attunement creates the musical relationships giving rise to the distinctive features of jazz.

One such distinctive feature in forming musical relationships is the structure of “call and response.” This structure is an important part of improvisational music as it allows a soloist to call to the others and the others to respond within the music. Within this musical context, “the response of musicians is clearly crucial to whether a particular musical ideas is picked up on, developed, or ignored.” As the soloist calls and the other musicians respond, there is a building of a relationship that occurs between the musicians. The “caller” realizes what arouses the interest of the “responders” while the “responders” learn what kind of calls are used by the “caller.” This builds trust among the musicians and this trust is what gives them the ability to explore the possibilities at work in the aesthetic of improvisation. In order for improvisation to take place, there must be a mutual trust as exemplified in the structure of call and response.

The relationships of the musicians also lead to the creation of “space” within improvisational music. In his article, “Sense of the Possible: Miles Davis and the Semiotics of Improvised Performance,” Chris Smith elucidates how Miles Davis was a musician, and group leader, whose main concern was to create a certain “space” to create an environment where fellow musicians could develop their attunement to each other and

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108 Ibid., 174.

109 For an example, see Monson’s discussion of the relationship between Byard and Tucker within the playing of “Bass-ment Blues” (Monson, *Saying Something*, 174).
to the music. Davis also did this in order to decenter the group, taking himself out of the center of the group and, thus, creating the space for the other musicians to be able to play as they saw fit so that the musical dialogue was kept open and ongoing. Through his own decentering and the creation of musical “space,” Davis developed a way of playing with others that was highly conversational. His way of playing was built upon the intuition that developed among the musicians in the “space” of the music. The players who played with Davis “uniformly allude not to issues of technical or compositional approach, but, more profoundly, to a way of hearing and responding, and encouraging others to do the same; to the cultivation of a unique capacity for attention” as Davis’ main contribution to the musical world. Ultimately Davis developed a “sense of the possible” within the music.

The creation of the “sense of the possible” is a phenomenon that is prevalent throughout jazz and improvisation. The “sense of the possible” is what happens when a group of musicians are concerned with being tuned in to a tradition and to each other and allow space and openness to play out in the music so that various possibilities and interpretations can be explored. Bruce Ellis Benson points to this when he says, “Simply

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111 Ibid., 163-64.

112 Ibid., 285. The “sense of the possible” also develops within the context of musical mistakes, where a musician plays a wrong note or scale. The “covering” of these mistakes ends up changing the performance and the piece as it is heard. See Eddie Prévost, “The Discourse of a Dysfunctional Drummer: Collaborative Dissonances, Improvisation, and Cultural Theory,” in *The Other Side of Nowhere: Jazz, Improvisation, and Communities in Dialogue*, eds. Daniel Fischlin and Ajay Heble (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2004), 355-59.
the interaction among the players means that whatever any one player has decided in advance (or even what they have all decided) is always left uncertain. To the extent that dialogue is a genuine dialogue, it is impossible to know exactly what is going to happen before it takes place.\textsuperscript{113} The spontaneity of the playing of the music gives rise to the possibilities in the music. As Monson clearly shows, musicians are trying to find a “groove” where they can find a sense of connectedness between themselves. The groove, though, is not limited to the relationship among the musicians but is also necessary in the relationship between the piece/ tradition and the musicians.\textsuperscript{114} The balance that exists is one that navigates the necessity of change inherent in an improvisation along with keeping continuity to a piece and tradition.\textsuperscript{115} The result is a drive among musicians to keep playing together so as not to fall out of the groove.\textsuperscript{116}

For Ingrid Monson, there are two broad ideas at work in the concept of the groove: first, is the interdependence of the music through a variety of social structures; and, second, an aesthetic ideal that is larger than any one individual. The prominent metaphors used to describe the groove tend to be quite social and idealistic as they talk of a feeling of mutuality in a pattern or compatibility.\textsuperscript{117} The goal of a good improvisation is to strike a groove with the other members of the group. When this groove is “found”

\textsuperscript{113} Benson, \textit{The Improvisation of Musical Dialogue}, 142. Benson even says that playing alone is built upon a degree of spontaneity.

\textsuperscript{114} Monson, \textit{Saying Something}, 68.

\textsuperscript{115} Berliner, \textit{Thinking in Jazz}, 370-71.

\textsuperscript{116} Monson, \textit{Saying Something}, 81.

\textsuperscript{117} Ibid., 93.
the members are tuned in to each other through the sharing of the internal beat of the music. When the musicians share this internal beat of the groove, they come together to play the music as one. This creates the space necessary for improvisation to happen. In the groove, the musicians are open to each other, listening to each other so that each is tuned in to the other in a way that keeps the music open.

The attunement to musicians results in a set of structures which actually work to unstructure the form of the music. In an improvisation, the musicians unstructure the music in interesting ways by decentering it and then going about trying to “play” with the material. This comes from the very openendedness of improvisational music, especially jazz. For the musicians, the unstructuring of the musical form allows the musical dialogue to continue. This is more important than just playing the music “the right way.” Improvising musicians are interested in constantly taking apart musical pieces and then working to put them back together again in new and interesting ways by trying new possibilities or new song structures or playing with the melody and harmony lines, among other things. The unstructuring of the music is the creative thinking at work in improvisation, which is what leads to the interesting ways that music can be played and heard otherwise.

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118 Berliner, *Thinking in Jazz*, 349.
119 Ibid., 361-62.
120 Ibid., 362.
121 Monson, *Saying Something*, 81.
122 Ibid., 169.
3. Attunement and an Audience of Listeners

The last place where attunement takes place within the process of making music is that of the musicians to an audience. This attunement becomes necessary if the music is going to be heard. In improvisation, the attunement to the audience becomes more necessary due to the fact that the group is playing the piece differently. Also, the audience will react/respond to the musicians, either approving or disapproving of the music. Thus, it becomes imperative for the musicians to be attuned to the audience so that the improvisation upon the piece actually is able to reinterpret and allow the piece to be heard differently.

Bruce Ellis Benson shows that the beginning of any attunement to an audience is the creation of space for both the audience and listener to dwell within while listening.\(^\text{124}\) As the musicians try and create space among each other, so the musicians and audience also try and create a similar space for the possibilities of the music to be heard through the interaction of musicians and audience. The musicians look to make a piece say something and extend to the audience a part in the musical dialogue. The listener and musician are dwelling in the same space and time and are together in the process of music making. This is what gives Christopher Small the ability to place the audience in a central place to the process of making music, as central as the musicians and composer.\(^\text{125}\) The musician seeks to be tuned in to the audience in a way that allows the audience a

\(^{123}\) Berliner, *Thinking in Jazz*, 216.


place of importance within the improvisation. In this being tuned in to each other, they are “living together through the same flux, are growing old together while the musical process lasts.”

In order for the listener in the audience to be part of the performance, it is also pertinent for her to be tuned in to the performance and the music being performed. When the listener is attuned to the music, she is able to hear a multitude of things that may not have been. Some things that may be heard include variations on certain themes, transformations of certain pieces, and humor between the musicians and audience, among other things. The listener that can hear these things is attuned to the music through the development of what Ingrid Monson calls “aural familiarity.” For Monson, aural familiarity allows the listener to be tuned in to the music and performance through a development of a familiarity with the music. Monson says that the development of this aural familiarity allows the listener to get out of the music what one puts into it: since it takes time and work to develop such familiarity, the attuned listener gets much more out of the music than the one who has not put into the music a similar amount of time. When listening to a group of improvising musicians, a listener needs to develop a familiarity with other genres as the group may dabble in various other places.

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127 Monson, Saying Something, 123.
128 Ibid., 125.
129 Ibid., 126. An example is John Coltrane who would perform Broadway numbers and play upon them at times. See Monson, Saying Something, 115.
familiarity develops for the listener the flexibility and agility to go with the musicians in improvisation.

Within improvisation, tuning in to the audience is what gives the ability of the performers to improvise. The goal of improvisation is to open up new ways of thinking about a piece in a new context. In order to understand how it can be heard anew, the musician must be attuned with the audience for which he plays. This attunement to the audience comes through a mutual awareness that both musicians and audience “must be aware of the procedures and the life preferences that ultimately inform the art they embrace.” This also means that the audience and musicians should be aware of the various social signifiers at play in music as this allows a certain understanding of where the music comes from and where it is going. Through this, the musicians can commentate upon various social situations and the audience can hear the commentary.

In the process of making music the musician enters into a genuine relationship with the audience. This relationship allows the audience to interact with the music and the musicians in a dialogue. The interaction of the musicians and audience is what gives rise to some of the possibilities for the music within the performance. The performers are trying to get the audience to understand the music differently, to hear it otherwise. The

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131 Prévost, “The Discourse of a Dysfunctional Drummer…,” 354.

132 Ibid., 354-55.

133 An example is the way that jazz musicians made statements through their music during the battle for Civil Rights in the 1950s and 1960s.
musician acts as a conduit of the music to the audience.\textsuperscript{134} The audience acts as a receptor, either accepting or rejecting the differences heard through a response in time to what the musicians are playing. The audience may accept the playing through clapping, bobbing heads, shouting, or other positive forms of response. A rejection from the audience might entail negative responses but, more than likely, would come through a non-response. The musicians are consistently reacting to the audience’s reaction. Thus, what occurs is a dialogue between the musicians and the audience. This dialogue becomes deeper and more thorough the more that the audience is involved through its aural familiarity and the more that the musicians are able to transform the music.\textsuperscript{135}

A key in the performance of improvisational music is the give-and-take that occurs between the audience and the musicians. The musician is trying to be attuned to the audience in order to know whether or not the audience “feels it.” An example of this is the music of The Grateful Dead, the psychedelic jam band emerging from San Francisco in the 1960s. Jerry Garcia talks of how The Grateful Dead rely on audience feedback and reaction in order to hear where the music can go.\textsuperscript{136} In fact, for Garcia and the rest of the group, the audience has intimate involvement in the music making process. However, Garcia acknowledges that the audience also involves themselves in the music where they almost take a share in the responsibility for the music making process. The audience of The Grateful Dead sees themselves as intimately involved in the process of

\textsuperscript{134} Keith Sawyer, “Improvisational Creativity: An Analysis of Jazz Performance,” \textit{Creativity Research Journal} 5, no. 3 (1992), 256.

\textsuperscript{135} Monson, \textit{Saying Something}, 98; 115.

\textsuperscript{136} Bailey, \textit{Improvisation}, 42-3.
the bands’ making good, authentic music.\textsuperscript{137} Thus, attunement to the audience is necessary for improvisation to occur.\textsuperscript{138} Through the use of attunement in the relationship of musician and audience, the musician develops the agility to take the music in new directions and places. The Grateful Dead offers an example of how necessary this interaction is.

C. Improvisation as Transformation: Breaking the Musical Form

The multiple attunement of the musician is what allows him or her to then rethink the music in a new way and, thus, improvise. The improvisation breaks the previous forms, allowing the musician to open the music and avoiding attempts at closure. As has been implied throughout, improvisation opens the path to “develop new forms (often breaking definitions);” or, improvisation seeks to open meaning through the transformation of the piece or tradition. Musicians do this through the stretching and overcoming of different conceptions of what the music may look like. The result is a re-forming of the music in a way that gives a hearing to the mutual collaboration between composer, performer(s), and audience.\textsuperscript{139}

Improvisation is concerned with a transformation of the music. The driving force for this transformation is the call to creativity within communities that stress improvisation, such as the jazz community. The creativity at work in these traditions was

\textsuperscript{137} Ibid., 46-7.

\textsuperscript{138} Another example of attunement between the audience and musician occurs in the work of John Coltrane, where he would use irony in order to keep the audience “on their toes,” paying attention to what was going on and also getting the audience to respond to him. See Monson, \textit{Saying Something}, 117-18.

\textsuperscript{139} Smith and Dean, \textit{Improvisation, Hypermedia, and the Arts since 1945}, 3-4.
such that it worked to vary the music being learned and heard by students. In a discussion with Max Roach that Paul Berliner recalls in *Thinking in Jazz*, he says that, “Because the jazz artist ‘was given credit for being innovative as a soloist,’ Max Roach and his peers, ‘grew up wanting to do something a little different from everybody else. It was the crowning achievement if you could invent an idea…”

The transformation of the music comes from the creativity of the artist to play upon the music and open the ideas to new forms which reorient the music. For Eddie Prévost, this means that “Contemporary improvised music is undoubtedly a break with established means of making music.” While Prévost is more willing to stress the break between the tradition/piece and the musician through the turn to creativity than I am, he still shows that improvised music does something other with the music so that it may be heard anew.

In contrast to Prévost’s sentiment, Jeff Pressing says that improvisation always begins from somewhere. The improvising musician takes this “somewhere” and begins to “play” upon it by reorienting the scheme already present in a given work. One finds this in the talk of many musicians who say that they want to be faithful to the music; however, in this faithfulness to the music, there is also a recognition of the importance of

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140 Berliner, *Thinking in Jazz*, 142.

141 Ibid., 138-42.

142 Prévost, “The Aesthetic Priority of Improvisation…,” 34.

143 Jeff Pressing, “Cognitive Processes in Improvisation,” in *Cognitive Processes in the Perception of Art*, eds. W. Ray Crozier and Anthony J. Chapman (Amsterdam and New York: North-Holland, 1984), 346-48. Here, I am not sure that Prévost would disagree with the idea that musicians begin from somewhere, which is why practice is so important. However, Prévost brings out the common misconception that improvisation seeks to make something totally new out of nothing instead of viewing improvisation as a transformation of a given piece and/or tradition.
breaking with tradition or, at least, transforming the tradition through innovation.\textsuperscript{144} This echoes the words of Walter Bishop, Jr., in an interview given to Paul Berliner for \textit{Thinking in Jazz}. Bishop talks about the movement a musician takes toward improvisation. He says that first a musician practices imitation, which results in an almost exclusive repeating of the piece or tradition. Second, there is an assimilation, where one repeats different patterns one has learned from listening to standards or through the practice of scales and modes, but the musician adds little twists and turns not already present. Assimilation does not result in a rethinking, but only in playing differently. The goal is in the third moment, that of innovation, which is where Bishop believes true improvisation takes place. Here, “one has created [one’s own] sound and [one] has a good sense of the history of the music” and now has the ability to “think of where the music hasn’t gone and where it can go…”\textsuperscript{145} Improvisation is concerned with innovation which immerses one in a style and tradition and then rethinks where this can go and how it can be heard differently. The result is an unstructured form, which is a form with a (non)center that arrests the musician at some point and time, giving the musician the possibility to improvise. For the purposes of the current project, this is termed “transformation.”

Transformation is concerned with the opening of forms, resisting any attempt to close the form used to play the piece of music. Daniel Belgrad argues that the openness

\textsuperscript{144} Sawyer, “Improvisational Creativity: An Analysis of Jazz Performance,” 258.

\textsuperscript{145} Berliner, \textit{Thinking in Jazz}..., 120; see also Berliner’s use of Bishop on pages 273-76. Lee Konitz uses a similar typology, except he talks of moving from interpretation to embellishment to improvisation. See Berliner, \textit{Thinking in Jazz}..., 67-71.
to the multiplicity of forms comes from the attempt of the marginalized—of which many improvised musicians were a part in the American context—to break the forms pressed upon them by different institutions and structures of authority. Improvisation becomes a key component in the arsenal of the artist to resist the totalizing moves made against him or her. Eddie Prévost points to this when he talks of the development of improvisation in the generation following the slave culture of the Southern United States. This next generation was now immersed in the oppression of reconstruction and Jim Crow. In opposition to this, the musicians begin to embrace styles and forms of music that seek change by throwing off hegemonic structures through improvisation. For these musicians, the transformation that takes place results in new music and in a new way of viewing oneself. The openness to possibilities necessary for transformation comes from the multiple attunements and from one’s own life and the attempt to reflect this in the music.

The concern of improvisation with transformation becomes manifest in three ways, according to Alan Durant in his essay “Improvisation in the Political Economy of

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146 Belgrad, *The Culture of Spontaneity*, 43.


149 Here, one could think of John Coltrane’s spiritual experience and the resulting album *Love Supreme* and his quest after this for a universal music, with the result being *Ascension*. Both of these come out of the flux of Coltrane’s life. Another example would be Miles Davis, with his constant experimenting and search for something new, from *Kind of Blue* to *ESP* to *Bitches’ Brew*. These are simply three representations of the impact that Davis’ life and context could have on his music.
Music. “First, Durant points to the view that improvisation is liberation. The liberationist view of improvisation is seen in improvisation’s encouragement of others in their expression. This perspective also shows the prophetic nature of the music in that it offers an alternative vision to the forms of oppression entrenching people, especially those playing and listening to the music.”

Second, Durant says improvisation is discovery. He believes that discovery occurs in “the transgression and transformation of existing codes...there is no new musical realm to discover that isn’t at the same time a restructuring or reconstitution of the old.” For Durant, improvisation works as discovery because it seeks to transform the old by leaving open the forms used to play the music by discovering new ways of thinking through the piece.

Third, Durant says that improvisation is dialogue. The dialogue of improvisation is concerned with exploration (which leads to discovery). Here, improvising becomes the vehicle for the exploration of the relationships between the musicians and, by extension, all people. Improvisation offers a place for the exploration of the nature of relationships through the interaction that occurs around various musical ideas.

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151 Ibid., 269-71.

152 Ibid., 273.

153 Ibid., 271-73.

154 Ibid., 274-76.

155 Ibid., 280.
improvisational music is with transformation, whether it is through the attempt at liberation, the process of discovery, or exploring human relationships in dialogue.

The threefold attunement of the musician discussed earlier becomes central to the nature of transformation in improvisation. In the understanding of Bruce Ellis Benson, this comes about for two reasons. First, the composer, in writing a piece of music, necessarily allows for the piece to be recontextualized. The piece is never again under the strict control of the composer but must now be interpreted by someone to be performed. When the music is performed, it is necessarily placed in a new context. This leads to the destabilization of the music, especially in jazz, doing away with a set center, but allowing the music to be “played.” As Vladimir Jankélévitch shows, the meaning of music is hidden or concealed within the music. The goal is to bring this meaning out through an evocation. However, to connect Jankélévitch with Benson, this evocation can only come through being attuned to the piece of music and understanding the meaning that wants to be brought out through the evocation.

The necessary recontextualization of the music leads to the second reason transformation is central to improvisation. The issue here is one of using one’s attunement to the piece and tradition in such a way as to perform the piece in a transformative way. For Benson, the way that one is able to create the space for transformation is through dwelling with the piece. Dwelling “transforms the space” by “fabricating what is conveniently at hand” in order to open the piece to becoming


157 Jankélévitch, *Music and the Ineffable*, 52; 63-64; 71; 72.
something new.\textsuperscript{158} Thus, no longer can a performer simply repeat the notes on the sheet of paper, but must interpret them and, in so doing, she necessarily rethinks the way the music is heard.\textsuperscript{159} The music is transformed through iteration. As musicians recontextualize it, the piece is transformed over and over again through its continued play.\textsuperscript{160}

For the musician, part of the process of opening the piece up to being transformed involves a certain risk. This risk comes from the imperative on the part of the musician to say something through the piece. There is always the risk that the piece does not say something. As Brown says, “An improviser (a) presents music intended to be worth hearing, by (b) creating it \textit{as} she plays. Given conditions (a) and (b), risk is latent in improvisational music.”\textsuperscript{161} For Brown, this risk is what makes jazz and improvised music so important, as it seeks a multiplicity of interpretations which gives rise to the unexpected. The unexpected adds an element to improvised music often absent in other music—that of unsettling and disrupting not only the listener, but the piece and tradition itself.\textsuperscript{162} The result is an unstructuring of the piece, where one may pick up one line or one chord and reorient the entire piece around this single fragment, transforming the very way that the piece can be thought and heard.

\begin{footnotes}
\item[158] Benson, \textit{The Improvisation of Musical Dialogue}, 32.
\item[159] Ibid., 71 and 111.
\item[160] Ibid., 79.
\item[162] See Brown, “‘Feeling My Way:’ Jazz Improvisation and Its Vicissitudes—A Plea for Imperfection,” 119.
\end{footnotes}
The result is a form that slips away and is never totally “gotten” because it transforms into other forms. The form is, in a sense, formless. This is not to say that there is not a form in improvisation. Rather, the form is different, it “slips” so that one never catches it. The form in improvisation unravels, unstructuring itself in the process of improvisation so that new ideas possibilities can be explored through a plurality of forms. Ted Gioia reiterates this in his discussion of the Blueprint Model of music versus the Improvisational Model. The Blueprint Model draws its name from architecture where “the artist plans in advance every detail of the work of art before beginning any part of its execution.”163 Here, form is the scheme that artwork must fit within in order for it to work. The Improvisational Model, on the other hand, is not privy to a scheme that has been worked out ahead of time, but builds upon what has just come before. The result is a model built upon the retrospective creation of form as it is developed from what has come immediately prior and works with where the musician wants to go.164

The recontextualizing of the piece of music by the performer results in interpreting the piece for a new audience which leads to a transformation. The improviser “is always engaged in making the music say something to and be useful for us, in the same way that future improvisers will be engaged in making music that says something to and is useful for those who come after.”165 In order to allow the music to speak to people in a new place, the improviser needs to be attuned to the piece and the

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163 Gioia, Imperfect Art…, 60.
164 Ibid., 60-61.
165 Benson, The Improvisation of Musical Dialogue, 150.
tradition from which the piece comes. The attunement of the musician gives the ability to transform the piece through its recontextualization. In being attuned to both the tradition and audience, the improviser is able to think the whole tradition of which the piece is a part so that it can be heard in a new context, so that the whole tradition can be rethought in a new place. This attunement opens the possibility for different forms to be used when playing the music. The result is an improvisation that seeks to continually undo the form of the music.

This transformation results in a shifting center at the heart of the piece of music. In this conception, the piece becomes an open product to be rethought and transformed. In order to articulate this transformation, Benson turns to Jacques Derrida and his thinking on translation. For Benson, Derrida’s notion of translation provides an interesting parallel to the kind of thinking that is occurring in musical improvisation. This is because Benson (following Derrida following Benjamin) understands a piece of music to survive as “a living entity” through its constant growth and building of its own tradition. The translation of a piece of music comes from being attuned to the piece through a concern for the spirit of a musical work rather than the letter of the composition. By concerning oneself with the spirit over the letter, the improvising musician is trying to keep the tradition of piece open in new contexts. This concern is

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168 Ibid., 183-86. Peter Szendy believes that the survival of a piece of music only comes through its translation. See Szendy, *Listen*, 52.

169 Ibid., 104-7.
seen in what Lee Brown calls the greatest threat to improvisational music: plagiarism. Brown shows that plagiarism and not forgery is the greatest threat to music because plagiarism just copies the music without needing to be attuned to the spirit of the music. In order to plagiarize, one merely needs to copy the way another plays a piece. However, a forgery consists of emulating another’s way of playing a piece which necessitates being attuned in some way to the other. A translation, then, taps into the growth of the original through its continued recontextualization. The translation of the music acts as the mediation of a transformation. The piece lives in the performance and its translation and the subsequent, ongoing translation of the piece.

The translation of the piece ultimately occurs because of the fragmentary nature of the piece of music. The piece is fragmentary because it also needs a supplement—or, it must be interpreted—in order to be performed, but the performance can never capture the piece in its entirety. Translation is the supplement. In trying to articulate this need of translation in the performance of improvised music, Ingrid Monson turns to Henry Louis Gates, Jr.’s concept of “signifying” to show how jazz is concerned with the

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172 Benson, The Improvisation of Musical Dialogue, 183-86.

173 Ibid., 182.

174 Szendy, Listen, 54-55.
“transformative reuse of material.” For Monson, Gates argues that signifying is not so much concerned with what is said (or played) but how it is said (or played). Gates uses the concept to evaluate how African-American forms of literature have been both co-opted and can also transform those very institutions that have been co-opted. For him, this comes through a transformation of the forms of the dominant language through “reversal, incongruity, and recontextualization.” Signifying shows how to reverse forms of language through recontextualizing them and by showing their incongruity what how things are said. This concept becomes helpful for Monson as it shows how jazz transforms other forms of music so that they may be heard differently. Oftentimes, this comes through taking up a fragment that escapes the piece but opens up the possibilities of the piece in the course of performance.  

Transformation, then, becomes a key component within any description of the nature of improvisation. The goal is always to allow the music to be heard otherwise, opening the spirit of the music to the listener and incorporating the listener into the experience of the music. Translation always keeps the piece open by denying any closure to the piece. The end result is a music that plays with form so that it may be heard differently. This music keeps its possibilities open through improvisation and seeks to

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176 Monson, Saying Something, 104.
“say something.” In all of this, though, improvisation looks to a form that allows for an unstructuring and decentering to occur through the pursuit of a certain formlessness.177

D. Conclusion

This chapter has had one central task: to articulate the kind of thinking that occurs in improvisational modes of music. This has been built upon the work of the previous chapters on the nature of thinking in Heidegger and Derrida. Through these three chapters, the goal has been to articulate a theory of thinking as attunement. In this chapter, there has been a focus on how this occurs within the musical world.

In order to articulate how attunement occurs and the implications for improvisation, this chapter has had three sections. The first section was on the nature of listening within music. The argument was made that all music is predicated upon the act of listening. For the musician, the development of one’s ability to listen opens the way forward for being an improvising musician. This is because listening acts as the connection between the piece and tradition, the musicians, and even the audience. Listening is central to all that occurs in music. And, as such, it is the first moment in attunement, where one attunes oneself by first listening to the other, however that other may come.

Second, the chapter articulated the threefold nature of attunement: that of the musician to a piece of music and the tradition the piece finds itself within; of the musician to other musicians; and, lastly, the musician to an audience. I showed that all

177 Here, one may look to the example of John Coltrane on Ascension as a way of seeing the constantly shifting middle within the music. In listening to this piece, one quickly realizes that the jazz tradition is being quite stretched and that Coltrane is breaking the very forms that he used to articulate so clearly, although for him it was always the pursuit of something more and other.
are necessary for attunement to take place. This is because music always begins from somewhere, so the musician must be attuned to the tradition and piece of music; the musician then seeks to play this in dialogue with others, whether others in the tradition or those who the musician plays with in current time; and, third, the musician plays this for someone, an audience. When these three come together, attunement works as it should by playing something within a tradition with others for others.

Third, the chapter laid out how playing music in improvisational forms of music seeks to transform. The transformation of the music was seen to be built upon the attunement of the musician to the tradition, other musicians, and the audience. The attunement of the musician to these three results in the transformation of the forms of the music. This transformation takes place by exploring the spirit of the music instead of trying to repeat the letter. The transformation of the music results in an unstructured form that resists any hegemonic form. The result is a translation of a piece of music or musical tradition to a new time and place, recontextualizing the music so that it may be heard otherwise.

This articulation of the type of thinking that occurs in improvisation has three implications for later chapters. First, this articulation shows how a way of thinking predicated upon attunement occurs. As the next chapters explore the nature of attunement within theology, it will be beneficial to have seen how attunement occurs in music, as well as being able to use the metaphors made available through the study of improvisation. This will allow a way of thinking in theology to be articulated that is concerned with being attuned.
The second implication is that I have articulated the kinds of sources to which one becomes attuned. This chapter has shown how one is attuned to a tradition, to those in one’s field, and to an audience. For theology, these sources also carry great weight as the theologian is attuned to the tradition that one works within and to the conversations occurring in the theological guild and the broader world. The result is a theology that values openness to closure, formlessness to hegemony, and multiplicity over totalization. Theology in this vein is transformed and seeks to transform others.

The third implication is that the outcome of being attuned is that one is able to “say something.” This saying something occurs through the transformation of traditional forms used to say something into forms that are more adequate to articulating what the musician wants to say in the moment. While a theologian will not be improvising in the moment like an improvising musician, the theologian does have a set of forms available for thinking theologically that have become, at times, quite static and moved toward an embrace of closure. If theology is going to actually think God then it seems that there is a need for a transformation of these available forms with an eye to the fact that only a plurality of forms could adequately think God. Attunement in theology seeks to transform the static forms traditionally used, especially in more modern and systematic theologies, to explore the infinite possibilities available for thinking God.

In order to accomplish these tasks, in the next chapter I deal with the work of David Tracy. Through an analysis of Tracy’s work, I articulate how he wants to pursue a theological conversation that includes a tradition of classics available to theology, the current modes of thinking in theology, and how theology can articulate itself outside of
its traditional bounds. Tracy shows a theological method for thinking theologically that places attunement at the heart of the theological enterprise, even if he does not explicitly state this.
CHAPTER FOUR:
ATTUNEMENT AND THEOLOGY: RESONATIONS WITH DAVID TRACY

The three previous chapters have cleared the ground for rethinking the nature of theology in our contemporary culture. The current chapter takes the modes of thinking in improvisation and proposes a theological project in tune with the type of thinking that occurs in improvisation. In order to do this, the following chapter enters into a conversation with the contemporary Roman Catholic theologian David Tracy. This conversation will focus on the ideas that Tracy has dealt with most explicitly in his career, from the rise of pluralism to the nature of theology, and how the theologian goes about naming and thinking God in a postmodern world. The concerns shared by Tracy and myself make him an ideal dialogue partner. Through this conversation, this chapter can open up the avenues of thought pertinent to viewing theology as improvisation.

I turn to Tracy because we share similar concerns. There are two preliminary concerns that are shared by Tracy and myself that need to be elucidated before entering an elucidation of his thought. The first is the idea that theology should be theocentric. Tracy’s approach to theology reflects his belief in the universality of the divine reality and, subsequently, the universality of the capacity for the experiences of sin and grace. The way that Tracy opens up the ability to have a thoroughgoing theocentric
theology is through his conception of the analogical imagination.\(^1\) Andrew Greeley says his “emphasizes the presence of God in the world and its creatures and relationships and social structures. The analogical imagination stresses the metaphorical dimension of creation as a sacrament of God.”\(^2\) The emphasis on the analogical imagination means theology cannot remain “self-enclosed” within its own set of language games and belief systems but must work collaboratively with others to understand and know God through critical and self-critical means.\(^3\)

The second preliminary concern that David Tracy shares with this project is the public nature of theological discourse. The central question for Tracy, within this concern, is what kind of publicness is demanded by the doctrine of God, specifically in fundamental, systematic, and practical theologies.\(^4\) Tracy explores the way that one can think God publicly in a way that allows the theologian the ability actually to say something about God since because of the analogical imagination, God can be experienced in the sacrament that is creation. For Tracy, this means the embrace of a revisionist, or critically correlational, theology.\(^5\) This type of theology has a dual commitment to the experience of and faith in the God of Jesus Christ and to critical

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\(^3\) Heyer, “How Does Theology Go Public?” 321.

\(^4\) Tracy, *Analogical Imagination*, 56.

approaches to thinking which spring from common human experience and language.\(^6\)

From this dual commitment, a twofold task arises for the theologian: the first task is to enter into a critical conversation with the Christian tradition in a way that the theologian can question the situation in light of the Christian event; and the second task is to develop some criteria of internal coherence so that one can interpret the Christian event in light of the whole symbol system of the religion and one’s contextual situation.\(^7\) The theologian who embraces these dual commitments becomes one who is constantly interpreting and re-interpreting the theological tradition\(^8\) in a way that allows it to encounter the contemporary world and its ways of thinking.

This chapter proposes that viewing theology as improvisation offers a way to navigate these two concerns. In doing this, the chapter sketches a way for the theologian can bridge the gap between the Christian tradition and common human experience and language. In order to accomplish this, the chapter will take four major steps. First, I articulate Tracy’s concern with the problem of totalities in theology and the need for a new way of doing theology in light of pluralism. Second, I turn to Tracy’s explicit work on the naming of God through his turn to the fragment. Third, I offer a discussion on how Tracy goes about constructing a theological “system” through the concept of the gathering of the fragments. Lastly, there is a proposal for a type of theological ethics that

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\(^7\) Tracy, *Analogical Imagination*, 405-6.

\(^8\) One of the things that Tracy finds agreement with and helpful in George Lindbeck is in his continued emphasis on the fact that theologians must interpret a tradition, but not interpret it away or re-invent the tradition. See Tracy, “Lindbeck’s New Program for Theology: A Reflection,” 468-69.
is a natural accompaniment to Tracy’s work: what is termed here an “ethics of resistance.” Through these four moves, the articulation of Tracy’s thought begins to open the kind of thinking that is needed to think theology as improvisation.

A. Theology as Conversation: The Problem of Totality and the Task of Theology

Tracy begins his thinking by mapping the terrain within which theology operates. By doing this, he can outline the kind of problems that exist for theology in its current situation and then proceed to address these through the formation of a theological thinking. For him, the world that theology finds itself in is that defined by a concern for addressing a pluralistic context. This pluralistic context causes issues because “behind the pluralism of theological conclusions lies a pluralism of public roles and publics as a reference group for theological discourse.” Tracy notices that theology has different audiences, whether one is writing to an academic community, to church people, or to those concerned with ethical issues; the theologian has a plurality of audiences. Similarly, there are a plurality of disciplines and groups within which theology finds itself in conversation. Thus, pluralism becomes theology’s predicament both from the

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9 This has been a concern for Tracy throughout his career. See the beginnings in his Blessed Rage for Order: The New Pluralism in Theology (Cambridge: Harper and Row Publishers, 1988), 3-21. In a later essay, Tracy abandons the term “pluralism” for the word “polycentrism,” arguing that our culture is one of many centers. However, I would argue that pluralism and polycentrism are nearly synonymous, so I continue to employ the term pluralism. See David Tracy, “African American Thought: The Discovery of Fragments,” in Black Faith and Public Talk, ed. Dwight N. Hopkins (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1999), 30.

10 Tracy, Analogical Imagination, 5.

11 Ibid., 54-98. Also, a cursory glance at Tracy’s work throughout his life shows him in dialogue with not only other theological/religious disciplines, like biblical studies and the history of religions, but also with other disciplines entirely, such as psychology, anthropology, sociology, economics, and history, to name but a few.
inside and the outside. For Tracy, theology should analyze the pluralistic context and begin to advance a way of thinking that acknowledges this.

Tracy begins by asking why this context arose in the first place. His conclusion is that pluralism is a byproduct of what can broadly be called “modernity.” In its most basic form, the modern is a discourse that moves toward totalization. Modernity pursues a technical reason, seeking hegemony in response to different concepts. The theological impetus prevalent in modernity is that of foundationalism. This approach to theology is dominant, even at the points where theology is hermeneutical, as the hermeneutics developed are to ground the foundation. The foundationalism prevalent in modern approaches to theology results in three separations that Tracy finds problematic: feeling and thought, form and content, and theory and practice. The separation of form and content occurs in modernity when thinkers focus on the form and argue that what appears is simply a “subjective construction” instead of the real being revealed through form; thus, the form becomes devoid of content as it gives nothing. Tracy goes on to argue that if one undoes the separation of form and content, one can also

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14 Tracy, “Traditions of Spiritual Practice and the Practice of Theology,” 235-36.

15 Ibid., 236-38.
undo the other separations. Thus, the focus for Tracy is on the relationship of form and content.

Theology encounters another problem in modernity which arises from these separations and foundationalism: the problem of totality. The problem with thinking in totalities is that this kind of thinking also extends to God/divine. When totalizing discourse is extended to God, the way that theology thinks and names God becomes a series of –isms, whether atheism, theism, deism, agnosticism, etc. In this form of discourse, God is subservient to the form because it totalizes the way that one can think God. This way of thinking theologically becomes a problem if one is going to think God as, for example, infinite or incomprehensible. This undergirding thought for theology in modernity is what Tracy works to undermine. He seeks a form for thinking God that is non-totalizing as it embraces a multiplicity of voices from multiple contexts. In a post-modern world theology is to be done in a non-totalizing way.

In order to counter the totalizing tendencies of modern thought, Tracy calls into question the unthought of modernity. There are two notable places that Tracy focuses his

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16 Ibid., 238-41. Tracy focuses almost exclusively on the separation of form and content, trying to understand how reimagine ways that form can again carry meaning the way it did for Plato and early Christian (as well as Jewish and Muslim) thinkers.


18 For a further explanation of this problem, see Nathan Crawford, “Theology as Improvisation: Seeking the Unstructured Form of Theology with David Tracy,” Irish Theological Quarterly 75, no. 3 (August 2010), 300-12.

19 Here, it is also pertinent to note that Tracy does not use the terms “premodernity,” “modernity,” and “postmodernity” as actual historical epochs, but strictly as heuristic devices. This avoids part of the criticism Derrida levels at Tracy. See David Tracy, “Fragments: The Spiritual Situation of our Times,” 170-184. This includes the response of Derrida and the ensuing dialogue between the two.
critique of modernity: the first is “the unreality of modernity’s belief in self-presence in modernity’s self-understanding as the present [and] the unreality of the modern understanding of the autonomous, self-grounding self.” Tracy believes the belief in self-presence and the autonomous self are onto-theological constructions. Tracy undercuts the move to totalization in modernity and onto-theology by arguing that two cornerstones of modernity are actually false realities. In doing this, he is able to remove the apparatus that allows for totalizing discourse by removing two of the central components that give rise to the foundationalism which gives rise to totalizing discourse—self-presence and the autonomous self. The move Tracy will make, then, is to analyze the way that form is a mediator, which will lead to forms that are non-constraining and, thus, non-totalizing.

However, a current and consistent critique of Tracy comes to the fore. The critique acknowledges that he may be ushering in a post-modern way of doing theology with his critique and rejection of Enlightenment views of rationality. However, the critique continues by saying Tracy’s theology is “thoroughly modern in his concern to correlate the gospel with human experience though now this experience is understood in a deeply pluralistic fashion.” Thus, Richard Lints associates Tracy’s method of correlation with Paul Tillich’s, which argued that the questions asked by a culture or

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context could be given answers by theology. Tracy’s method of correlation is much more complex, dealing with issues of ambiguity and pluralism by taking into account hermeneutics and deconstruction. In this vein, Tracy’s thought is thoroughly post-modern as it is non-foundationalist, opening correlational methodologies for theology to the internal and structural critiques that come from many post-modern thinkers.

For Tracy, this conception of theology is ideal for postmodernity, which is the situation within which theology currently finds itself. He finds a way of thinking about what this form may resemble for a postmodern theology by turning to the nonconstraining nature of conversation and dialogue. He turns to conversation because epistemology has to be rethought by moving from the analogy of building a house to a way of thinking that is more akin to telling a story or conversing with others. The result is not a loss of the publicness of one’s theology; rather, Tracy sees this epistemological move to conversation as a way of increasing public rationality as there is a greater

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23 See David Tracy, *Plurality and Ambiguity: Hermeneutics, Religion, Hope* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1987). In this vein, it would be important for Lints and other critics of Tracy to read works beyond *Blessed Rage for Order* (and even *Analogical Imagination*), a work that Tracy has critiqued at times. His critics would do well to deal with how Tracy develops his theological thinking, especially in the last twenty years with his turn to thinking specifically about how to think and name God.


plurality of voices engaged.\textsuperscript{26} The theological form of conversation offers a non-constraining form for theology that seeks to have multiple dialogue partners.

Conversation and dialogue offer a “strategy for possibility” for theology in the postmodern world. This strategy is useful because of the pluralistic nature that is prevalent in the postmodern context.\textsuperscript{27} Postmodernity, for Tracy, is what comes after, and reacts to, modernity. The reaction that Tracy has against modernity is its embrace of a discourse that moves toward totalization. Modernity pursues a technical reason which seeks hegemony in response to different concepts.\textsuperscript{28} An example (dealt with more fully later) is the naming of God. Modernity seeks to offer the correct “-ism” for God, which is “the correct set of abstract propositions which name and think God.”\textsuperscript{29} While modern thinking seeks to systematize all things within a self-grounding reason, postmodernity tries to let God be God again through “disrupting historical consciousness, unmasking the pretensions of modern rationality, demanding that attention be paid to all those others forgotten and marginalized by the modern project. \textit{Theos} has returned to unsettle the dominance of the modern \textit{logos}.”\textsuperscript{30} In part because of this penchant for dialogue and

\textsuperscript{26} Lints, “The Postpositivist Choice: Tracy or Lindbeck?” 664-65.

\textsuperscript{27} McCarthy, “David Tracy,” 472 and 474.

\textsuperscript{28} David Tracy, “Literary Theory and Return of the Forms for Naming and Thinking God in Theology,” \textit{Journal of Religion} 74, no. 3(July 1994), 304.

\textsuperscript{29} Ibid., 307.

\textsuperscript{30} David Tracy, \textit{On Naming the Present: Reflections on God, Hermeneutics, and Church} (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1994), 37.
conversation, a theology that occurs in postmodernity seeks alternatives for thinking God in otherness, difference, transgression and excess.\textsuperscript{31}

However, as an heir of modernity, postmodernity is not altogether innocent.\textsuperscript{32} For Tracy, the way to move forward with a critique of totalization in postmodernity is through the “linguistic turn”\textsuperscript{33} which he sees as reintroducing “society and history into all notions of reality and truth.”\textsuperscript{34} The linguistic turn makes it necessary and appropriate to ask who is asking the question of God.\textsuperscript{35} Tracy critiques modern thought’s impetus to totalization when he turns to the particularity of language, pointing to language’s self-deconstructing, non-grounding play of signifiers which does not allow for a transcendental signified.\textsuperscript{36} Here, the theologian sees the inescapability of language with the historical limitations and ambiguity of all discourse, including central Christian texts.\textsuperscript{37} For the theologian, language functions not just as a mediator of truth but is the ultimate mediator. Following Heidegger and Wittgenstein, Tracy makes the claim that all

\begin{itemize}
  \item[32] Ibid., 106.
  \item[33] David Tracy, \textit{Plurality and Ambiguity}, 47. Tracy says that the linguist turn is “an uncannily interruptive exploration of the radical plurality in language, knowledge, and reality alike” (\textit{Plurality and Ambiguity}, 47).
  \item[34] Tracy, \textit{Plurality and Ambiguity}, 50.
  \item[37] Lints, “The Postpositivist Choice: Tracy or Lindbeck?” 668.
\end{itemize}
of reality is disclosed through language. Thus, theology functions in a hermeneutical way that “waits and listens for” the disclosure of the whole of reality in the multiplicity of linguistic forms available to a thinker.

As Tracy analyzes the current situation and attempts to find forms and ways of thinking that allow for an appropriate thinking of God in the postmodern, he discovers that even the Christian tradition itself is pluralistic. He finds this especially in the Gospels where each is a different narrative in response to the one event of Jesus Christ. The different Gospels also allow a series of interpretations of this event of Jesus Christ to develop in subsequent traditions, developing theology into a thoroughly pluralistic phenomenon over the centuries. Christian theology is in its essence a necessarily pluralistic discipline. Thus, conversation and dialogue are necessary to theology as they allow for the ability to understand the multiplicity of ways that people think and name God, whether strictly orthodox or outside of the established tradition.

The account that Tracy offers here differs from postliberal accounts of the way that theology should be conducted. Postliberals—like Hans Frei, George Lindbeck, and William Placher—understand theology as a unified discipline with one essence that is


39 Ibid., 51. Tracy draws the idea that the theologian should “wait and listen” from Heidegger.

40 Tracy first notices this in *Blessed Rage for Order: The New Pluralism in Theology*.

41 David Tracy, *Analogical Imagination*, 378. Tracy does not believe, though, that this pluralism is inappropriate to Christian theology though, saying “Pluralism is not only a fact present throughout Christian history from the New Testament period to today; any pluralism faithful to original witnesses and the need for diverse expressions is in principle an enrichment of Christian consciousness” (*Analogical Imagination*, 319).
described in the language of the tradition and the church. For Lindbeck, this descriptive task is so that one can experience the world in the way that the religion describes; thus, the goal is not knowledge as much as being religious in the right ways according to the tradition.\textsuperscript{42} The task of the theologian is to be strictly descriptive, offering an account of what the tradition and church believe in their linguistic framework.\textsuperscript{43} However, as Tracy makes clear, this type of theology actually works in a prescriptive way as there is no one tradition or one church, but a plurality of ways of thinking in the multiplicity of traditions and churches in Christianity. The pluralistic nature of Christian theology opens the fact that interpretation itself will be pluralistic.\textsuperscript{44} For Tracy, this pluralism means theology has two primary tasks: first, theology must critically interpret the tradition, not simply through repetition, but through a mediation of the event which offers an interpretation of the situation; and, second, theology must interpret the situation and event within the whole symbol system of Christianity, developing criteria of internal coherence, even if this is incomplete.\textsuperscript{45} This makes theology an inherently hermeneutical discipline.

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  \item \textsuperscript{42}George A. Lindbeck, \textit{The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age} (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1984), 35-36.
  \item \textsuperscript{43}This is the argument of William Placher, “Revisionist and Postliberal Theologies and the Public Character of Theology,” \textit{Thomist} 49 (1985), 392-406. Placher says that accepting a doctrine entails an agreement to “speak and act in particular ways…” (397). This quote points to the idea that the goal of postliberal theology is descriptive in that theology espouses doctrines for people to believe, through speaking and acting, in certain ways. He goes on to say that theology merely articulates the rules for “using language in a properly Christian fashion” (398). Thus, Placher argues that theology, in this postliberal mode, sets forth a language, through the description of doctrines, for the Christian community to use to speak and act correctly. However, I would argue that this explicitly ignores the pluralism within the Christian tradition.
\end{itemize}
For Tracy, as a hermeneutical enterprise within a pluralistic situation, theology does not seek conflict or argument, but genuine conversation\textsuperscript{46} between its own tradition and the contemporary situation.\textsuperscript{47} As a text provokes questioning on the part of the interpreter, there should be an entering into “the logic of question and response of the subject-matter of the text.”\textsuperscript{48} Drawing on Kenneth Burke, he argues that the attempt to purify the various conflicting interpretations of the world at work comes through conversation.\textsuperscript{49} However, this purification is ongoing, open-ended, not seeking closure. Conversation is a discourse that is concerned with not only accepting, but actually encountering otherness and difference. Theology in the postmodern milieu seeks openness to dialogue with the other as the other comes in difference, transgression and excess. The goal is to converse in a back-and-forth movement. The conversation partners for theology become those who are asking the questions of the situation while

\textsuperscript{45} Tracy, \textit{Analogical Imagination}, 405-7. The criteria of internal coherence Tracy advocates can never be complete, but are only a “rough sketch” as to how the symbols work together.

\textsuperscript{46} For Tracy, conversation, as he describes it, is the hope, the ideal. However, he also recognizes that in the current situation conflict is humanity’s actuality. See \textit{Analogical Imagination}, 363. He also sees argument as carrying a positive into conversation, as something needed to move a conversation forward at given times (\textit{Plurality and Ambiguity}, 23). However, the argument is subsumed under conversation with its impetus on respect and sincerity towards the other, that all are equals in the conversation, and a willingness to engage all evidence and ideas that are relevant (\textit{Plurality and Ambiguity}, 26).

\textsuperscript{47} Tracy, \textit{Analogical Imagination}, 363. See also \textit{Plurality and Ambiguity}, 1-27.

\textsuperscript{48} Tracy, “Hermeneutical Reflections in the New Paradigm,” 41.

being in dialogue with the classics, whether sociologists, philosophers, biologists, painters, poets, etc.  

However, this idea of theology as conversation is not without its criticisms. There are two that are quite valid and offer a way for better understanding the way that Tracy will develop this way of thinking theologically. The first comes from Nicholas Lash, who criticizes Tracy by arguing that Tracy’s notion of theology as conversation is too idealistic. Lash says that Tracy’s conception of conversation is extremely rare and difficult to attain. Lash also criticizes Tracy by noticing that conversations tend to “drown out” different voices, like the poor and oppressed, while privileging more dominant voices. Thus, Lash’s critique focuses on the problematic nature and conception of conversation that Tracy develops. The second critique comes from Kristin Heyer who also critiques Tracy’s model of conversation. She says he “remains vague regarding who constitute the members of the global conversation he proposes and whether or not it is a this-worldly possibility.” The critiques of both Heyer and Lash are valid and indicate where Tracy is vulnerable.

Tracy answers the criticisms by arguing that theology is indeed conversation and broadens the people who can be part of such a conversation. This means that the contemporary situation can put questions of the poor and oppressed to theology as they

50 Tracy, Analogue Imagination, 345.


52 Ibid., 52-53.

arise. The interaction that takes place in the conversation between the multiple voices, including theologians, the oppressed, philosophy, critical theory, etc., ultimately discloses the ways of dealing with the problems that come to the fore in our culture.\textsuperscript{54} Thus, conversation is the answer for Tracy, but only when it includes a number of dialogue partners.\textsuperscript{55} As such, conversation is a way of dealing with the interaction between text/tradition and interpreter.\textsuperscript{56} In fact, Werner Jeanrond argues that Tracy’s hermeneutics is one where the text and reader stand in a dialectical relationship to each other, where there is the possibility of the interpreter being changed through the interaction.\textsuperscript{57} Tracy’s model of the game explicates the point Jeanrond is attempting to make. In this example, the emphasis is on how one is immersed in the game, in the rules of the game, in the playing of the game, etc. When a player enters a game this person is now a participant. By entering the game there is a transformation of the person. This transformation moves the person from one who merely observes to one who is involved and is released to “do” the game. Only the participant is actually involved in the game.\textsuperscript{58} This has implications for the nature of interpretation, as one must be able to play the game by entering into the


\textsuperscript{55} Tracy explicitly broadens the conversation partners and the horizon of the conversation in his later works, as will be seen more clearly in the next three sections of the chapter.

\textsuperscript{56} For more on the nature of Tracy’s theological hermeneutics as conversation, see Sanks, “David Tracy’s Theological Project: An Overview and Some Implications,” 719-721.

\textsuperscript{57} Werner G. Jeanrond, *Text and Interpretation as Categories of Theological Thinking*, trans. Thomas J. Wilson (Dublin: Gill and MacMillan, 1988), 134-35. Also see Jeanrond’s criticism of Tracy’s Tracy’s hermeneutic here on pages 135-141.

\textsuperscript{58} Tracy, “Hermeneutical Reflections in the New Paradigm,” 40-41.
multiplicity of “possibilities suggested by others” as they enter into the search for truth; however, this is in a conversation with others.\textsuperscript{59} One learns to enter into the conversation of theology through a training of the imagination to enter into a dialogue across times, texts, translations, being able to engage the other as other, and still follow the multiplicity of ways opened for thinking God.\textsuperscript{60}

The way that the theologian enters into the multiplicity of possibilities opened through the conversation is by asking questions. For Tracy conversation is “questioning itself. It is a willingness to follow the question wherever it may go. It is dia-logue.”\textsuperscript{61} Conversation follows a question in search of the possibilities of truth, necessarily allowing otherness and difference to come to the fore, always with the recognition that the different and the other could become the possible.\textsuperscript{62} It is also important to note in a conversation that there is an “inevitable presence of our own pre-understanding and pre-judgments.”\textsuperscript{63} It is important to understand one’s own presuppositions as one enters the conversation. This allows a more genuine and fruitful conversation to develop.\textsuperscript{64}

To describe conversation, Tracy turns to the Platonic dialogues. He says that the Platonic dialogue makes clear that “real conversation occurs only when the individual

\textsuperscript{59} Tracy, \textit{Plurality and Ambiguity}, 19.
\textsuperscript{60} Ibid., 20.
\textsuperscript{61} Ibid., 18.
\textsuperscript{62} Ibid., 19-20.
\textsuperscript{63} Tracy, “Hermeneutical Reflections in the New Paradigm,” 42.
conversation partners move past self-consciousness and self-aggrandizement into joint reflection upon the subject matter of the conversation.”

A conversation in this vein employs a back-and-forth movement that consists of “an ability to listen, to reflect, to correct, to speak to the point—the ability, in sum, to allow the question to take over.”

Tracy says the “subject matter, the questions and responses, are allowed to take over.”

This has three implications: first, the dialogue is more interested in the question than the answer; second, to inquire truly provokes more inquiry; and, third, the inquiry that takes place is directed to the horizons of the inquirers. The dialogue is meant to work through the problem in a way that confronts those involved with their own existential self-understandings, throwing themselves into question by revealing their own “possibilities, complexities, and limits.”

The turn to Plato allows Tracy to note the concern with what kind of person can actually enter into the dialogue. Thus, Tracy’s turn to Plato is because he finds himself sharing the same hope that Plato had in his first Western academy: “a slow shift of

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66 Ibid., 101.


69 Ibid., 137.

70 Ibid., 138.

attachments, a painstaking education of desire—an education like that which Plato foresaw as our best, and perhaps our only hope for both living and thinking well. Even metaphysics and the next abstract theology serve not only an intellectual but spiritual purpose: another great barrier against our natural egoism, another form to sharpen our attention.\textsuperscript{72} Tracy is arguing for the correct attunement of the one entering into a dialogue through the overcoming of one’s natural egoism by directing attention outside of oneself. Such an attunement leads to the development of an attentiveness to those ways of thinking that are outside one’s own.\textsuperscript{73} This is shown explicitly when Tracy follows up the goal of the Platonic dialogues with an exhortation to follow Bernard Lonergan’s transcendental precepts: “Be attentive, be intelligent, be reasonable, be responsible, be loving, and, if necessary, change.”\textsuperscript{74} The formation that takes place orients one in a way to bring certain elements to the conversation that may not be present through knowing oneself.

However, many interpreters of Tracy, especially the ones focused on his earlier works, have agreed that his thought focuses on finding some kind of common, rational ground and/or criteria for theology. William Placher says that Tracy seems to “presuppose a universal human something-or-other which various religions, in their various ways, express” and that this is the same among all people.\textsuperscript{75} Placher and others accuse Tracy of being a foundationalist. However, these thinkers miss the point that  

\textsuperscript{72} Tracy, “Traditions of Spiritual Practice and the Practice of Theology,” 240.  
\textsuperscript{73} Tracy, “On Theological Education: A Reflection,” 19-20.  
\textsuperscript{74} Tracy, “Traditions of Spiritual Practice and the Practice of Theology,” 241.  
\textsuperscript{75} Placher, “Revisionist and Postliberal Theologies and the Public Character of Theology,” 397.
Tracy simply makes the assumption that there is a religious dimension to human life, but he is not saying that this dimension is the same for all people. However, David Kamitsuka also critiques Tracy in this vein, saying that Tracy is looking to ground his explication of conversation and dialogue in the notion of community. Kamitsuka develops this critique thoroughly through an evaluation of Tracy’s hermeneutic for reading Scripture; here he says that Tracy wants to build upon a common human experience that provides a common criterion to all people for their thinking. He also says that Tracy’s scriptural hermeneutic requires an ecumenical consensus that is not present in the Christian tradition, let alone in the current context. John Vissers offers a good summary of this critique when he says that Tracy believes “the systematic theologian cannot engage in public conversation without first yielding to another analysis of reality.” These critiques are all dependent upon the reading of Tracy as a foundationalist who wants to ground his theological thinking in a foreign conception of reality. By grounding his theology in a different, non-theological discourse, these critics argue that Tracy tries to articulate a foundation upon which all theology can be built.

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76 Here, Kristin Heyer is in agreement. See Heyer, “How Does Theology Go Public?” Heyer argues that Tracy’s account offers the most coherent balance between the tradition of Christian theology and the postmodern, pluralistic context that is the contemporary situation.


78 Ibid., 114ff.

79 Ibid., 132.

Tracy offers a response to these different criticisms by returning to the notion of theology as conversation. The Platonic dialogues, he says, exemplify the open-endedness that must be the main component of any attempt at conversation with others. This open-endedness shows three different Platonic presuppositions at work in conversation: first, there is a priority of the question over the answer in true inquiry; second, true inquiry provokes further inquiry in that any answer raises more questions; and, third, the type of inquiry involved in conversation is directed to horizons of inquirers, which means the conversants set the agenda for the conversation. These three presuppositions at work lead Tracy to offer two more components of any conversation: first, that the conversation is not an argument in that there is no winner, but only an attempt to inquire as to what the truth or meaning of a situation is; and, second, dialogue leads to the questioning of the assumptions of the various participants through the perpetuation of open-ended inquiry that leads one to reexamine the horizons of thought in which one is involved. Werner Jeanrond points to the openness not only of the participants but also of the self that is involved in inquiry. Jeanrond notices that the involvement of the self in inquiry also necessitates, for Tracy, a willingness to engage different ideas and people and, if necessary, to change based upon the nature of the inquiry. The one involved in a conversation must always be open to revision if a true conversation is going to take place. This dialogue, then, allows a self-realization that the subject is “in-process”

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82 Ibid., 135.

83 Ibid., 134-35 and 137.
which leads to the proper framing of reason in its own “possibilities, complexities, and limits,” which are revealed through the dialogue with others who show the participants and the self the blind spots in one’s thinking.  

Tracy argues that participation in the conversation only comes through the right formation of the thinker. This means that one learns to live in a pluralistic world and engage in a multitude of discourses with a number of different people and groups. The reason that this formation is important for the theologian is because religion lives through the entering of a critical community of inquiry which would lead the religious thinker into a conversation with those engaging in such inquiry. The formation of the theologian involves education, where one learns to be involved in such a conversation through learning and internalizing the contemporary context and the Christian tradition. The theologian becomes the one who actually does the discipline of theology, which for Tracy is “where action and thought, academy and church, faith and reason, the community of inquiry and the community of commitment and faith are most explicitly and systematically brought together.”

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84 Jeanrond, Text and Interpretation as Categories of Theological Thinking, 148.
86 Tracy, “Traditions of Spiritual Practice and the Practice of Theology,” 238.
88 Ibid., 13.
89 Ibid., 15.
The task of the systematic theologian is to “interpret the classic of her or his particular religious tradition.” Tracy believes in this because of the hermeneutical nature of theology. The theologian is one who is “nothing more nor less than an interpreter of the religious classics of a culture.” The classic is a text within a tradition or culture that discloses the reality, the whole, of that tradition as something that is simply given and must be accepted and recognized. The classic is defined by containing two basic components: first, it has a radical stability as it has become a permanent part of a tradition and/ or culture while, second, also containing a radical instability since it has an “excess of meaning through ever-changing receptions.” These two components lead to its interpretation. The interpretation of the classic occurs through its thoroughly particular position as something entrenched in a culture. Due to this entrenchment the classic can never be fully understood. However, it still reaches out from its own historical context and demands to be interpreted. Tracy argues that for

90 Sanks, “David Tracy’s Theological Project: An Overview and Some Implications,” 715. For an overview of Tracy’s notion of the classic, see Vissers, “Interpreting the Classic: The Hermeneutical Character of David Tracy’s Theology in Analogical Imagination.” However, Vissers’ account contains a number of major flaws (which are dealt with in Tracy’s Plurality and Ambiguity): first, Vissers holds to a static notion of truth and extends this to Tracy’s theology, even though Tracy obviously has a much more dynamic notion of truth; second, Vissers does not understand the nature of hermeneutics, which is, at its most basic, a phenomenology of the way interpretation occurs, leading to a description of how people interpret texts instead of being a prescriptive discipline as Vissers accuses Tracy of being involved in (see 203); lastly, Vissers fails to comprehend how Tracy can make claims to universality while also being aware and advocating the historical and finite nature of human interpretation (202-4). All in all, then, Vissers’ account must be accompanied with a critical eye.

91 Tracy, Analogical Imagination, 154-55.

92 Ibid., 177 and 201.

93 Tracy, Plurality and Ambiguity, 14.

94 Ibid., 17. Andrew Greeley gives a sociological underpinning to Tracy’s claim about the classic here in his article “Theology and Sociology: Validating David Tracy.”
historically informed interpreters there needs to be a return “to the task of understanding by conversing with the claim to attention of classic texts and events.” The theologian is the one who enters into conversation with the classics of the tradition so that they may be interpreted for the present.

Part of his discussion on the classic is Tracy’s focus on intensification. He frames the discussion by discussing how one may produce a classic. For Tracy, the classic is produced by “undertaking the journey of intensification into particularity.” This journey is “…to the point where an originating sense for the fundamental questions and feelings that impels us all, and a rare response in thought and feeling to those questions, is experienced…” The one who produces the classic has a unique, particular experience that compels her to create something that speaks to that experience. The creation of the classic is an attempt to understand the moment one experienced that made one question one’s fundamental feelings. The producer of the classic feels like one must create in order to speak to “certain essential truths which…touch human existence by their immediacy and irreplaceability.” In the creation of the classic, therefore, is a moment of distanciation due to intensification. This distanciation results from the “intense and paradigmatic experience” one has. This distanciation, though, is essential for one to be able to speak to the nature of the experience in the classic. The distanciation from the

95 Ibid., 39.
96 Tracy, Analogical Imagination, 125.
97 Ibid., 126.
98 Ibid., 127.
experience means that one needs a way of bridging the gap between the experience and the creation of the classic. Tracy argues this happens through the use of imagination which is “the correlative intensification power which produces in language that which the work expresses.” Tracy goes on to say, “The classic text is produced only when imagination at work, in a work, impels, drives, frees the creator to express the meaning…of the work in the work.” The end of the journey of intensification is the creation of the classic whereby one communicates a particular experience through a work that transcends oneself. Intensification also produces a work that avoids closure as any attempt at explaining the experience would destroy the very nature of said experience. For Tracy, the journey of intensification results in a way of thinking that plays with genre in order to find what is appropriate to speak to the meaning and experience of the self transcended in the work of the classic.

Theology becomes a conversation with the classics of a tradition, specifically the theological tradition. This conversation with the classics joins the theologian to the entire community that has gone about interpreting these texts and events. By entering the conversation on the interpretation of the classics, the theologian enters a “world of meaning and truth offering no certainty but promising some realized experience of the

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99 Ibid., 128.

100 Ibid., 129.

101 Ibid., 133-34.

102 Tracy, “Can Virtue Be Taught? Education, Character, and the Soul,” 147. However, as Werner Jeanrond says, it should also be noted that the engagement with these classics is not uncritically, blindly accepting whatever the classic says; rather, this conversation is “assessed by the community of believers” to ensure that no ideology or “blind faith” seeps into the conversation (see Jeanrond, Text and Interpretation as Categories for Theological Thinking, 142).
whole by the power of the whole.”¹⁰³ This world is that which the classic discloses so that the theologian can think and rethink what it means to think and name God. This disclosure, though, is never controlled and completely comprehensible as it is the disclosure of the experience of the radical mystery of God which results in an “uncontrollable incomprehensibility.”¹⁰⁴ The conversation the theologian enters with the classic is concerned with saying something about that which one cannot really say anything—the radical mystery and incomprehensibility of God. Yet, the belief exists that these classics do disclose some reality of the nature of the divine. The theologian, in conversation with the classic, is caught in the “back-and-forth movement” of trying to say something about God while also acknowledging that all truth about God is incomprehensible.¹⁰⁵

B. Naming God: The Turn to Form through the Fragment

The next step of my argument consists outlining why it is that thinking theology as improvisation is a possibility. The way forward is to begin to understand what it is that theology is conversing about. For Tracy, theology is a conversation about what it means to think and name God.¹⁰⁶ To this point, in the first three chapters, I have stressed

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¹⁰³ Tracy, *Analogical Imagination*, 177. Here Tracy seems to be advocating a return to a theology that seeks a whole or that tries to grasp the whole, even though there is never any certainty of this. In his later work, however, I argue that Tracy would not engage language of the whole but would look to the language of form and fragment for expressing this sentiment.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 177.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 154.

¹⁰⁶ For an analysis of the continuity of Tracy’s movement from primarily methodological concerns to his thinking on how one names and thinks God, see Gaspar Martinez, *Confronting the Mystery of God: Political, Liberation, and Public Theologies* (New York and London: Continuum, 2001), 152-215.
a way of thinking that is concerned with attunement to the other and how the thinker can be attentive to this other and to “groove” with this other, finding a rhythm with the other. In this chapter, I have also discussed how theology is a conversation concerned with what it means to think and name God. Thus, the argument throughout the rest of the chapter details how theology can open possibilities for thinking and naming God. The form that I consistently turn to is that of “fragment.”

Tracy turns to the fragment because he finds in this form a way of confronting the totalizing discourse prevalent in modernity and critiqued in postmodernity. Postmodern ways of thinking confront the totalizing discourse of modernity through the turn to the other, to the excessive, and to the transgressive. Theology searches for forms that show a way through the attempt to totalize God-talk, allowing the idea of God to touch upon the reality of the God espoused in theology and breaking any whole that may be forced upon the thinking of God. The result is an attempt to find a form that communicates the content that theology wants to share in reference to God. Thus, the naming of God in the postmodern context turns to those forms that reveal the excessive and transgressive nature of the revelation of God, trying to match the content of this excessiveness with an appropriate form for God, all the while aware that this form is incomplete.


109 Another critique made of David Tracy is that he is constructing an approach to the idea of God that is overly metaphysical and indebted to modernist approaches, specifically pantheists (See John J. O’Donnell, S.J., “Transcendental Approaches to the Doctrine of God,” *Gregorianium* 77, no. 4 (1996): 659-676). However, if these critics would take the time to read Tracy’s later work, they would see that this
that are used for God, then, uncover the underside of theology by exploring the “shattering otherness” of God.¹¹⁰ This shattering otherness of God becomes an interrupting force to any discourse on God.¹¹¹ The interruption comes when the elements of excess, transgression, and otherness are present in discourse on God. The search Tracy and I share is for the form(s) that allows thinking God with an awareness of God as interruptive force.¹¹²

At this point it is important to examine why form is important for Tracy’s theology. He turns to the idea of forms because he believes “[t]here can be no ideas free of the web of language. There are no pure messages. Whatever message comes, whatever subject matter is understood, comes by means of its forms, whether the text is as short as a proverb or as long as an epic.”¹¹³ Within Western thought, the idea of form becomes even more necessary as it has been central since the time of Plato for how an object or a phenomenon appears. Plato sets the trajectory of Western thought by articulating the cosmic harmony within which a form can communicate a certain kind of content. The role form, drawn from the Greeks, is to give a preliminary coherence to the cosmos.¹¹⁴

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¹¹⁰ Tracy, “Theology and the Many Faces of Postmodernity,” 108.

¹¹¹ Ibid., 109-10.

¹¹² Ibid., 109.

¹¹³ Tracy, Plurality and Ambiguity, 43.

¹¹⁴ Tracy, “Traditions of Spiritual Practice and the Practice of Theology,” 237.
From the Greeks, Tracy adopts the importance of form and sees that form is central in monotheism. In monotheism, God is the creator of form. This leads Tracy to say that “form prevails through the Creator-God’s formal, immanent causality. For Christian thought, the doctrine of the Word grounded this reality of form in the central Christian doctrines of Christology and Trinity.”\textsuperscript{115} In monotheism, form and content become linked together because God—the content—creates the form. Monotheistic theologies focus on finding appropriate forms for the content of the belief in God. The first question theology asks is “who is God as God has named Godself in and through all the form of God’s biblical names…”\textsuperscript{116} This can also be extended to the way that traditions understand God as God has been revealed in the traditions. The focus is not on the limits of human understanding but on the divine and how comprehensible, or incomprehensible, this divinity is. Here, the form used to think God becomes linked with the content one is trying to understand this God through.\textsuperscript{117}

Christian theology, however, differs from the strict monotheism of other religions through its belief in the Trinity and the corollary belief in the incarnation of the Second Person of the Trinity. Due to these beliefs, the centrality of form is necessary to any Christian theology faithful to the “incarnational principle” of Word as Logos, where God takes on \textit{human form}. This necessity of form comes through the belief that the Word as

\textsuperscript{115} Ibid., 237.

\textsuperscript{116} Tracy, “Literary Theory and Return of the Forms for Naming and Thinking God in Theology,” 309-10.

\textsuperscript{117} Tracy, “The Hermeneutics of Naming God,” 262.
Logos is manifested in and through form. Due to this incarnational principle, Tracy argues that theology should take christomorphic form as this makes theology able to reflect the idea that Jesus Christ is the form-of-forms, the divine-human form. In keeping with this christomorphic focus, the forms that Tracy finds helpful are those that point to how Jesus Christ came into the world, as a transgressive and excessive phenomenon, exploding the traditional forms used to think God. The type of form preferred by Tracy is those that emphasize the excess of God as well as God’s interruptive and disruptive nature through the inbreaking as demonstrated in the incarnation of the Second Person of the Trinity.

Tracy believes that he finds a form for an appropriate thinking of God in the fragment. He turns to the fragment because this is a form that seeks to “shatter any reigning totality system” through a recovery of “once-forgotten, marginalized, and repressed realities.” The fragment does not allow the whole to continue by showing the inadequacy of every whole to offer a proper explanation. The fragment does so by bringing to the fore the other and the different, those entities within the system that do not allow any closure. The fragment arises in the postmodern context where there is a

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118 Tracy, “Traditions of Spiritual Practice and the Practice of Theology,” 238.
119 Tracy, “Theology and the Many Faces of Postmodernity,” 111.
123 Ibid., 171. As Tracy shows, this is quite different, contra Derrida, than the Romantic uptake of the form fragments. The Romantics picked up the fragment due to a longing for the whole; the postmodern, on the other hand, turns to fragments because they show the instability of any system, revealing the other and difference. Along with “Fragments: The Spiritual Situation of Our Times” see
focus on the “once forgotten, marginalized, and repressed realities” that were ignored in modernity; religion offers place for the recovery of these ignored, repressed forms through the embracing of those realities that do not fall into any systematic categories or totalizations, most notably the idea of God. Thus, the fragment’s concern is to resist the resists totalizing nature of discourse.

The turn to the fragment accomplishes three necessary tasks on the way to being able properly to think and name God. First, the fragment allows one to see the fragmented nature of both modernity and postmodernity, understanding that no discourse or way of thinking can offer a total explanation for the way things are. Second, the turn to the fragment encourages the letting go of any totalizing system. Tracy wants to “[f]ocus instead on the explosive, marginal, saturated, and, at times, auratic fragments of our heritage…Blast the marginalized fragments of the past alive with the memory of suffering and hope; remove from their seemingly coherent place in the grand narratives we have imposed upon them.” The fragments disrupt ways of thinking people have now taken for granted. Lastly, the fragment opens a way of thinking God that focuses on the incomprehensibility of God and relates this to the non-closure of all things in the


Ibid., 171.


Ibid., 179.

Ibid., 179.
universe. These three tasks of the fragment show the inability of any discourse to think God adequately. They do so by showing where discourse about God breaks open to allow the irruption of the divine.  

At this point, Tracy wants to differentiate his approach to fragments from previous ones that he finds inadequate. The first approach to fragments that Tracy mentions comes from what he terms “radical conservatives.” These thinkers view the fragments as the only remnant of what was a once-unified Western culture. The radical conservatives look to the fragment with both regret and nostalgia for a world that once was but is no more. For Tracy, T.S. Eliot, especially his poems *The Four Quartets*, typifies this position. The second approach comes from postmoderns. Postmoderns look to the fragments as those pieces that free one from a system or totality. The view of the fragment by the postmoderns partly explains the “return of religion” as religion is the “feared other” of the Enlightenment. These thinkers look for fragments in their most excessive and transgressive forms as these call into question the Enlightenment while avoiding the forming of any totality. Tracy finds these two views of fragments inadequate as they do not fully appreciate the nature of the fragment. The conservatives

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128 Ibid., 180.
130 Tracy, “African American Thought: The Discovery of Fragments,” 32.
131 Ibid., “Fragments: The Spiritual Situation of Our Times,” 173-76.
134 Ibid., 177-78.
do not really want the existence of fragments but accept them as a reminder of the
gotten whole. Postmoderns have a more positive view of the fragment, but only as
that which breaks the totality and, thus, do not appreciate the full range of possibilities
available to this form.

Tracy endorses a third approach, one that is explicitly theological and
philosophical. He views the “fragments even more positively than the postmoderns as
bearers of hope, for some form of redemption in our own time, if we could but attend to
them.” With this approach, the fragment does something more than just break
totalities: it offers hope and opens up certain possibilities. The fragment does this
through its preferences for the marginal aspects and people of history, those events that
“recall forgotten, even repressed memories,” giving hope, and possibly redemption, to
those who were ostracized, forgotten, and/ or repressed. For Tracy, the result of
preferring this approach to the fragment is a vibrant religion that grounds itself within its
most transgressive and excessive elements, the same elements that lead to irruption and
fragment.

Tracy next turns to finding those discourses within theology that are fragmentary
and give themselves to thinking God in this fragmentary way. The two discourses that
Tracy turns to are the mystical and prophetic. He takes up these forms of discourse
because they are pieces of the Christian tradition that play to the transgressive and

excessive nature of God. He shows that these two discourses operate within modernity on the underside of theology. Tracy also chooses these forms as they reflect the two classic forms for understanding God’s reality, as love and intelligence. However, within the postmodern context, these forms return. They return in a way that fragments the hegemonic thinking on God that occurred in much of modernity. This fragmenting of these forms leads, in the postmodern, to a place where all forms for thinking God are subject to such an unstructuring.\textsuperscript{138}

Tracy’s project begins with a discussion of the mystical form. While analyzing the mystical form, he notices that within mystical language there is a destabilizing force at work. This force comes from the desire of the mystic to “say something” while recognizing one’s own inability to say anything concretely about God. The mystical “says something” through a constant play of signifiers relating to God, creating an unpredictability to the language and postponing of any attempt at closure.\textsuperscript{139} Following the thought of Jacques Lacan, Tracy notices that there are two general moves at work in much mystical discourse. The first is to reduce the world, especially that which is portrayed in Scripture, to its most basic elements: God, world, and soul. This reduction occurs so that the mystic may order and view the structural relationships between these. Second, the mystic uses a language that reflects a radical turn in the mystical experience, following Dionysius, Eckhart, and Eriugena. This turn is to see the basic elements of God, world and soul dissolving into each other so that they are self-dissolving and self-

\textsuperscript{138} Tracy, \textit{On Naming the Present}, 44-45.

\textsuperscript{139} Tracy, “Prophetic Rhetoric and Mystical Rhetoric,” 192.
negating. The mystic turns to language and a way of thinking God that reflects this simultaneous radical otherness and radical intimacy that exists between God, world, and soul.

Tracy begins thinking and naming God with mystical discourse as it points to the beginning point for understanding God as God. This beginning point is the incomprehensibility of God seen not only in the infinite nature of God but also in the seeming paradoxes that thinking God requires of the theologian. The reason that the mystical form reveals God as incomprehensible is because it fragments all pretense of intellectual or linguistic totality. Tracy views the mystical fragmented form as containing two parts. The first focuses on the human relationship with the cosmos through facing limit-situations. The mystical allows an experience of human finitude and, subsequently, the infinite nature of God. The second part is a turn to ethics in that one does not totalize either God or neighbor. The mystical fragment is interested in both how one thinks God and how one lives in light of such thinking. The mystical, as a fragmented form, opens the possibilities for a number of ways of thinking God as incomprehensible but also a multitude of ways of engaging God through the life one leads in love.

Tracy takes up the form of the mystical through two streams of Christian mysticism: love mysticism and apophaticism. While these two forms of mysticism are

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140 Ibid., 192.
142 Tracy, “Form and Fragment,” Part II.
143 Tracy, “Theology and the Many Faces of Postmodernity,” 114.
interrelated, there is still a difference between the two. In love mysticism, Tracy notices a focus on the transgressive and, oftentimes, erotic nature of language used for God.\textsuperscript{144} This form of mystical language shows the excessive nature of God’s self-giving as God transgresses all bounds of the chasm that exists between the infinite and finite. The love of God becomes apparent which in turn inspires the mystic to love God.\textsuperscript{145} This gift of God’s love overcomes the distance between Creator and created. The result of God’s love in the person is an increase in one’s love of God and in thinking God as incomprehensible. Following his “incarnational principle” Tracy shows how thinking God through incomprehensibility comes when God overcomes the distinctions between the divine and human in the incarnation of Christ. The incarnation is beyond adequate articulation and the result is a language that resorts to embracing the incomprehensible nature of the event. However, this incomprehensibility gives rise to the response to God on the part of the human to receive God’s gift and respond in love.

The incomprehensibility of God is shown more explicitly in the mystical language of apophaticism. Apophatic mysticism stresses the radical incomprehensibility of God through a focus on the inability of the finite to speak of God. However, the incomprehensibility of God is not cause for concern for the apophatic thinker as it is a positive reality pertaining to God. Apophatic language, Tracy says, picks up on “the positive reality of the notion of radical incomprehensibility of God and/or the Void.”\textsuperscript{146} Tracy means that “incomprehensibility,” when used in reference to God, means

\textsuperscript{144} Tracy, “Post-modern Re-Naming of God as Incomprehensible and Hidden,” 242.

\textsuperscript{145} Ibid., 242.

\textsuperscript{146} Ibid., 243.
something about God: mainly, that God is not comprehensible. This is to make a claim about the nature of God. Thus, when the theologian says that humanity cannot comprehend God, this is a positive factor as it does not place upon God the limits of finite description. Instead, the theologian is encouraged to explore and think the nature of God in a way that is endless, offering a way of thinking that corresponds to the infinite nature of God.

To further explain the nature of the mystical forms, Tracy turns to the thought of Pseudo-Dionysius, a theologian who uses both of the fragmented forms of mysticism.147 Tracy’s use of Pseudo-Dionysius comes from his desire to communicate that naming God requires a different kind of language that opens the excessive and transgressive elements of God. Tracy says, “We move with Dionysius…to an excessive language, that is, excessive in relation to all predicative namings of God, positive or negative.”148 Tracy finds in Pseudo-Dionysius a way of thinking that moves beyond any language of pure predication or pure negation in relation to God. Pseudo-Dionysius opens a way of thinking God that pursues a language of love that seeks love of God in worship, calling to God in praise and prayer. There exists, here, an experience of God.149 This experience comes from the incomprehensible nature of God opening up a way of responding to God in love: the experience of God overcomes the distance between God and creature, opening a language that reflects this through the idea of incomprehensibility pursued in


149 Tracy, “Form and Fragment,” Part II.
love. It is this experience of God as incomprehensible that will open into the experience of the hiddenness of God in the prophetic.

The second form of theology language that Tracy explicates as fragmentary is the prophetic. The prophet speaks because the Other demands it, not out of the prophet’s own desire. The prophet is one who “hears a word that is not his or her own. It is Other. It disrupts consciousness, actions, deliberations. It demands expression through the prophet.” The prophet is the one who speaks for the Other that is not present but hidden. For Tracy, the prophet speaks because of his or her experience of God. This experience comes from the interruption of God into history; or the radical in-breaking of God into the created world. Tracy’s philosophy of history undergirds this. Tracy’s conception of history is that “[h]istory is not only contingent; history is interruptive. Western history is, through and through, an interruptive narrative with no single theme and no controlling point.” The prophet points to this interruptive nature of God in history by moving language about God in two directions: toward the apocalyptic and ethical. These two directions allow the prophet to root thinking of God in the revelation of God in history. The prophet articulates the radical plurality and ambiguity that touches all ways of thinking and naming God as “there is no innocent interpretation, no innocent interpreter, no innocent text.”

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150 Tracy, “Theology and the Many Faces of Postmodernity,” 112.
151 Tracy, “Mystics, Prophets, Rhetorics: Religion and Psychoanalysis,” 265.
152 Tracy, Plurality and Ambiguity, 68.
153 Tracy, “Theology and the Many Faces of Postmodernity,” 112.
In his articulation of the prophetic fragment, Tracy begins with the issue of ethics. Through the prophetic, Tracy follows the work of Levinas—and Derrida—in beginning ethics with the issue of how one encounters the Other. Tracy believes that the “principal issue today is the issue of otherness, not more of the same….” The Other releases the one encountered by the Other from all desire to offer a totality of the Other. Instead, the Other opens one to an ethical responsibility to actually engage the Other in the Other’s otherness. Through this engagement the prophet calls people back to their own agency and to action in their political and historical context. The prophet points to those moments of otherness as the place of the disclosure of God in the world. These places of otherness revolve around the marginalized, oppressed, and others marked as non-persons. God is revealed in these moments of weakness, which follows the christomorphic form that Tracy has already articulated as the guiding principle for his theology. Thus, the weakness and hiddenness of God actually work as the revelation of God.

The ethics that Tracy articulates comes from the in-breaking of God into history. Tracy articulates this in-breaking of the divine through the apocalyptic, which he sees as

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154 Tracy, *Plurality and Ambiguity*, 78-79.

155 The nature of the ethics that arises from Tracy’s work, in relation to the thinking of Derrida, will be explored more in the fourth part of this chapter, “An Ethics of Resistance.”

156 Tracy, “The Post-modern Re-naming of God as Incomprehensible and Hidden,” 244.

157 An example here may be the prophet Jeremiah. While he speaks for God, he does not understand why God does what God does and struggles with the message. However, within this struggle, Jeremiah simply allows the encounter of God with himself to occur while he continues to prophesy.

158 Ibid., 244.

159 Tracy, “The Hermeneutics of Naming God,” 262.
part of the prophetic. Through his use of apocalyptic discourse Tracy shows the interruptive and disruptive nature of God while also articulating the hiddenness of God as the place of the revelation of God. The apocalyptic moment is brought to the fore most explicitly in Luther’s conception of God’s hiddenness. Luther is apocalyptic because his view of history is quite apocalyptic, as he sees history as a series of conflicts and ruptures. This leads him to the development of the hiddenness of God, which is found in two ways. First, and most famously, Luther finds the ultimate revelation of God as being contained in the cross, as the life-giving God is revealed in the death of Jesus on this cross. Here Luther follows Paul in his strong belief that God is revealed in weakness, seen most explicitly in the weakness of God on the cross.

However, the Hidden-God is not strictly revealed in the weakness of the cross as the second moment of the apocalyptic shows. This second moment of God’s hiddenness comes from behind, even beyond, the Christ revealed on the cross. This moment stems from the experience of God in terror, as awe-ful, completely overwhelming the recipient of the experience. The revelation of God comes from the experience of dread and

160 James Shields shows the importance of eschatology, and specifically apocalyptic, to the work of Tracy [see James Shields, The Eschatological Imagination: A Revisionist Christian Eschatology in the Light of David Tracy’s Theological Project (New York: Peter Lang, 2008)]. While Shields shows the reliance of Tracy upon the idea of God’s interruptive nature in history, his account is overtaken by this idea of interruption as the only form of eschatology at work in Tracy (see, specifically, pages 166-67).

161 Tracy, “Form and Fragment,” Part II.

162 Ibid.


terror of one’s situation.\textsuperscript{165} This experience of dread and terror gives Tracy the impetus to say that this seemingly negative experience ultimately opens humanity to be able to relate to God in the non-continuous, disruptive nature of history.\textsuperscript{166} This is the place where humanity is able to experience God.

Through his analysis of Luther’s theology Tracy comes to the conclusion that the Hidden-God, as revealed in the prophetic fragment, is an absolutely disrupting, interrupting force in the history of the world. This way of thinking God allows Tracy to articulate God “as an awesome, often terrifying, hope-beyond-hope.”\textsuperscript{167} The logos used to control and think the idea of God in the totalizing discourse of much modern theology often misses this hiddenness of God as it fails to articulate the disruptive and transgressive nature of God.\textsuperscript{168} Here, Tracy is not talking about God’s revelation coming in God’s incomprehensibility but the revelation of God in the hiddenness of God: these are different. Tracy says, “This God reveals God-self in hiddenness: in cross and negativity, above all in the suffering of all those others whom the grand narrative of modernity has set aside as non-peoples, non-memories, non-history.”\textsuperscript{169} While the reasons for these acts are incomprehensible, the way of thinking God that arises here is in reference to the God hidden in the cross and the seeming negativity of Jesus’ death.

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\textsuperscript{165} Tracy, “Form and Fragment,” Part II.
\textsuperscript{166} Tracy, “The Hidden God: The Divine Other of Liberation,” 11.
\textsuperscript{167} Tracy, \textit{On Naming the Present}, 43.
\textsuperscript{168} Ibid., 45.
\textsuperscript{169} Ibid., 43.
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The fragmented form of the prophetic brings together the ethical and apocalyptic moments. This fragmented form reveals the turn to the other in contemporary theology which is interruptive of any system through the interruption of God as event, gift, and/or revelation, among other moments.¹⁷⁰ The turn to the other in the ethical is radically disruptive through its use of the apocalyptic forms of thinking to articulate the in-breaking of God in history.¹⁷¹ Thus, if the cross is that moment of the revelation of God in history then this revelation continues to occur in those places where suffering and struggle occur in the contemporary world, in those non-spaces, the places occupied by the non-persons who are the oppressed, marginalized, and disenfranchised. Tracy argues that the presence of these peoples reveals the reality of the other(s) and those that are different. The revelation of these realities “destroy[s] any teleological version of modern history even as they allow a return of the eschatological God who disrupts all continuity and confidence.”¹⁷² For Tracy, the prophetic fragment relies on the importance of the cross. Tracy says “the cross should now be read as the revelation of God in hiddenness, in suffering and struggle, in the endurance and the joys of those individuals and groups too often effectively designated non-persons by the dominant culture: the oppressed and marginalized in all history, in every society, in every church.”¹⁷³ The prophetic utilizes


¹⁷¹ Tracy, “Prophetic Rhetoric and Mystical Rhetoric,” 190.


¹⁷³ Ibid., 13.
the cross as that point that is both an ethical command to embrace the other and the apocalyptic moment that interrupts history to disclose the hiddenness of God.

Tracy makes this way of thinking the event of the cross more explicit through an analysis of Jesus’ death in the Gospel of Mark. In Mark, Tracy finds an account of the cross that is prophetic in that it brings together the ethical and apocalyptic. Tracy begins with the end, showing that Jesus makes the same cry to God the oppressed and dispossessed do: “My God! My God! Why have You forsaken me?” Mark’s Gospel discloses God in Jesus as revealed in the hiddenness of struggle and conflict. Taking his cue from liberation theologies, Tracy argues that the Gospel of Mark must be read in light of all those who have, are, or will suffer, both living and dead. Thus, the prophetic takes an ethical turn by seeing the Hidden-God as disclosed in the suffering of those deemed non-entities. God’s revelation in the hiddenness and weakness of the negative experience of the cross opens the possibility of seeing God in the weak, those who are oppressed, marginalized and forgotten. In doing this, the Gospel of Mark offers a beginning point for the development of forms of resistance to the destruction of humanity by finding the Hidden-God in those often de-humanized the most explicitly.

The prophetic form opens the possibility of new forms of ethics. These ethics develop out of God’s interruptive self-disclosure in history through “the survival, struggle, and conflict of oppressed and forgotten people, living and dead: in otherness,


\[175\] Tracy, “The Post-modern Re-naming of God as Incomprehensible and Hidden,” 245.
difference, marginality.” Tracy furthers his understanding of ethics through his contention that new forms have emerged in the postmodern context. The new forms emphasize differing people groups, the differences between different cultures and classes, as well as the multi-cultural nature of many approaches to theological thinking. These all allow the content of a group’s beliefs to come through the form used to communicate their beliefs. This is because “the face of the genuine other should release us from all desire for totality and open us to a true sense of infinity for naming and thinking God.” Tracy finds it necessary to embrace the genuine other in a way that is non-totalizing but open to otherness of the other; and, this leads to an extension of this embrace of otherness not only in the other person, but also in the other as Wholly Other, as God. In doing this, he discovers the impetus to a discourse that is non-totalizing is the same as (or, at least, very similar) to the one which looks to do justice to the thinking of God as infinite and other.

The mystical and prophetic fragments do something to the theologian. There is an event in each that interrupts the person’s life and asks to be dealt with: the mystical in the gift of love and the prophetic in the in-breaking of God in history in an interruptive and transgressive moment. Due to the nature of these fragments as events which transform the way one is thinking, Tracy points out that these fragments cause the theologian to

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177 Tracy, “Traditions of Spiritual Practice and the Practice of Theology,” 238.

178 Tracy, “Literary Theory and Return of the Forms for Thinking and Naming God,” 316.
stop, to stutter the naming of God. The experience of God leads to the stuttering of God’s name; the theologian, in trying to name God, employs Pseudo-Dionysius’ insight to negate and deconstruct all positive language for God while also seeing the inability of negative language alone to “say something” about the reality of God. In order to overcome this seeming impasse, Pseudo-Dionysius moves beyond these two languages into a place where the thinker enters way of thinking which comes from praise and prayer and this leads to a stuttering of God’s name(s) as one cannot “catch” the name of God, but only stutter over it in a way that one never completes the naming. Pseudo-Dionysius would have the theologian in some sense “stuck,” oscillating between kataphatic and apophatic languages for God and, yet, caught in the inability to actually speak God. However, the theologian is compelled to speak but cannot speak rightly. The theologian simply stutters by having to “say something” but unable to really “say” anything. While not everything uttered in the stutter is worthwhile, the stutter occurs as the theologian gets stuck having to “say something.”

The stutter leads into understanding how theology is improvisational. For Tracy, thinking God ultimately leads to praise, prayer, worship and contemplation. In this, one does not speak a name of God purely; rather, there is an attempt to offer different names for God, hoping that one may “work.” When one hits upon a name, it causes one to stop as this name interrupts one’s thinking. The result is a moment where one must begin to

179 Tracy, “Form and Fragment,” Part II. See also Malcolm, “Impossible God,” 27.

180 Ibid., Part III.

181 Tracy, “Impossible God,” 27.
“play” the name, “riffing” on it, stuttering it. The key is that theology does not just offer a set of names for God the way an orchestra plays a composition; rather, theology tries names, thinks through names, opens names to possibilities, hoping to catch one that “says something”. In the same way, the jazz musician tries different possibilities, opening a piece to being heard otherwise.

C. The Gathering: Rethinking the “System” of Theology

The problem with the form of fragments is how to bring them together to “say something” while allowing them to still be fragments. In this vein, Kristin E. Heyer notices a shift in the thinking demonstrated by Tracy from his early work of Blessed Rage for Order to his more recent theological thinking, which seeks to analyze similarities-in-difference based upon the radical contingency and ambiguity inherent in all discourse.\(^{182}\) The problem of giving some coherence to the fragments often leads to a discourse that does not recognize this contingency and ambiguity of all discourse. Rather, at times, the focus on the fragments tends to become one more way of offering a totalizing way of thinking God as these no longer are the fragments breaking the whole, but become a piece in a new system.\(^{183}\) This is unacceptable for Tracy. The theologian needs a way of bringing the fragments together that does not seek to systematize or totalize them, but give them a certain coherence (although, this is, at times, quite loose) by thinking their similarities-in-difference.

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\(^{182}\) See Heyer, “How Does Theology Go Public?” 310-11; see also Tracy, Plurality and Ambiguity.

Tracy turns to the idea of “gathering” for a way of collecting the fragments and giving them coherence. He argues that the task of theology in the postmodern world revolves around the ability to gather and order the fragments. Tracy is aware of the fact that this gathering can turn into a totalizing discourse that places constraints upon the thinking and naming of God. He argues that there must be a constant remembering of the fact that these religious expressions are in fact fragments which break the whole. Tracy exemplifies this, saying, “Though you can’t have a totality of symbols, you do need to order and gather them without losing the sense that religious expressions are simply fragments.” The fragments themselves offer a constant interruption of any attempt at hegemonic discourse in relation to the thinking of God. The focus on the fragments and their gathering allows theology to continue to resist while offering ways of thinking God that is consonant with the multiple and pluralistic nature of theological thinking.

The conversation of theology becomes the place where the gathering can take place in the contemporary context of theology. The reason that Tracy turns to the conversation is because the gathering is concerned with similarities-in-difference, bringing together those forms and ways of thinking that are other than each other. The gathering allows a living-in-difference. The gathering brings together the fragments and lets them critique each other. The gathering offers a way of constantly calling into

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185 Ibid., 28.

186 Ibid., 28.
question the very “system” that attempts to give coherence to the fragments, never allowing the fragments to be reified into a whole. The coherence that the theologian gives to the fragments is always shaky and able to be changed due to the nature of the fragments as unsettling, disrupting, and interruptive of any whole.

The gathering that Tracy turns to in order to think and name God is that of the “mystical-prophetic.” The mystical-prophetic brings together the mystical rhetoric—which thinks God as incomprehensible—with the prophetic rhetoric—which thinks God through hiddenness. These two seem to be quite disparate ways of thinking God. However, they come together through the gathering which allows these two different discourses to live-together-in-difference. Tracy brings the mystical and prophetic together in the gathering because each disrupts the modern way of thinking God, instead offering a way that is predicated upon the excessive and transgressive nature of the divine.187 The gathering of the forms offers a way into how theology is able to bring together its plurality of discourses to think God. Theology does this by entering into the conversation around a given moment, event, or idea for God.

In order to bring together the mystical and prophetic Tracy finds points of contact between them which allow an entry point into thinking God. One of these points of contact is that of the impossible. Tracy uses the idea of the Impossible as a way of gathering the fragments of the mystical and prophetic in a way that allows the theologian to think God. Within mystical discourse God is understood as primarily incomprehensible and, thus, any thinking of God becomes an attempt at futility. The

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naming of God is not possible and, yet, still occurs. The incomprehensibility of God disturbs all attempts at naming God; God then is thought through the impossible as that which cannot be named or thought but is still named and thought. Likewise, the prophetic also looks to the impossible for a way of thinking God, but not as a way of disrupting language and thought. Within prophetic discourse the impossible is a disruption of history that opens the way to justice by offering a breaking point with reality as currently constructed. People are exhorted to do the impossible by working actively against current forms of oppression and marginalization. The impossible is the embrace of this fight through the disruption of history by God.\textsuperscript{188}

Tracy also gathers together these two fragments by looking at how each assumes the other. Turning to the mystical, he articulates how the incomprehensible God is found on the underside of theology in those deemed non-persons. Likewise, the prophetic sees the Hidden-God in the useless suffering of those deemed non-persons through oppression and, here, God’s disclosure is in both the voices of the oppressed and the action taken on behalf of them.\textsuperscript{189} Thus, the mystical, like the prophetic, is rooted in the uptake of the voices of those put on the margins of society. But, the prophetic is also rooted in the mystical as it locates its roots in reflection on the religion of the people it wants to liberate. The prophetic then pushes the mystical into a place of action by showing how the spirituality associated with this leads to overcoming the system of oppression.\textsuperscript{190}

Thus, the prophetic is also rooted in the mystical because religion is practiced with a view

\textsuperscript{188} Tracy, “Form and Fragment,” Part II.

\textsuperscript{189} Tracy, “Post-modern Re-naming of God as Incomprehensible and Hidden,” 246.

\textsuperscript{190} Ibid., 247.
toward the Wholly Other. Overall, one can see Tracy trying to bring these two disparate discourses together, allowing them to deconstruct and reconstruct each other. This leads to the gathering which opens the various possibilities for thinking and naming God.

The gathering brings together those forms of discourse that have oftentimes been kept separate within the Christian tradition. This separation meant that they were not used together in order to think God. Tracy says, “The Hidden-Revealed God and the Comprehensible-Incomprehensible God have never been closer in self-understanding. It is this conjunction that may free both the prophetic and mystical trajectories of post-modern theologies to find one another once again, and, in so doing, find anew a further disclosure of the unfathomable Mystery of God.”

Thus, the concern of Tracy, through the advancement of the idea of the gathering, is that this helps the theologian think God in a way that brings out the mystery of God.

Tracy furthers the idea of the gathering by pointing to multiple modes of discourse which bring together fragmented forms. He sees three principal gathering forms used in Christian theology: narratives (in light of the Gospels), doctrines, and liturgy. Tracy’s tendency is to revert to the literary forms; however, the recourse to literary forms tends to limit him by not fully allowing for the full thrust of the nature of theology as conversation. There is a temptation in his thinking to revert only to one form of gathering at a time instead of putting these three into conversation with each other. As a corrective, this project outlines a turn to a musical form of improvisation which

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191 Tracy, “The Hermeneutics of Naming God,” 263.
moves to the more performative aspects of theology. While it may be easy only to see the performative aspect of theology in the liturgical form, this project picks up on this performative aspect in all moments of gathering as all participate in the conversation to allow theology to say something. Through these moments of gathering theology shows its concern with finding the implicit rhythm of theology through the notion of attunement.\textsuperscript{193} Improvisation allows for a multitude of fragments to speak almost simultaneously. Instead of offering three discourses, this musical metaphor allows for the turn to the idea of a chord, hitting three or more notes at the same time. Theology as improvisation opens the possibility of a multitude of disparate discourses to resound simultaneously, calling each other into question, but still articulating a “whole” together.

The doctrine of Christology shows a point where Tracy continues to bring together the various forms of gathering to think through a Christian doctrine. Tracy does not spell out explicitly how his concept of the gathering works here, but it is evident that Christology allows Tracy a place to test his thinking. Tracy admits as much in his early works.\textsuperscript{194} Tracy argues that in order to do Christology appropriately, the theologian needs to recognize the diversity of forms that work together to disclose the truth of Jesus Christ.\textsuperscript{195} He points to the multitude of different sources that speak to the nature of Jesus

\textsuperscript{193} An example of the musical nature of narrative is the way that Gospels frame Jesus. For example, we see in John how Jesus creates an enormous amount of tension between himself and the Jewish leaders, only to see that tension released in the event of cross-resurrection. The musical nature of doctrine is also heard in the doctrine of the Trinity, where we are not trying to strike some proposition that “catches” the doctrine, but to find a rhythm for our language that discloses the Triune nature of God in the mutuality of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit: I would argue this is how Augustine attempts to think the Trinity.

\textsuperscript{194} In two of Tracy’s earliest works, \textit{Blessed Rage for Order} and \textit{Analogical Imagination}, he tests the methods and thinking he develops in the realm of the doctrine of Christology.

\textsuperscript{195} Tracy, \textit{Analogical Imagination}, 305.
Christ, from the four gospel accounts to the thoughts of Paul to the Christic hymns in Philippians and Colossians. All of these are different forms and speak differently to the reality of Jesus Christ. However, Tracy can bring all of these together in a conversation that works with different conceptions of Jesus in order to come to some coherent whole. Here, Tracy uses the gathering of fragments to think in a variety of ways about Christology. He says that a focus on the event of Jesus helps develop ordered relationships of the whole of reality because Christology has a number of implications for how the theologian views both the self and the world. In a similar manner, Tracy argues that the event of Jesus Christ reveals that God is love and this helps theology rethink the nature of self and world. Taking a different approach, Tracy says that Christology answers the question “who is God?” in Christianity by pointing to the event of Jesus Christ. Thus, Tracy uses Christology as a theological doctrine which offers a place where multiple strands for thinking and naming God can come together in one coherent gathering.

In light of the above, the gathering offers this project its most explicit example of a theology which works as improvisation. This is because the gathering, like improvisation, is built upon the inherent conversation that takes place among theologians and their sources. The gathering allows the theologian the opportunity to organize and

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196 This is not to deny the apocalyptic nature of the disclosure of Jesus Christ in the New Testament. See Analogical Imagination, 308 and 312.

197 Tracy, Analogical Imagination, 429.

198 Ibid., 435.

199 Tracy, “The Hermeneutics of Naming God,” 37.
reorganize ways of thinking theologically. This process corresponds to the way that the musician is able to play with an idea in a piece of music. The musician takes the fragments of the piece of music and begins to reorganize and play with these. The theologian does this through the analysis of a way of thinking and reimagining its possibilities for thinking and naming God. However, for both the theologian and musician the task is never complete. They both avoid closure at almost all costs.

D. An Ethics of Resistance

Tracy is aware of the consistent critique that his theological project does not offer a developed ethics. Werner Jeanrond exhorts Tracy to develop a way of balancing his concerns with method and doctrine with a “search for principles and strategies for political action.” Jeanrond also poses the question, “What is the relationship between the obviously necessary place of conversation in Tracy’s theory of theology and the actuality of conversation in Tracy’s assessment of praxis?” In essence, Jeanrond is posing the question of what kind of response to the negatives of modernity arise in the action of ethics. Tracy is aware of this, saying that postmodernity is often ethically underdeveloped and, thus, needs an ethical response to some of the problems inherited from modernity. This final section argues that Tracy develops an ethics of resistance, which says that religion “provides the ground for resistance and hope, resistance ‘to more

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of the same,’ and hope in the future.” In order to flesh out how this ethics of resistance works, I supplement Tracy’s thought with that of Jacques Derrida.

The reason that the question of ethics arises here is because of the impetus given through the gathering. The gathering has been described as a living-in-difference. The concern in the gathering is to be able to understand the other, however the other may appear. The embrace of the other in the gathering and the drive toward living-in-difference offers an ethics of resistance that correlates to the type of ethics that arises in postmodernity. Unlike the modern move to a universal ethics (à la Kant), the ethics pursued in postmodernity is an ethics of resistance to any system or theory that neglects difference and otherness. The modern tended to focus on the need for a drive for an all-encompassing totality of ethics (which always failed) while the postmodern is concerned with justice that actually destroys the nostalgia and drive for a totality. Thinking in the postmodern actually becomes an ethical move as it is a form of resistance against the totalizing and hegemonic forms inherent to modernity. Postmodern ethics always seeks to do justice to those on the underside of a system or structure.

The ethics of resistance developed here comes by thinking the other. The way that this ethics is accomplished is through the deconstructive gestures of many


204 Sanks, Tracy’s Theological Project,” 720-21.


postmoderns, exhibiting the underside and neglected of modernity. The postmodern embrace of the other means that those who were/are oppressed and marginalized are now allowed to call into question the system: their voice is now allowed to be heard on their own terms. One of the ways Tracy sees these voices being allowed to speak and be heard is through the notion of history that postmodern thinkers espouse, where the forgotten and repressed other of history, these “subjugated communities of resistance in the past and present are finally allowed to speak on their own terms. Otherness, difference, transgression, excess become the alternatives to the deadening sameness, the totalizing systems, the false security of the modern self-grounding subject.”

The way that Tracy encourages the thinker to find and take up these voices on the underside of modernity is through the act of listening which hears the oppressed and marginalized and also couples oneself in active solidarity with these people. Through listening to the oppressed and marginalized, Tracy offers a place of resistance to these totalizing forms.

One place that Tracy finds explicitly picked up in the postmodern is that of religion in its transgressive and excessive forms. Religion offers a conceptual framework for resisting totalizations. This actually makes it an exercise in resistance. The way that religions exercise resistance is by engaging in the same logic used in the classic. Whereas the classic is a text that confronts a world and opens new possibilities, so also religion functions in a similar way by resisting the dominant thought and

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207 See, for example, Tracy, “Fragments: The Spiritual Situation of Our Times,” 171.
209 Lane, “David Tracy and the Debate about Praxis,” 29.
confronting a broader culture with a series of other possibilities. Religions offer a vision or, better, a redescription, of reality as interpreted through a cluster of metaphors derived from the classics of the tradition. The place where these metaphors of resistance are most explicitly found is in the fragmenting voice of the mystics and the prophets. The transgressive nature of the conversation with the classic begins with the interpreter throwing the self at risk in front of the transformations for which the classic calls. This conversation teaches the interpreter to move from self-centeredness to a Reality-centeredness. This move comes through the classic as it challenges the reality one now inhabits. The conversation results in an openness to the possibilities for the transformation of the contemporary world opened by the religious classic. The result of this conversation is a hope built on the call to action from living a life of solidarity with those who need emancipation and/or authentic liberation as God has granted both in the Exodus and Christ-event.

Religions, with their belief in world transformation, are an exercise of resistance. In Christianity, the resistance to totalization comes through the ultimate other—God, especially God’s “shattering otherness” which undoes any system or way of

211 Tracy, *Plurality and Ambiguity*, 84.
214 Ibid., 89-90.
215 Ibid., 93.
216 Ibid., 113.
217 Ibid., 84.
thinking imposed upon God. The naming of God that takes place in religion and theology should be an action in resisting the temptation to totalize God. The religious one acts against this by resisting the “-isms” that place God in some hegemonic form, like deism, pantheism, panentheism, etc. Theology names God through a polyphonic naming that constantly deconstructs and reconstructs each name, not allowing any name to dominate, but to simply be devoted to and praising the Wholly Other. The Wholly Other fragments each name attempted. The practice of naming God ultimately teaches resistance as it shows the inability of any discourse to actually accomplish the task of explaining God and instead offers a multiplicity of forms which resist and interrupt this act of naming.

When the theologian takes heed of the current situation, the realization is that the wholly other who calls into question the totalization and system of oppression is on the outside of the system through oppression and marginalization. This is not to say that the oppressed are to be glorified as “God” or their suffering meant to be redemptive. Rather, as the naming of God breaks any system that claims to “capture” God, so this naming of God leads to a confrontation with the contemporary reality that contains a plethora of systems that lead to the oppression of those who are other. The logic of resistance at work here draws from the naming of God in stressing the otherness of the oppressed and marginalized and how this otherness opens the breaking of these systems,

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218 Tracy, “Theology and the Many Faces of Postmodernity,” 108.

219 Tracy, Plurality and Ambiguity, 84-5.
fragmenting them. The religious classic advocates this in the mystical and prophetic forms this study has already examined.220

However, there is a seeming disconnect with the ethics promoted here and how it would actually work in a specific situation. In response, Tracy makes clear that there is a practical response found within Christianity. He turns to the christomorphic form, saying that “[t]here is…no theoretical solution to historical disaster and defeat, but through and in Christ there is a practical response for the Christian and for any theology faithful to a Christian practice of resistance to evil even in defeat. And there is gracious joy in the struggle and in life itself.”221 While acknowledging the problems that arise in the actual history of oppression, Tracy gives an exhortation to find solidarity with the other through the sharing in the struggle that these peoples find themselves in. This is a practical response for Tracy as it is an imitation of what Jesus Christ did and encouraged his followers to do. The one who acts as an imitator of Christ ultimately undoes the hegemonic response of some ethical constructs by acting in a way that is always for the other.

Through this pursuing of an ethics of resistance, Tracy becomes more connected to the thought of Derrida. This ethics of resistance becomes most explicit in the idea of justice informed by deconstruction: ethics must be about doing justice and doing justice is about a transformation from being self-centered to being for the other. This conception of justice follows Derrida’s discussion of law and justice in his article “Force of Law:

220Ibid., 103-7.

The ‘Mystical Foundation of Authority’” and links it with the ethics of resistance that Tracy has implicitly developed. For Derrida, justice is a resistance to law because law is ultimately built upon an unjust, originary violence as the legal authority is almost always legitimated through the use of some violence to an/other. Deconstruction destabilizes the law by bringing to light the illegitimate legitimatization of the law. Justice, on the other hand, works to resist the hegemonic nature of law because justice is being open to the other through hospitality. This causes the questioning of the very foundations of law, politics and morality. This is explicitly linked to the thought of Tracy because, through the questioning of the “norm” of the law, justice resists by turning to an attempt to be open to the other, for the other, letting the other to come to light. The turn to the other is the act of resistance performed by justice.

As a form, improvisation opens a way where the goal is always to “hear” the other: it is not possible to improvise without hearing the others in one’s group. Thus, improvisation is always about hearing the other and how, in hearing the other, one can both supplement and add to what the other is saying. The conversation is about having a multiplicity of voices present in the improvisation, where there is a polyphonic nature to what occurs. Thus, improvisation is a form explicitly concerned with doing justice to the

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222 The discussion of Derrida here rehearses what was articulated earlier in reference to Derrida’s deconstruction of justice.


224 Ibid., 235ff.

225 This is not to evade the “classic” notions of law and justice as being concerned with equality. Rather, this shows that by paying attention to the deconstructive moment, law becomes problematized in that it is no longer concerned with equality as much as having authority. It is justice, when not put forward through the lens of law, that is actually concerned with equality and being for the other.
other. And this justice for the other is pursued in a mutual resistance to any form that
tries to set the parameters or dominate the conversation. Rather, the musicians work
together toward something other, something new, toward hearing and playing a piece
otherwise. Improvisation is a form of musical resistance to any attempt at a hegemonic
composition and this is accomplished through doing justice to the other.

If improvisation implies an ethics of resistance this also means that attunement
has importance for the ethics of resistance, not only in improvisation but also within
theology. Attunement to the other (Other) is prevalent in both and becomes the
fundamental place for both thinking and action. It is the attunement to the other that
allows one to hear this (these) other(s) in a multitude of places, whether music, religious
texts or the contemporary situation. Where there is attunement to the other there can be
resistance against the hegemonic impulse of much thinking to reduce the other to the
same. Attunement resists sameness by allowing the other to come to the fore by doing
justice to the other. The result is a multitude of voices being used to show the otherness
and difference prevalent in the contemporary world. This opens into the necessity to
gather these others in a way that creates a polyphony of voices.

E. Conclusion

In this chapter, my goal was to use David Tracy’s model of theology as
conversation as a conceptual framework for understanding the possibilities of a theology
as improvisation. I did this because of the consonance of conversation within theology
with the idea of conversation within improvisation. Tracy advances a theological model
advanced which opens the possibilities as to what a theology of improvisation may look
like. This was advanced through the outlining of Tracy’s theological project in the first section of this chapter.

The second section of the chapter sought to build upon Tracy’s model of conversation through his account of the fragments. The reason that the notion of fragments is important in the model of theology as improvisation is because the improvising musician is consistently fragmenting the piece of music and playing upon a fragment to open new, interesting possibilities. Tracy’s model shows a theological equivalence to this by taking up the fragments that undo the totalizing discourse for thinking and naming God. Tracy allows the fragments to come to the fore in a way that consistently calls into question theology’s thinking of God and, thus, opens possibilities for what a language about God may entail.

The gathering, as outlined in the third section of the chapter, becomes the place where the fragments are brought together in order to think God. Theology brings together a plurality of fragments in the gathering. The gathering allows the fragments to live together in difference through the conversation that takes place between these, calling each other into question, offering various possibilities, and keeping open the conversation. The gathering acts as the place where theology can come to fruition in its attempts to think and name God by working through the conversation and exploring the possibilities opened up therein. The gathering names and thinks God in the multitude of voices, through polyphonic nature of all communities.

The gathering and its emphasis on living-in-difference ultimately results in an ethics of resistance. This ethics of resistance comes directly out of both the theological
model Tracy adopts as well as the aesthetic of improvisational musicians. In both, the goal is to keep the conversation going and open, avoiding closure. In order to accomplish this, both theology and improvisation resist attempts at totalization or hegemony. The ethics of resistance works to ensure that the gathering can take place with a number of voices able to join the conversation through the living-in-difference. For both theology and improvisation this move to resistance of totalizing discourse is important as it frees the thinkers and gives them the ability and room to explore. This move to exploration is important for both theology and improvisation since what they explore—whether God or music—cannot really be contained in a closed discourse.

Through Tracy’s theological model the project of theology as improvisation finds a kindred spirit. The next part of the project is to see how this fundamental theological position may open into an explicit improvisational theology. Here, the project turns to St. Augustine of Hippo. In Augustine, one finds a theologian who uses a multitude of forms and discourses, all working together to bring to the fore different understandings and ways of thinking about God. This is all informed by his “musical” understanding of the world. This gives Augustine a creative, constructive, and important way of doing theology that has been often neglected.
CHAPTER FIVE:

THE THEOLOGICAL EXAMPLE:

AUGUSTINE’S UNSTRUCTURING OF THEOLOGICAL FORM

The last chapter of the project is an exposition of Augustine. The turn to Augustine is made for two reasons. First, he deals explicitly with a musically-influenced theology in his *De Musica*. Second, Augustine employs multiple forms for thinking theologically, many of which point to the necessity of finding a nonconstraining form for the theological endeavor. Thus, this project finds Augustine to be a kindred spirit as he is one who is concerned with being attuned to God and allowing this to shape and form theology. The two texts I utilize in this regard are the classics *De Doctrina Christiana* and *Confessions*. In these texts one can see Augustine’s use of different forms for thinking God. Through his use of different forms, I argue that he embraces a way of thinking God that moves into a formlessness. This formlessness comes from the very nature of God as the One who gives form but can never be contained or reduced to one form. Thus, the argument moves into a way of thinking God that embraces the formless.

The goal of this chapter is to tie together some of the strands that have been alluded to, but left untied throughout the other parts of the work. The objective is to begin constructing a theological model which takes seriously the inconceivable nature of God. For Augustine, the problem in theological language is that when humans think of God, there is the awareness that the language and thinking used are inadequate and
incapable of grasping God. He says that although believers praise and bless God, “no words of ours are capable of expressing him…”¹ Human speech for God is, in the view of Paul J. Griffiths, duplicitous as it never measures the divine correctly.² Language must find a way out of the conceptual language which entraps God.³

Augustine believes God escapes this purely conceptual nature of language. He offers an understanding of God through the use of sound, where the notions of music, rhythm, psalms, and other musical elements become a key interpretive moment to thinking God. For Charles T. Matthews, Augustine’s critique of theology here is also a critique leveled at ontotheology because there is no frame available for the theologian to use as a “‘backdrop’ against which to ‘foreground’ God…[because]… God is always ‘behind’ supporting every horizon…”⁴ The fact that there is no horizon against which to think God does not mean that there is no ability to construct a language for God; on the contrary, Augustine is adamant about the “sheer necessity to say something” through the use of images and metaphors to think God with the realization and caveat that what is


³ Bavel refers to this as the “Augustinian Paradox,” saying “on the one hand, his attempts to speak about God in every possible way with rhetorical figures, with metaphors, with playing on words, crying and shouting, or with the whole arsenal of his philosophical knowledge,—on the other hand, his constant declaration that God is beyond our knowledge and language” (Bavel, “God in Between Affirmation and Negation According to Augustine,” 84).

said does not actually reveal God. The way that he will do this is by embracing a language where God is thought in terms of the formless.

The doctrine of divine simplicity is one way of analyzing how Augustine constructs theological language. He deals with the problem of divine simplicity in a way that foreshadows Thomas Aquinas. For Aquinas, the concept of the simplicity of God requires that any language used for God be inadequate as is actually simple, meaning that no language is complete and whole in itself. Thus, any language used for God does not give adequate signification to the one it is trying to signify. In *City of God*, Augustine says that “those things which are essentially and truly divine are called simple, because in them quality and substance are identical, and because they are divine, or wise, or blessed in themselves, and without extraneous supplement.” Augustine shows the need for a form to think God that speaks to God’s reality as simple.

The new form that Augustine turns to in order to think God is that of sound. The embrace of sound allows for a way into thinking through the inconceivable nature of God. This project has turned to the musical form of improvisation as a way of dealing with the problem of the inconceivability of the nature of God. This echoes an insight made by Catherine Pickstock, who argues that Augustine moves to a theological

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5 Augustine, *The Trinity*, VII.9, 227.


approach that is more in line with Pythagoras than Plotinus. Augustine leaves Plotinus’ neo-Platonic system of the multiple arising from the One for a Pythagorean way of thinking that embraces the “musical” or “numerical” nature of the world. This Pythagorean mode opens possibilities for thinking of the Creator. Being, is not found in language alone, but is part of language which is part of the nature of sound. The end result is a proposal for doing theology that tries to think God in God’s unconceivable nature through a series of forms that undo themselves, pushing the formlessness of God.

In exploring the texts of Augustine, one notices the emphasis on a certain kind of formation for being able to hear the sound of God in the creation. One of the ways that this formation occurs is in Augustine’s attunement to God’s sound through the learning and repeating of the Psalms, specifically in singing them. In *Confessions* Book IX Augustine recounts how his singing of the Psalms formed and shaped him in certain ways. This leads him to think God “shuddering in awe” while “hope and joy surge up within him at [God’s] mercy.” For Augustine, the singing of the Psalms gives one’s life a certain rhythm that leads to true religion. For him, true religion is a way of life that purges the mind and makes it capable of grasping “the one God, Father and Son and Holy

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However, as Augustine says, a large part of learning true religions comes from the desire and ongoing cultivation of paying “pious and diligent attention.”\textsuperscript{11}

For Augustine, the goal of true religion is wisdom, or \textit{sapientia}.\textsuperscript{12} The beginning of the task of theology is to be attuned to God in such a way that one is purified and made ready to contemplate and gain knowledge of God, which is wisdom.\textsuperscript{13} Wisdom does not allow a person to be separated from God as it binds both human and God together through the work of the Word of God, not only in the incarnation but also in the Word’s present ministry.\textsuperscript{14} Wisdom is the knowledge of God that is developed as one moves from knowledge of the creation—called \textit{scientia}—to knowledge of what it is to dwell in the vision of God as one contemplates God.\textsuperscript{15} Rowan Williams develops this idea of wisdom further when he says, “For the mind to acquire \textit{sapientia} is for the mind to see itself sustained and embraced by this self-communicating action of God; to see itself as being directly formed by this relation to God’s wisdom, not given an identity by its


\textsuperscript{12} Ibid., 20, 42.


\textsuperscript{14} Augustine, \textit{The Trinity}, 1.13, 73.


\textsuperscript{16} To see how this is developed in Augustine’s \textit{De Trinitate}, see Nathan Crawford, “The Sapiential Structure of Augustine’s \textit{De Trinitate},” \textit{Pro Ecclesia} 19, no. 4 (Fall 2010): 434-452.
relation to ‘lower’, transient objects (XIV.20).”¹⁷ The attainment of wisdom comes through the development of a “religious love of truth” which is only able to be pursued through the seeking of the good life “patiently and in all docility.”¹⁸ The cultivation of being a certain kind of person allows one to grow in wisdom which opens one to the cultivation of virtues which opens one to the ascent towards God in a continually deeper way.¹⁹

A. The Basis of Theology: An Examination of De Musica

Before analyzing the actual text of De Musica, it is important to understand its importance in the Augustinian corpus. This text begins the theological path that Augustine will pursue in his later years, especially after 396.²⁰ This is one of the texts where Augustine sets out to put together an understanding of the liberal arts which Christians can use in order to think in a Christian manner. While he does not finish his proposed analysis of all the liberal arts, he begins with De Musica. This has certain significance as the kind of thinking, and the path he lays open in this text, will be pursued


²⁰ I agree with Carol Harrison, who argues “the real revolution in Augustine’s thought happened not in 396 but in 386, at his conversion, and that the defining features of his mature theology were in place from this moment onwards” [Carol Harrison, Rethinking Augustine’s Early Theology: An Argument for Continuity, 7]. For the importance of De Musica, see Erica T. Hermanowicz, “Book Six of Augustine’s De Musica and the Episcopal Embassies of 408,” Augustinian Studies 35, no. 2 (2004), 174. For the importance the text plays in later Christian theology, especially the Middle Ages, see Nancy Phillips and Michel Hugo, “Le De Musica de saint Augustin et l’organisation de la durée musicale du 9th au 12th siècles,” Reserches Augustiniennes 20 (1985), 117-31.
In fact, it seems that *De Doctrina Christiana* finishes the project begun with *De Musica* in giving Christians a way to interpret the secular world, especially the alternative histories and rhetorics offered by the ancient, non-Christian world. Ultimately, this text helps Augustine open human thought patterns up to the various rhythms, harmonies, etc. played in creation through the study of rhythm and music. He opens these patterns through his belief that “[rhythmic] pattern is an outward access to internal intrinsic emotional substance...” Thus, Augustine’s *De Musica* offers a good place to begin a study of his use of sound to explore the unconceivable nature of God through the use of music.

The best way to begin a study of *De Musica* is to examine Augustine’s understanding of what counts as music. The first point he makes is that music is different than grammar. He does this by pointing to the fact that both are modes of signification; however, music differs from grammar in its use of rhythm and measures in how it signifies, whereas grammar only signifies in a semiotic way. Music is the science of rhythm and measure, or what he terms “mensuration.” Mensuration deals with “moving well.” He says, “Music is the science of moving well. But that is because whatever

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21 On the importance of *De Musica* to the formation of Augustine, see David C. Alexander, “The Biographical Significance of Augustine’s *De Musica,*” *Studia Patristica* 33 (1997), 3-10.


moves and keeps harmoniously the measuring of times and intervals can already be said to move well. For it is already pleasing, and for this reason is already called mensuration.”

Music is the science of the rhythm of movement. The study of music deals with how one develops an understanding of the general rhythm of things. This understanding of rhythm is not only limited to sounds but to all things that move.

The place of rhythm in music is there to make connections. Augustine understands rhythm as that which connects things. So, the rhythm of an object deals with its own connection with itself, while an object’s rhythm with another object deals with the connection between the two. Thus, the rhythm of something not only connects it internally but allows connections to be made between different things. Part of what it means to develop as a musician is to form one’s “ear” so that one can adjudicate the various connections that exist through rhythm. The way that one begins to understand the nature of rhythm is through one’s innate sense of hearing. Augustine believes nature gives all people a sense of hearing that allows them to hear the music in all

25 Ibid., I.2.3, 175.

26 Ibid., I.3.4, 175.

27 Nancy van Deusen, “De Musica,” in Augustine through the Ages, ed. Allen D. Fitzgerald, O.S.A. (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1999), 575. See also See Catherine Pickstock’s elucidation of rhythm: “In the De Musica, musical rhythm…is characterized, first, by the classification of rhythmic patterns in proportions which remain the same regardless of length of sounding, and, second, by a stress on the importance of intervals as elements which can themselves form part of a rhythmic structure, but which serve also to divide up musical sequences” (Pickstock, “Music: Soul, City, and Cosmos after Augustine,” 247).

28 An obvious objection would be that rhythm is linked with hearing and if someone cannot hear then one would not have rhythm. However, rhythm for Augustine is inherent to the nature of life so that to be alive is to have a rhythm as there is a rhythm to life. Similarly, in this author’s experience, there is even a rhythm to the way that language is used by those who are deaf (the author has a deaf aunt and uncle). In “speaking” to the deaf there is a rhythm to the language used, even if it is not heard by one’s ears.
things. Nature not only endows people with this natural “hearing” of rhythm, but also shows the nature of rhythm in the creation through various examples, like the song of the nightingale, the rhythm of the life of bears and elephants, and the general music at work in nature. Besides, animals are moved by music while also being the creators of a certain rhythm.

Augustine says that the sense of hearing must be cultivated and developed in order to hear the complexity of the rhythm, melody, and harmony at play in creation. This sense of hearing is formed through two things: memory and imitation. He says that the formation comes through practice as it develops mastery through repetition and the subsequent shaping of one’s memory. Augustine believes that practice develops one’s hearing to both listen and play well so one can be a rhythmic person, which develops memory. The cultivation of memory comes when one is able to remember what one heard, how something was played, or if it was done well. Memory allows for connections to be made. The cultivation of memory leads to the second thing needed: imitation. In imitation, the musician, through remembering, imitates what was heard before and tries to duplicate it, perhaps expounding upon it. The musician develops the sense of hearing by explicitly recalling the memories of mensuration and trying to imitate


30 Ibid., I.4.5, 177.

31 This is similar to the formational process of the improvisational musicians in Chapter 3.

32 Ibid., I.4.-9, 181-83.

33 Ibid., I.5.10, 184.
these. Through the dual work of memory and imitation the formation of the self occurs in such a way that one is able to be a person of the rhythm of the world.\textsuperscript{34}

In developing this musical sense, one becomes attuned to the rhythm and harmony of all things. This attunement allows one to hear the rhythm and harmony that rings throughout the creation. For Augustine, the rhythm and harmony of the creation give it rationality. The rational are those things that are proportional as commensurable with each other.\textsuperscript{35} Rationality adheres to a numerical measure.\textsuperscript{36} Rationality gives proportionality to creation. An example that Augustine uses here is that of the number three. This number exemplifies perfect harmony because it is the sum of the first two numbers while also being the next number after the first two. So, three is both the sum of one and two while also being the next number to come after one and two. The number three completes the harmony of the first two numbers.\textsuperscript{37} The harmony in the number three shows the proportion, or harmony, with which the universe is ordered, giving an example of the perfection underlying the nature of creation.\textsuperscript{38}

In Book I of \textit{De Musica} Augustine elucidates the musical nature of the world. In Books II-V, he goes about establishing how it is that one is formed in such a way as to be

\textsuperscript{34} Ibid., I.4.8, 181-82.

\textsuperscript{35} Ibid., I.9.15, 190.

\textsuperscript{36} Ibid., I.11.18, 193-94.


\textsuperscript{38} Augustine, \textit{De Musica}, 1.12.23, 199-200.
able to hear this musical nature of the world. This formation comes through the development of an ear to hear so that one can hear the proportional ordering by which God created.\textsuperscript{39} The ear that Augustine wants the person to develop is one that is based upon listening as this listening attunes one to hear the rhythm of God in creation.\textsuperscript{40} Harmony and rhythm lead to a world of “unending flow.”\textsuperscript{41} Through the development of one’s ear to hear the music of the world one can be attuned to this unending flow of rhythm and harmony in all things.

The mind is able to tap into the rhythm and harmony of the world through one’s attunement to the music of the world and this leads to the mind finding the ratio of the universe.\textsuperscript{42} The mind uses reason to find the rationality at the heart of creation because the rational part of the human person is able to tap into the rationality of the world because they are alike.\textsuperscript{43} Due to this rationality, Augustine concludes that music leaves a trace in both the physical world and in the soul in its giving proportion to things. This ordering conjures a feeling in people and this feeling points to the trace of music through a sense of rhythm in all things. It is the musician who develops this sense that taps into the great rhythm and harmony of the world.\textsuperscript{44} The theologian is the one able to move

\textsuperscript{39} Ibid., I.12.23, 199-200.

\textsuperscript{40} Ibid., III.7.16, 254 and IV.3.4, 266.

\textsuperscript{41} Ibid., III.1.1, 237.

\textsuperscript{42} Ibid., V.5.9-10, 305-6.

\textsuperscript{43} Ibid., V.8.16, 311-12.

\textsuperscript{44} Ibid., I.13.28, 204.
beyond the rhythm and harmony of the world to find the One who has given the creation its rhythm and harmony.

In Book VI of *De Musica*, Augustine shows that the goal of the treatise is to come to God that gives wisdom. Augustine moves from the discussion of music in light of rhythm, measure, and proportion to the way that one knows God. He does this, as he says in *De Trinitate*, because “after practicing the mind’s gaze on the lower image we may be able to shift it from the illuminated creature to the unchangeable illuminating light.” Augustine is not ending the discussion of rhythm and harmony in creation. Instead, he says that one’s understanding of the world as musical allows one to move to the place of being able to contemplate God. This contemplation is the goal of the treatise and all of the liberal arts. The teaching of *De Musica* shows what it means to know God which begins with paying attention. This knowledge of God builds on the corporeal knowledge gained through understanding the world. The one who knows God is both theologian and musician. The musician/ theologian learns to practice the “music” of God through the knowledge of God gained through one’s knowledge of the harmonious and rhythmic universe.

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45 Ibid., VI.1.1, 324. Alexander believes that *De Musica* VI is the first place where Augustine develops a framework for the Christian religious life: see Alexander, “The Biographical Significance of Augustine’s *De Musica*,” 6.

46 Augustine, *The Trinity*, IX.17, 280.

47 In the *Soliloquies*, Augustine responds to the question of how it is that one can know what God wants by simply responding “Pay attention!” (Augustine, *Soliloquies*, II.32, 90).

48 Augustine, *On Music*, VI.2.2, 326. See also *Soliloquies*, I.1, 19.

Augustine recognizes the problem that sin poses to this account. Sin could mar one’s sense of rhythm and harmony. To counter this, Augustine turns to the fact that God creates. As Creator, God allows this goodness to continue to resonate throughout creation.\(^{50}\) The goodness of God points to God’s trace in the world. Through creating, God gives all natures “a rank and species of their own, and a kind of internal harmony.”\(^{51}\) In *City of God* Augustine relates that it is not nature that is contrary to God, but vice: the creation still maintains some good because it was created good, acting as a vestige which points to the Triune God.\(^{52}\) God’s goodness allows the listener to be attuned to God as long as one has cultivated a disposition that opens one to be able to hear rightly. The problem of sin is not that one hears the wrong harmony or rhythm in creation, but that one is not in tune because one has not been tuned or is playing wrongly.\(^{53}\)

The knowledge of God moves from the corporeal to the incorporeal or from the creation to the Creator. Creation acts as a reminder of the Creator through its “original beauty” which God has woven into its very fabric.\(^{54}\) From this interaction between knowledge of creation and the Creator, the idea of God as the Creator *ex nihilo* arises for Augustine. *Creatio ex nihilo* points to the separateness of the Creator from creation, but also reinforces the idea that the One who creates does so through the giving of being through order, form, and beauty. This leads Carol Harrison to say, “Creation is both the

\(^{50}\) Augustine, *True Religion*, 44, 57-8.

\(^{51}\) Augustine, *City of God*, XII.5, 384.

\(^{52}\) Ibid., XII.3, 382-83.


\(^{54}\) Augustine, *True Religion*, 72, 78.
work of grace and the way in which grace works.”55 The beginning of moving to knowledge of God in wisdom leads to the transformation of the person through the work of God’s grace. The one who has not tuned one’s ear to hear God is stuck in the corporeal while the one who has been formed rightly has learned to hear God. Hearing God rightly moves the soul further towards the incorporeal.56 Augustine makes this point more explicitly in De Trinitate where he talks of the transformation of the believer through contemplation. The way that contemplation, leading to wisdom, works is to meditate upon the relationship of God to God’s creation.57 The contemplation of God’s relationship with the creation opens one to see that God overcomes the distance between Godself and creation while also endowing creation with the necessary ability to move to God. One can know the hierarchy of being that exists and how the harmony of the universe operates, made apparent in the order, structure, and reason of creation. One is able to hear this when attunement to God occurs for the person.58

Augustine meditates upon the order of being in creation through the triadic relationship of the body, soul, and God. He notices the harmony that exists between the three, talking of the relationship as a “harmonic structure.”59 When he evaluates the

55 Harrison, Rethinking Augustine’s Early Theology, 100.
57 Augustine, The Trinity, V.17, 201.
relationship between the three, he begins with body and soul. He says that the body and soul need to exist in a mutual harmony and rhythm to each other. If the body and soul did not exist in this type of relationship then they would affect each other in negative ways. The reason that the body and soul exist in such a relationship of mutuality, in rhythm and harmony with the each other, is because the being of the body comes from its form and the form comes from the soul. The relationship between the body and soul reflects the one between the soul and God. The soul must exist in a proper harmony with God by finding the rhythm of God in the world. For Augustine, when the soul is rightly tuned into God the life of the body is easier as it exists in its proper place.

The discussion of the relationship that exists between the body, soul, and God points to the harmony of creation for Augustine. In all of creation there exists a “sensible harmony”; however, the question that Augustine asks is what it is that one loves in “sensible harmony.” The One to love in a sensible harmony is God, the One whose harmony is being played and heard throughout the creation. Augustine makes this explicit in the following statement: “Thus there is beauty in every single thing, with [God] making it, and with [God] arranging them in regular order there is beauty in all things together.”


62 Ibid., VI.10.26, 351-52.

creation. This giving of form is the giving of existence and being, making form an ontological category. Form gives coherence to creation. This coherence reflects its being in God and it is through this that one can begin to reflect upon God and move to a deeper knowledge of God. Thus, the trace of God in creation is its order and being which is what gives it its harmony and rhythm.

The way that one learns to recognize the trace of the harmony and rhythm of God in the creation comes from a study of Scripture. This study of scripture results in moving the soul and mind to dwell in the spiritual things of God by attuning one to God by a restoration of one’s delight in the reasonableness of the creation. Augustine uses the repetition of reciting scripture—specifically the Psalms in a musical manner—to orient him to the reality of God especially in the creation. Attunement to God comes from listening to scripture and allowing scripture to form one so that one can tap into the trace of the sound of God. The study of scripture “exhorts us only to love our God and Lord with all our heart, with all our soul, and with all our mind, and love our neighbor as ourself? If, then, we refer all those motions and numbers of human action to this end, we

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64 Harrison, *Rethinking Augustine’s Early Theology*, 100-01. The idea that form is an ontological category will become more important in the discussion of *Confessions* as the distinction is made between the One who gives form and those who have form.


shall certainly be cleansed." The study of scripture opens one to the reality of God and allows one to take delight in the goodness of creation.

This attunement to God allows the soul to “soar” to God through the transformation of the soul. The transformation that happens in the inner soul comes through the ability of the soul to pay attention to those things encountered by the outer soul in the visible beauty of the creation. The result is an attunement to God that comes from the transformation of the whole self so that one can be rightly constituted within the beauty of the creation as ordered by God. From this constitution in the order of God’s creation, one can learn to love the true Beauty of God over the inferior, corporeal beauty of those things on earth. The result is a rightly ordered love which loves God above all things, even the self, and learns to love all lower things as they exist in the creation. The soul learns to love God by being attuned to God through the love of God that comes initially from hearing the trace of God in creation.

This elucidation of *De Musica* offers the first step in the argument of this chapter. However, throughout this discussion, the problem of how one can conceive the inconceivable in God has persisted. Augustine has consistently pressed the point that the

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69 Ibid., VI.15.50, 371.
71 Ibid., 77, 81-82.
73 Ibid., VI.14.46, 368.
74 Ibid., VI.16.53, 374.
theologian can actually say something about God without destroying the nature of God. This comes to a head in Book VI with the discussion of how it is that humans can have knowledge of God. Augustine is not sure how to deal with this problem. This necessitates deepening the discussion by analyzing further forms for thinking God in the Augustinian corpus. Here, I turn to *De Doctrina Christiana* and *Confessions*. In these texts, Augustine works within theological forms that allow the Divine to irrupt and come to the fore by leaving room for that which is unthinkable in God. The ineffable nature of God results in a denial of closure to any discourse on God. For Augustine, this means that there arises a necessity to use a variety of forms to think God.

B. Finding the Groove: Rhetoric as Form in *De Doctrina Christiana*

The turn to *De Doctrina Christiana* is natural after an exposition of *De Musica* as both develop a theology of liberal arts. Both texts offer a way of thinking God within the context of the liberal arts. The taking up of *De Doctrina Christiana* at this point in the current project is to begin to probe the questions left unasked by *De Musica* but which are important to the scope of this project: mainly, “how can one think God in a

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way that pays attention to the fact that God is inconceivable?” and “how does theology allow for something new to be put forth about God?” 77 In what follows, I will analyze De Doctrina Christiana in order to see how Augustine explores these questions and how his thinking here is carried out in Confessions.

A central insight that De Doctrina Christiana relies upon is that the text is meant to train the reader to hear/see the Good and Beauty which only exist in God. 78 In De Doctrina Christiana the argument is more concerned with finding the way in which to best interpret Scripture and then communicate that interpretation. 79 Augustine relies on a logic of attunement that results in a hermeneutic of love. Love is the key to Augustine’s approach to interpreting Scripture, leading David Tracy to say, “That key to a true interpretation is caritas: the transformation of our eros by God’s agape of grace.” 80 However, before one becomes attuned to interpret through love there needs to be a transformation through purification. 81 This transformation results in a way of life and rhetoric which opens one to reading Scripture through the hermeneutic of love. The

77 Both of these questions arise from the “Augustinian Paradox” as it is laid out by T.J. von Bavel, O.S.A. See his “God in between Affirmation and Negation According to Augustine,” 84.


interpreter is formed in a way to practice the hermeneutic of love in all interpretation. The result is an understanding of the bible as a text of human words that are signs pointing to a reality beyond itself (the divine) but which never fully realize this reality and so a gap exists between the signs and the reality. The hermeneutic of love overcomes this through an interpretation that does not seek the right form but the correct way of speaking and being in light of one’s attunement to God through love.

In order to approach De Doctrina Christiana in a way that most adequately deals with the questions just asked, I will begin with Book IV. Augustine explicitly makes the move to rhetoric as what is most appropriate for using a hermeneutic of love to think God. His concern is with a right interpretation of Scripture through the development of a way of life. For Augustine, it does not matter how one interprets Scripture or the words one uses to point to God if one’s life does not reflect the transformation that has occurred because of one’s encounter with God. The life of the one claiming to be a Christian should also reflect the change that has taken place due to this conversion as the words one uses are not as meaningful as the life one leads. As Augustine says, “…whatever the grandeur of the speaker’s utterances, his manner of life carries more weight.”

Augustine believes that a major part of the substance of any talk of God is the life of the one doing the saying. Book IV offers an account of how the Christian thinker

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83 Augustine, Teaching Christianity, IV.59, 237-38.
84 Ibid., IV.59, 237.
85 Ibid., IV.61, 238-39.
communicates the gospel through living one’s life, as the text is a “living text” which addresses the truth of God as it is found in Scripture and one’s life.\textsuperscript{86} Augustine believes this counters the possibility of one who composes a beautiful sermon but leads a life that does not give credence to the sermon.\textsuperscript{87} For Augustine, this person is trying to communicate something that this one does not know and trying to use a rhetoric that one cannot use.\textsuperscript{88} Thus, central to proclaiming the gospel is the disposition of the one who does the proclaiming.\textsuperscript{89} The role of the pastor, then, is to display Jesus Christ through an imitation of the life of Jesus.\textsuperscript{90}

The rhetoric that Augustine advocates is one that reflects this way of life, a way of being that pronounces the gospel as love with one’s mouth and one’s actions. Attunement is at the heart of this, as the rhetoric that lives in tune with God is rightly ordered, with the goal not so much understanding God through systematizations but being open to following God. This results in wisdom (sapientia), not just knowledge (scientia). The wisdom comes from the continued exploration of the multiple senses of Scripture, understanding not only the literal things that happened but the God behind

\textsuperscript{86} John D. Schaffer, “The Dialectic of Orality and Literacy: The Case of Book IV of Augustine’s \textit{De Doctrina Christiana},” in \textit{The Rhetoric of St. Augustine of Hippo: De Doctrina Christiana and the Search for a Distinctly Christian Rhetoric}, eds. Richard Leo Enos, et al. (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2008), 295. Schaffer makes this clear when he says, “In the ancient world, every text involved a performance whose effect was not just informational or cognitive but also dramatic and emotional” (295).

\textsuperscript{87} Augustine, \textit{Teaching Christianity}, IV.60, 238.

\textsuperscript{88} Ibid., IV.62, 239-40.

\textsuperscript{89} Ibid., IV.4, 202.

\textsuperscript{90} Margaret R. Miles, \textit{Desire and Delight: A New Reading of Augustine’s Confessions} (New York: Crossroad, 1992), 118.
these and how Scripture always leads to love.\textsuperscript{91} When one can properly understand Scripture as moving one to love of God and neighbor at all times, then one moves into the place of actually practicing the rhetoric properly.\textsuperscript{92} The goal of rhetoric is to move people to act. The interpreter sways people to action by giving them a love to imitate, which opens them up to how the love of God is expressed.\textsuperscript{93} The rhetoric Augustine intends wants to move people to love so that they may assent to God.\textsuperscript{94}

The center of this way of life for Augustine is prayer, not an ethical system or correct interpretation of God’s laws. Prayer leads the believer to be able to practice this rhetoric rightly.\textsuperscript{95} Maschke says that Augustine’s theology of prayer lies in a “gracious conformation” which is “the humble restructuring or reforming of the Christian life to the divine will as empowered by the assurance of God’s grace.”\textsuperscript{96} Prayer is that activity that attunes one to God because it is an activity where one orients oneself to be with God.\textsuperscript{97} For Augustine the person who is charged with speaking the gospel should be one who is first a pray-er rather than a speaker. Prayer is that which allows one to say things that are

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\textsuperscript{91} Augustine, \textit{Teaching Christianity}, IV.7, 204. Two examples that Augustine uses here are Paul and Amso (\textit{Teaching Christianity}, IV.9-21, 205-212). Amos is most important for the purposes of this project as he is concerned not only with what is said but also addresses the way things are said (\textit{Teaching Christianity}, IV.15, 209).

\textsuperscript{92} See, for example, \textit{Teaching Christianity}, I.39,123.

\textsuperscript{93} Ibid., IV.27, 215-16.

\textsuperscript{94} Ibid., IV.29, 216-17.

\textsuperscript{95} Ibid., IV.32, 218.


\textsuperscript{97} Ibid., 435.
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“good and holy” and which are also understood, enjoyed, and obeyed by listeners.\textsuperscript{98} Thus, prayer is not so much a correct belief system as a crying out to God, a way of being open to God in such a way that the theologian can then hear God. Prayer brings out the humility of the theologian by helping one recognize one’s place as creature in the creation with all goods coming from the Creator.\textsuperscript{99}

The language that the theologian uses for thinking God comes from the practice of prayer. The rhetoric the theologian uses is that of praise out of love.\textsuperscript{100} The language used reflects the beauty and order of the One loved. The prayer that attunes the theologian to God results in a theology that praises God through the language of love. It is a theology that seeks to praise God, as well, not only in one’s speaking, but also in the life of the theologian through love. This life becomes not just the basis for the proper Christian rhetoric, but the rhetoric itself.\textsuperscript{101}

The theological reason that Augustine advocates this kind of rhetoric in love through prayer is found in Book I of \textit{De Doctrina Christiana}. In Book I the basis for this rhetoric is put forth by opening the way in which the theologian can be formed and attuned in such a way as to be able to “speak” a rhetoric like this. This attunement is twofold, encompassing an attunement to God while also being attuned to the people to whom one is trying to communicate the gospel.\textsuperscript{102} The attunement necessary for

\textsuperscript{98} Augustine, \textit{Teaching Christianity} IV.32, 218.

\textsuperscript{99} Griffiths, \textit{Duplicity}, 60.

\textsuperscript{100} Augustine, \textit{Teaching Christianity}, IV.38, 222.

\textsuperscript{101} Ibid., IV.38, 222-23.

\textsuperscript{102} Ibid., I.1, 106.
performing this kind of rhetoric comes from the ability to see to what a sign may point back, which is only possible if one has a rightly ordered love. A rightly ordered love allows one to practice the hermeneutic of love; Book I shows the impetus for this hermeneutic of love. This rhetoric opens theology up to becoming a (de)centered, unstructured form.

Here, a brief exposition of Augustine’s discussion of signs/things and use/enjoy becomes quite helpful. This discussion should provide a bit of an overview to the kind of thinking that Augustine embraces here while also setting the parameters of the discussion of what the nature of creation is like in order for something like the incarnation of the Word to occur. Augustine uses his conception of “signs” to talk about how one understands the “invisible things” of God. The discussion of signs/things is necessary because if one is ignorant of the things to which scripture and creation point, then one cannot read these signs correctly. Thus, all creation is a series of signs that humanity is to use to attune itself to the ultimate thing to be enjoyed—the Triune


105 Augustine, Teaching Christianity, I.2-7, 106-9.

106 Slocum, “De Doctrina Christiana and Musical Semiotics in Medieval Culture,” 143. Slocum also says that this principle allowed a view of music to develop that was metaphysical, “wherein it could act as a speculum of the universe, a means whereby one might apprehend the harmony of God’s universe” (143).

107 Augustine, Teaching Christianity, II.24, 141-42.
God. The sign of creation can point to the Thing (God) because “the distinguishing characteristic of the useful sign is that it is not either literal or figurative, but both literal and figurative.”  God can be called a thing because a thing is “something whose being is not determined by the function or meaning of something else.” Thus, God is the only thing as God alone is not determined by anything else. From this, Augustine determines that God alone is to be enjoyed because God is the only proper thing while everything else is to be used to grow in knowledge so that one may contemplate God.

The contemplation of the signs leads humanity to be able to see the truth of creation as that which leads to a contemplation of God and attunement to God. For Augustine, in the incarnation the Word is “tuned” to humanity and humanity is “tuned” to God. Rowan Williams underscores this interpretation of Augustine, saying that “…the incarnation manifests the essential quality of the world itself as ‘sign’ or trace of its maker.” The incarnation of the Word offers Augustine a theological site that allows him to begin thinking how it is that the person can look at and contemplate creation and begin to move from here into a deeper wisdom of God.


110 Ibid., 139-40.

111 Augustine, Teaching Christianity, I.9, 110.

112 Augustine, The Trinity, I.22, 82.

113 Williams, “Language, Reality and Desire in Augustine’s De Doctrina Christiana,” 141.
The contemplation necessary to move to wisdom comes in being attuned to God through a process of purification. This process of purification comes through the imitation of Jesus, the One who attuned humanity to God so that humanity could come to wisdom and live the life of love. The imitation of Jesus leads to the good life because the imitation of Jesus is a form of contemplation which makes one capable of living a godly life that speaks to the reality of God’s love. Living the good life opens one to being united to God in love, where one’s life shows the enjoyment of God and this allows the theologian to apprehend God in and through love. Thus, the life of Jesus Christ becomes that which opens up the contemplation of God leading to wisdom, but this contemplation is done through the imitation of Jesus in one’s life. By doing this, one lives the life of love that allows the kind of thinking necessary for exploring the nature of the Word and how the Word’s incarnation endows the creation as the sign leading to further, deeper contemplation of God in wisdom.

The reason that an imitation of Jesus leads to wisdom is because of the nature of the incarnation of the Word. What teaches one to hear, know, and love God is the incarnation where Jesus Christ, as Wisdom, adopts human form and communicates


115 Ibid., I.14, 75.

Godself to humanity without losing the essence of God. In order to further articulate how it is that the Word takes on full humanity, Augustine draws on Phil. 2. He points to Paul’s assertion in Phil. 2 that the Word takes on the form of the servant. Augustine shows how the Word, as the Second Person of the Triune God, takes on human personhood and so enters the economy of being human. There now is able to be a harmony between Creator and created as the incarnate Word makes possible the perfect existing together of the full natures of the human and divine. There is a harmony that now exists within creation as it relates to itself—the Word seems to bring harmony to the whole of creation. Since God has come into the world through the Incarnation, the world has been “baptized” by God in a way that all things contain the trace of God. This trace comes from the Wisdom of God who creates and inhabits the world. The Incarnation leaves the trace of God in all of creation so that the one attuned rightly to God can hear this trace and use these things as signs that point to God.

Augustine’s thought is christomorphic and theocentric especially as it practices the hermeneutic of love. Since the hermeneutic of love is central to the entire theological project pursued by Augustine, it becomes quite apparent that the doctrine of

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118 See Augustine, *The Trinity*, I.14, 74-75. It is important to note that Augustine draws the metaphysical argument for how the Word becomes human from a passage that stresses the action that Jesus does, not only in the incarnation but also in his life on earth. The imitation of Jesus as servant seems to be at the work in the background, leading one back up the order of being from servant to incarnate Word to the Godhead.

119 Ibid., IV.4, 155.

120 Augustine, *Teaching Christianity*, I.12, 111.

121 Tracy, “Charity, Obscurity, Clarity: Augustine’s Search for a True Rhetoric,” 279.
the incarnation—and the type of theological thinking that arises from this doctrine—sets
the way in which theology is done. In imitation of Christ, the theologian is a mediator
and should open others to God through his or her right attunement to God. The reason
that this is possible for the theologian is because of the incarnation. The doctrine of the
incarnation acts as the theological site for attuning people, and creation, to God because
this is the place where the ultimate revelation takes place from God to humanity. Thus,
the incarnation is the place where people are able to be attuned to God as it in this act that
God heals the disease that is sin so that people may dwell with God.

The incarnation makes possible this attunement to God and that results in the
healing of sin through the right ordering of love, loving God above all else and loving all
other things because they bring one closer to God. A rightly ordered love leads the
person to enjoy only God. This single enjoyment comes from the fact that God alone is
to be enjoyed as all other things are signs pointing to God. From this, one loves all
things, in the love of God, because God “flows” through all things—all of creation—with

[122] John M. Norris, “The Theological Structure of Augustine’s Exegesis in the Tractatus in
Euangelium Ioannis,” in Augustine: Presbyter Factus Sum, Collectanea Augustiniana, eds. Joseph T.
even says that the theological principle that guides Augustine is “his understanding of God’s revelation to
humanity through the incarnation of the Word” (385).

[123] For more on the mediating nature of the incarnation, see Brian E. Daley, S.J., “Incarnation,” in
Augustine through the Ages, ed. Allan D. Fitzgerald, O.S.A. (Grand Rapids and Cambridge: Wm. B.

[124] Augustine, Teaching Christianity, I.13, 112.

[125] Ibid., I.34, 121.

[126] Ibid., I.20, 114.
no-thing being separate from the love of God.\textsuperscript{127} The result of the incarnation is the created being “glued”—or attuned—to God through the life of Jesus Christ, who was equal to God the Father and an equal of humanity. It is Jesus Christ’s taking on of both natures that humanity can be attuned to God and “may abide forever in that supreme and unchangeable good.”\textsuperscript{128} The incarnation teaches the Christian how it is that God disseminates grace, as a gift in and through love.\textsuperscript{129} The response of the theologian is to reflect upon this and begin to pursue a similar way of responding to God through love.

Drawing from the nature of thinking that arises when one begins doing theology from the incarnation, Augustine argues that love is the key to a right interpretation of Scripture. In fact, love is the unifying theme of \textit{De Doctrina Christiana}.\textsuperscript{130} Any correct interpretation of Scripture begins from a hermeneutic of love since this way of interpreting gives credence to the fact that all interpretations must point to love of God and love of neighbor.\textsuperscript{131} This love of God and love of neighbor “becomes the means by which a new wisdom is born…[This love] becomes the means to discover the true meaning (and thereby the true arguments) from the new classics—the Scriptures.”\textsuperscript{132} The real importance of the hermeneutic of love is that it opens the possibility of correctly

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{127} Ibid., I.21, 115.
\item \textsuperscript{128} Ibid., I.38, 123.
\item \textsuperscript{129} Daley, “Incarnation,” 168-69.
\item \textsuperscript{131} Augustine, \textit{Teaching Christianity}, I.39-40, 123-24. See also III.24, 180.
\item \textsuperscript{132} Tracy, “Charity, Obscurity, Clarity: Augustine’s Search for a True Rhetoric,” 279.
\end{itemize}
interpreting Scripture and forming a properly Christian rhetoric in light of this interpretation. One can hear this advocated when Augustine says, “So if it seems to you that you have understood the divine scriptures, or any part of them, in such a way that by this understanding you do not build up this twin love of God and neighbor, then you have not understood them.”133 His argument for the necessity of all of Scripture leading to the life of love gives Augustine the ability to argue that all of Scripture, even figurative expressions, must be interpreted as encouraging love of God and neighbor because scripture “commands nothing but charity, or love, and censures nothing but cupidity, or greed, and that is the way it gives shape and form to human morals.”134 This interpretive paradigm does not dominate thinking on God but leads to a rightly ordered love. To reach this conclusion Augustine has drawn on 1 Tim 1:5 which says, partly, that “the end of the commandment is love.”135 The end of interpreting Scripture is the twofold love—first of God and second of the neighbor.

Part of developing the ability to perform this hermeneutic of love is to properly practice the love of one’s neighbor. Augustine extends the love of neighbor to all people, saying, “All people are to be loved equally; but since you cannot be of service to everyone, you have to take greater care of those who are more closely joined to you by a turn, so to say, of fortune’s wheel, whether by occasion of place or time, or any other

133 Augustine, *Teaching Christianity*, I.40, 124.

134 Ibid., III.15, 176 and III.20, 178.

135 Ibid., I.27, 118. See also I.44, 125.
such circumstance.”

Augustine then says that love of neighbor is really an extension of the love of God, that a person cannot enjoy another person as a thing, but should love the person to grow closer to God. Part of this loving is also to help the other person learn to love God. It seems here that Augustine devalues the person for God by making love of the neighbor more concerned with increasing one’s own love of God rather than actually loving the neighbor as neighbor. However, as both John C. Cavadini and Oliver O’Donovan make apparent, for Augustine to love one’s neighbor for God’s sake is to love them as other and not use them for some sort of ends, to embrace them as they are instead of trying to make the neighbor into someone the same as “me.” The love of neighbor is extended to the neighbor as neighbor without the intention of overcoming their otherness to make them the same. This practice of the love of neighbor extends to enemies as well, without worrying about what the enemy may do because this enemy can never rob one of what one loves. Thus, it is the love of God that leads to love of

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136 Ibid., I.29, 118. It could be argued that Augustine is limiting love of neighbor when in reality he is saying that taking care of those that are near is most important because they are the closest in proximity. This is not to devalue loving the neighbor on the other side of town, the country, the sea, or the world. This view could be attributed to Augustine in De Doctrina Christiana I.31, 119-120 where he offers a commentary on Luke 10 (the Parable of the Good Samaritan) that focuses on extending compassion to all people without prejudice.

137 Ibid., I.30, 119.


139 Augustine, Teaching Christianity, I.35.

140 Ibid., I.30, 119. Augustine makes a similar argument, saying “We should indeed be willing to help everyone, even those who have harmed us or wish to harm us or with at least that harm befall us. This is true religion, this is perfect religion, this alone is religion; and it is through this instrument that reinstatement with God has to do with the greatness of the soul which we are examining and which makes
neighbor, but the love of neighbor is just as important, opening the theologian to remember all those others who are not accounted for. In fact, while love of God is first in the order of being commanded, love of neighbor is first in order of performing with “authentic love of neighbor [as] the first realization of our love of God.”

Love is the form that theological thinking follows in order to properly execute the rhetoric Augustine promulgates. Love opens avenues for thinking God that are concerned with being rightly attuned to God. Love does not seek to dominate or control the thinking of God, but to be in a dynamic state due to the dynamic nature of attunement. As Rowan Williams makes clear in his commentary on De Doctrina Christiana, part of the task of this text is to resist premature closure of the interpretation of scripture, instead opting for a hermeneutic “which indefinitely postpones fulfillment…” This is the hermeneutic of love. Thus, the concern of Augustine is similar to that of Derrida—to resist closure of discourse especially discourse about God. Theology that takes the form of love as its basis then seeks to follow God in God’s love for neighbor, to follow God in God’s desire for a rightly ordered creation, and to follow God in God’s overall movement. The result is an attunement to God that opens one to think and contemplate God through the nature of love. Thus, De Doctrina Christiana opens further the questions advanced earlier—namely what form is available it worthy of freedom. For He frees from all things whom it is most useful for all to serve, and to be content in whose service is perfect freedom—the only freedom” (Augustine, The Greatness of the Soul, 78, 108).


142 Williams, “Language, Reality and Desire in Augustine’s De Doctrina Christiana,” 142-43.

143 Jeffrey McCurry, “Towards a Poetics of Theological Creativity: Rowan Williams Reads Augustine’s De Doctrina Christiana after Derrida,” Modern Theology 23, no. 3 (July 2007), 422.
for thinking God and how it is that the theologian can say something new—through a
turn to rhetoric as pursued through the hermeneutic of love.

C. Improvising Freely: The Form of the Confessions

Augustine’s *Confessions* continues the hermeneutic of love pursued in *De Doctrina Christiana*. However, the *Confessions* does not seek a form of rhetoric, but develops the form of the formless, or the form of transformation. In *Confessions* Augustine moves the type of theology necessary for thinking God into a place that takes seriously the formless, or unstructured, nature of God. Augustine wants to trace the movement of love and how it transforms him in the first nine books and then in the last four books, he examines how this reciprocal love transforms the way one views the world. Augustine offers a way of orienting the self so that one can begin to move into a trans-formed way of thinking God that is predicated upon love. This love puts the self back together in a way that allows the person to attune oneself to God, relearning the rhythm and tempos life that were broken when one was outside this love.

Book I of *Confessions* orients the reader to what Augustine hopes to accomplish in the subsequent twelve books by offering an overview of the story of love that he will

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145 To say that God is formless is not to imply that God does not exist or that God has no form. Rather, the implication is that any attempt to think God must take into account the infinite number of forms available for doing theology and thinking God. To infer that God is formless is to make the claim that God is pluri-form with no one form dominating.


The text gives a way for Augustine to orient his entire existence around God because God gives intelligibility to his life. By using narrative, Augustine allows others to read how God gives intelligibility to live so that they may learn how it happens. The ground of Augustine’s theology here is his experience of the love of God and how he responds to this. He sees God leading him back to God as every movement away from God is actually bringing Augustine back to God. This ground does not act as a dominating factor but as the beginning of Augustine’s attunement to God. The possibility of attunement comes from Augustine asking God to “open the ears of [his] heart.” When he finally learns to love through the encounter with God, he then is attuned to God and is able to improvise upon theology, moving into the formless through a meditation upon God’s action in creation. The step into the formless is why Augustine uses “sound” language to discuss this encounter with God as love is the only response possible because it is a non-forming, non-dominating approach to God.

Augustine narrates his movement in the first seven books to the place where he actually learns to love God. He moves from ideology and worldview to ideology and worldview in a search for a philosophy of life because he cannot find a view of God that

148 Augustine, *Confessions*, II.1, 62.

149 Matthews, “Book One: The Presumptuousness of Autobiography,” 22. Margaret R. Miles makes a similar assertion, arguing that Augustine wants to reorient one’s pleasure, seeking this in God and not all the other things that take pleasure away from God (see Miles, *Desire an Delight: A New Reading of Augustine’s Confessions*, 19-20).

150 Augustine, *Confessions*, I.5, 42.
is reasonable and rational. He goes from astrology to Manicheism (*Confessions* IV-V) to Skepticism (*Confessions* V.19) to Stoicism and Neo-Platonism (*Confessions* VII) and, finally, to being a Christian (*Confessions* VIII). This retelling of the story opens Augustine to the love that God had for him in that God never left or abandoned him, even though he was dealing in false ideologies that were seemingly leading away from God. Further, these different philosophies embraced by him made him an “enigma” to himself because he was lost, out of tune and step with the rest of creation because he was away from the grace of God that truly gives a person his or her humanity. Each one brings Augustine closer to the garden in Book VIII, where he has an encounter with God through the reading of Paul. This encounter finally opens Augustine up to the love of God and allows him to embrace this love while also reciprocating the love. The whole confession is a movement to this embrace with God in love, finally giving Augustine an attunement to the Triune God.

The attunement to God in Augustine’s narrative is introduced in Book VII and completed in Book VIII. In Book VII, Augustine gains the theoretical apparatuses he deems necessary in order to believe that the Christian God may well be real. He moves from the discussion of the problem of evil to freeing himself from the astrology of Firminus to finally finding guidance in the “books of the Platonists.” Neo-Platonism plays the most significant role in his “intellectual conversion” as this philosophy gives a

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151 This is quite noticeable in *Confessions* VI.5, 139-40 where Augustine feels tremendous relief when he finds a conception of God that does not relegate God to the class of the created.

152 Augustine, *Confessions*, IV.9, 97.


154 Ibid., VII.4ff, 161ff.
framework within which the Word may be born wholly from God and not coming from
the desire, lust, and flesh of humanity, again allowing Augustine to keep separate the
nature of God from the created.\textsuperscript{155} However, this theoretical idea of God is not yet an
attuned, transformed faith, resulting in God giving “new form to [his] deformity.”\textsuperscript{156}
The result of Book VII is epistemological, not mystical/ontological, giving Augustine a
knowledge (\textit{scientia}) but not through wisdom (\textit{sapientia}) which brings trans-formation.\textsuperscript{157}
Since the result is not a trans-formation, Neo-Platonism ultimately does not satisfy his
spiritual desire.\textsuperscript{158} This desire could not be fulfilled until he embraced Jesus Christ, as
the Word, as the mediator between God and humanity.\textsuperscript{159}

Book VIII completes Book VII by telling the story of when Augustine is
converted in an ontological or mystical way to Christianity. This conversion is a
reconciliation with Christianity.\textsuperscript{160} This reconciliation is very powerful, though, as the
Latin term \textit{conversio} makes apparent—\textit{conversio} means something akin to “turning
around” or “change.”\textsuperscript{161} Augustine’s conversion through a reconciliation of himself with
Christianity is a turning from the life that led away from the Christian God to the embrace

\textsuperscript{155} Ibid., VII.14, 170-71.

\textsuperscript{156} Ibid., VII.12, 169.

\textsuperscript{157} Phillip Cary, “Book VII: Inner Vision as the Goal of Augustine’s Life,” in \textit{A Reader’s
Companion to Augustine’s Confessions}, eds. Kim Paffenroth and Robert P. Kennedy (Louisville and

\textsuperscript{158} Augustine, \textit{Confessions}, VII.16, 173.

\textsuperscript{159} Ibid., VII.24, 178.

\textsuperscript{160} Harrison, \textit{Rethinking Augustine’s Early Theology: An Argument for Continuity}, 22.

\textsuperscript{161} E. Ann Matter, “Conversion(s) in the \textit{Confessions},” in Augustine: “Second Founder of the
of Christianity through the experience of Christ as mediator. Through the (re)embracing of Christianity in an ontological manner Augustine reorients his life around the love of God. This leads to a deeper attunement to God in and through this love. The conversion of Augustine is not concerned with finding a “greater certainty” but wants to cultivate oneself so that one can have “a more steadfast abiding in [God].” There is a transformation of one’s deepest desire as Augustine shows that there is a complete reorientation of himself from being a person who was not at peace because of a set of wrongly ordered desires to a person who has the one desire to love God and neighbor. Margaret Miles sees the conversion of Augustine as a transformation of pleasure. She says that Book VIII ultimately tells the story of how Augustine gives up seeking pleasure in either sex or knowledge outside of God because all of his desires are fulfilled in God and God alone. The reading of Paul in the garden transforms Augustine by getting rid of the voices that drive his desire for sexual pleasure by filling this space with the happiness that comes from being loved by and loving God.

The transformation that Augustine narrates begins with a series of conversations that he has with others around him. These are concerned with what the right philosophy is or how to lead one’s life and similar topics. For Augustine, these conversations raise

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162 José Oroz Reta, O.R.A. reinforces this when he says, “The whole focus of Christian conversion is the return to God…from which the soul has distanced itself through sin. However, the ‘return to self’ is also a return to God, from whom disobedience and sin have caused such distance…” (José Oroz Reta, O.A.R., “Conversion,” trans. Augustine Esposito, O.S.A. in Augustine through the Ages, ed. Allan D. Fitzgerald, O.S.A. (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1999), 239.

163 Augustine, Confessions, VIII.1, 184.

164 Ibid., VIII.1-3, 184-87.

165 Margaret R. Miles, Desire and Delight: A New Reading of Augustine’s Confessions, 32-35.
an internal conflict. This inner conflict ultimately leads him to the garden, where he hears the voice of God and picks up the book of Paul sitting on the bench, reads and has his ears opened to the music of God. At this moment, Augustine realizes that God has been with him throughout his life and was bringing him to this point to be reoriented into the life of love as led by the Christian. In this conversion, Augustine becomes tuned to the trace of God in the creation in sound. In fact, even in this scene, Augustine does not have a vision of God telling him to pick up the book but hears the voice of God and then also hears God speaking through the singing of children, exhorting him to “Pick it up and read, pick it up and read” (referring to the book of Paul). The importance of sound inside the narrative of the Confessions shows Augustine’s attunement to God and detailing how this attunement leads to orienting oneself differently, leading to a different way of seeing oneself as part of the creation. The transformation opens the converted up to the divine in creation so that one can move to a deeper attunement to God through a contemplation of the divine in creation.

After Book VIII he makes a fundamental change, no longer articulating his embrace of Christianity and the attunement to God in love. In this last part of

167 Ibid., VIII.19ff, 199ff.
168 Ibid., VIII.25, 204.
169 Ibid., VIII.29, 206.
170 Matters, “Conversion(s) in the *Confessions*,” 25.
Confessions, the move is toward a deeper love of God aroused through a meditation upon God’s creation. This meditation comes with the realization that the human person must find a home as created and find one’s image solely in the activity of God as Creator. Augustine begins to view the events of his life through the lens of Scripture. Augustine looks to improvise with the way to think God in creation by playing upon the words “In the beginning God created heaven and earth.” He does not get past this line. The improvisation is a theology that plays on this line and opens theological thinking into a formlessness.

The ability to think theologically in this manner comes from his continued personal formation through the singing of Psalms. Paul Burns suggests that it is Augustine’s immersion in the Psalms through daily recitation and singing that leads to his somewhat unique use of these texts in the Confessions: Augustine uses the texts to shape his memory by changing the form and style of the Psalms. The singing of the Psalms allows Augustine to be so immersed in the text that he feels comfortable enough to transform them so that they work appropriately in his theological writing. He discusses how the words being “sung sensitively by a tuneful voice” does something to him, moving

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172 Williams, “Sapientia and the Trinity: Reflections on the De Trinitate,” 18. This meditation stems from Williams’ elucidation of how Augustine understands the creation: “Creation, then, is the realm in which good or beauty or stability, the condition in which everything is most freely and harmoniously itself in balance with everything else, is being sought and being formed” (Williams, “Good for Nothing? Augustine on Creation,” 18).


174 See Augustine, Confessions, IX.18ff, 223ff.

him to a desire for a deeper piety. However, Augustine struggles with this desire, feeling a sense of guilt from the effect that this singing has on him. This guilt comes from the fact that this is not the way that ideas are usually expressed or pursued; however, Augustine is moved by the music. Eventually, he comes to the point of realizing that the singing of the Psalms and the hearing of other people singing beautifully are formational and evocative elements that attune him deeper to the trace of God in the creation. Thus, the guilt subsides by the time that Augustine begins Book XIII, where he begins with a quoting of the Psalms to orient his thoughts and open the topic he wishes to cover, the nature of creation. The recitation through song of the Psalms acts as a formational practice for Augustine. Through this practice Augustine can contemplate the nature of the unchangeable God, the One who gives existence and form to all of creation. This practice of recitation leads Augustine into a deeper contemplation of God as formless in that what distinguishes the creation from the Creator is the fact that the creation has a fixed form while God is without such form: the unchangeable is not subject to the changeable nature of the form.

Augustine can now move to a discussion of how attunement to God leads to a contemplation of the work of God in creation. In narrating how he comes to embrace the work of God in creation, he begins by establishing the nature of God as immanently involved in creation. He does so through a discussion of how God has attuned Godself to

\[\text{\footnotesize 176 Augustine, Confessions, X.49, 269.}\]
\[\text{\footnotesize 177 Ibid., XIII.1, 342.}\]
\[\text{\footnotesize 178 Ibid., IX.11ff, 217ff.}\]
Augustine by listening to him and embracing him so that Augustine may have faith and be attuned to God.\textsuperscript{179} This immanent work of God leads Augustine to begin meditating upon the nature of this God, the One who encountered him in the here and now. Augustine says that this God is the Creator.\textsuperscript{180} The move that Augustine makes here is to meditate upon God and God’s work in creation by searching for how God has been revealed in and through elements of creation. As Augustine meditates upon the nature of God as Creator, he begins to embrace a more evocative language over conceptual language.\textsuperscript{181} The evocation comes from the place of memory, actively engaged in opening old moments and now seeing these through the lens of one attuned to God by seeing God as involved in one’s life and, by extension, in creation.\textsuperscript{182} Evocative language is the way that Augustine thinks through this. Memory, then, becomes the way that Augustine can begin to hear the work of God in creation as this faculty acts as a place for these experiences to come together.\textsuperscript{183}

The way that Augustine opens his thinking on how God reveals Godself in creation is through a turn to the implications of Jesus Christ as the mediator between God

\textsuperscript{179} Ibid., X.4, 238-39.

\textsuperscript{180} Ibid., X.6, 240.

\textsuperscript{181} When asking what he loves when he loves God, his response is not conceptual as much as evocative, saying “a light, voice, fragrance, food and embrace for my inmost self, where something limited to no place shines in my mind, where something not snatched away by passing time sings to me, where something no breath blows away yields to me its scent, where there is savor undiminished by famished eating, and where I am clasped in a union from which no satiety can tear me away. This is what I love, when I love my God” (\textit{Confessions} X.8, 242).


\textsuperscript{183} Teske, “Augustine’s Philosophy of Memory,” 151ff.
and creation. Jesus Christ is the One who attunes humanity and God, reconciling these two through the incarnation where the Word takes on the full nature of both the human person and the divine. Thus, in the person of Jesus the two are able to be attuned to each other. The attunement of humanity and God through Christ comes about because the Word first attunes the divine to the human, taking on the form of humanity in the form of a servant (Phil. 2). As Christ attunes the divine to the human he brings about the actuality of God taking on human flesh, even though the flesh of the human person is not mixed with the divine. The ability to tune the divine and created into each other comes from the fact that the Word confers “perfection on creation by calling it back to himself, so that it may be given form by adhering to the creator, and by imitating in its own measure the form which adheres eternally and unchangeably to the Father, and which instantly gets from him to be the same thing as he is.” It is the love of God that is the cause of this attunement, as God reaches beyond Godself to humanity through his love for creation. This love of God heals the infirmities of the human person so that one may overcome sin and lay down one’s life to God.

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184 In fact, Rowan Williams believes that, for Augustine, to think creation is to think the Incarnate Word (Williams, “Good for Nothing? Augustine on Creation,” 18.

185 See Augustine, Confessions, X.67ff, 281ff.

186 Augustine, Homilies on the Gospel of John1-40, XXI.7, 377-78.


188 Augustine, The Literal Meaning of Genesis, I.9, 172.

189 Augustine, Confessions, X.69-70, 282-83.
As God heals the infirmities of creation the result is its transformation. Creation is now different because of God’s reaching out through the incarnation and touching the creation. Augustine sees this transformation happening, ultimately, in the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus. He believes that the work of Christ on the cross is to make peace between God and creation, alluding to Col. 1.19-20. Christ’s resurrection reconciles the believer to God so that one may partake in the resurrection, not the resurrection of Jesus at Golgotha but the resurrection toward eternal life. The result of the cross and resurrection is that creation has been touched by the divine, with the divine then reverberating throughout all parts of the creation.

The goal of Augustine’s foray into Christology is to arouse him to a deeper love of God. It is this desire to love God more and follow God in God’s work through this love that opens theology in a way so as to be able to be uncentered and formless. In fact, as Augustine says in Confessions XIII, the result of his continued contemplation of God is to find rest in the Gift that God has given in the Word and creation. This opens one to moving towards God through a sort of gravitation: the person is drawn towards the divine trace in creation and, through the incarnation, can now recognize this trace through the mutual attuning of God to humanity and humanity to God in the person of Jesus Christ. The meditation on God as Creator has led him to an ascent in love toward God. The evidence of such an ascent is in the “singing” of the songs that accompany one in the

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191 Ibid., 108, 335-36.

192 Augustine, Confessions, XI.1, 284.
ascent to God. These songs are those of one’s transformation, of the divine trace reverberating throughout creation, of one’s attunement to God.  The center of theology is now love—the love God has for humanity and how God’s love encourages the responding love of humanity for God. Augustine’s goal is to avoid the closure of any thinking or language of God because of the fact that love never ends but is always re-born and renewed through one’s attunement to God. The theological end of this love is a form for thinking God that follows God by turning to a nonconstraining structure or form. In fact, John Cavadini shows how Augustine’s conviction of the emptiness of human language about God in Book II is meant to keep God-language open since there is always a void to be explored as God is never known fully.

With the establishment of love as the center for doing theology, thinking theologically is reconstituted around the response to God and the paths that this response opens for the theologian. There is no form or structure that constrains how a theologian responds to God as long as it is in love. The result is that theology is only to be open to responding in whatever way is most appropriate at that moment, in that time. Through this response the theologian can “say something” about God that can be heard freshly and anew, opening interesting and different ways for actually thinking God.

In Book XI, as he enters into the attempt to think the nature of creation, Augustine begins by exhorting himself—and, by extension, the reader—to be patient and simply to

193 Ibid., X.10, 243.

What does one listen to or for? The listening that Augustine advances is a disposition of being open to the presence of God in the world. For Augustine, God’s trace reverberates throughout creation and, due to this, creation is able to then reflect the divine trace and reverberate it back to God. Rowan Williams makes a similar observation, saying that for Augustine “God actively preserves the equilibrium of creation, activating those particular potentialities for harmony that will actually guarantee harmony at this or that specific moment…” Augustine also says that the whole of creation sings praise to God and in this praise all of creation, including humanity, praises God. The way that Augustine thinks through the way that one can become aware of the trace of God in the harmony of creation is through an analysis of Wis. 11:21. From this scriptural passage, Augustine says that the harmony of God in creation is seen through measure (mensura), number (numerus), and order (pondus or ordo). Measure refers to the limit of possibilities extended to creation, while number refers to the form and harmony or proportionality of creation, as to be created is to have a certain stability. Order refers to creation’s movement towards its appropriate goals. The theologian hears God in creation by listening to the way that creation reflects these different characteristics; this reflects divinity. Augustine is playing on the auditory nature of one’s


196 Ibid., XI.7-8, 288-290.


199 Williams, “Creation,” 252.
attunement to God. He is trying to get the reader to think outside of those conceptual frameworks that only entrench God in a concept instead of opening the idea of God up to the multiplicity of forms and modes of thinking available for the theologian.

Augustine turns to the idea of creation through the Word as a way to think through the nature of the divine trace in creation more thoroughly. Augustine holds that the Word that created all resonates in all things throughout the creation. The Word of God, as the voice of God, is heard in the existence of all things in heaven and earth, pointing all towards the Creator. The person who can hear this is the one who has been attuned to God through the development of the “inner ear” to hear the eternal Word in the creation. However, in this discussion of the Word and creation, Paul Ricoeur offers an interesting insight into the analogy of God being an artisan when God creates. Ricoeur says that to talk of things being made through the Word is to deny God the idea of being an artisan. This denial comes from the fact that an artisan always starts from something else. However, God does not begin from anything but God, creating out of Godself. Due to this, the Word (verbum) cannot be like a human voice (vox), but must be thought differently. The Word, he notes, receives and transmits eternally as the Creator—without the voice of God creation would cease—while the human vox begins and ceases and eventually dies away.

200 Augustine, Confessions, XII.37, 336.
201 Ibid., XI.6, 288.
202 Ibid., XI.8, 289-90. See also Confessions, XII.18, 321-22, where Augustine points to the fact that this inner ear allows one to hear the Word in all of creation because it is the result of one’s attunement, which takes place through the formation of the person by committing to memory the things of God.
The question that still needs answering for Augustine is how God creates and from what God creates. He begins with the question of the “what” in the process of creation. Augustine argues that God creates from a formless void, that the “stuff” out of which God creates was neither visible nor organized but was “an abyss of inconceivable depth.”

Augustine also quotes Wisdom 11:17, which says “You who made the world from formless matter.” Augustine gleans from the biblical witness that the “what” that God uses for creation is almost akin to a nothingness, that the earth was totally formless and God creates out of this “invisible and unorganized” “formless matter.” This nothingness out of which God creates leads Augustine to talk of creation out of nothing (creation ex nihilo), saying there was “nothing at all...for there was some kind of formlessness with no differentiation.” The reason that God creates out of nothing is so all creation bears the image of God and not the substance of God. For Augustine, if creation bore the substance of God then it would be, in some way, co-equal with God. However, in being given the image of God, creation bears the divine imprint without being of the same substance as God. Not only does God give form to those things that God creates in those first moments but God also gives the potential for all things that may

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204 Augustine, *Confessions*, XII.3, 313.


207 Ibid., XII.7, 315-16.

208 Ibid., XII.3, 313.

209 Ibid., XII.38, 336-37.
Thus, God’s action in creating comes from giving order to the material that was formless and non-differentiated, nothingness.\textsuperscript{211}

The way that God goes about giving form to the creation is twofold. First, God creates a “heaven’s heaven.”\textsuperscript{212} “Heaven’s heaven” is an “intellectual creation” which participates in eternity—although, as created, it is not eternal as God is eternal. The “heaven’s heaven” acts as what gives order and form to creation.\textsuperscript{213} There is a “created wisdom” here that brings an “intellectual order of being.”\textsuperscript{214} Before God gives order and form to the “stuff” of creation, God has fashioned a rational creation in the Word of God giving a Wisdom and order to what is to be created and this occurs in the “heaven’s heaven.” Here God orders the hierarchy of being while endowing the universe with harmony and giving form to the void.\textsuperscript{215}

To some scholars, like Roland Teske, this “heaven’s heaven” shows the Neo-Platonic bent of Augustine, arguing that he ultimately believes that the only way to understand something is to have contact with the divine ideas in a place like the “heaven’s heaven.”\textsuperscript{216} However, there are two problems with

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{210} Ibid., XII.28, 328.
\item \textsuperscript{211} Augustine, \textit{Unfinished Literal Commentary on Genesis}, 11, 119. See also Augustine, \textit{The Literal Meaning of Genesis}, I.28, 180-81.
\item \textsuperscript{212} Augustine, \textit{Confessions}, XII.8, 316. Roland Teske describes “heaven’s heaven” as intellectual and created by God before time as God’s dwelling place, a place that eternally contemplates God in the presence of God (See Roland Teske, \textit{To Know God and Soul: Essays on the Thought of Saint Augustine} (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2008), 267ff).
\item \textsuperscript{213} Ibid., XII.9, 317.
\item \textsuperscript{214} Ibid., XII.20, 323.
\item \textsuperscript{215} Augustine, \textit{The Literal Meaning of Genesis}, II.16, 119.
\end{itemize}
such an understanding. The first is that this view fails to take into account that Augustine is, in a sense, using a somewhat more Aristotelian idea of substance—as a thing that contains form and matter. In the “heaven’s heaven” Augustine lays out the forms that will connect with the matter of the “stuff” of creation: both are necessary for the moment of creation. Second, Teske fails to take into account the fact that Augustine proposes the “heaven’s heaven” as a way of keeping the Creator/created distinction, arguing that there needs to be some “place” where God can create forms and which humanity can know, but that does not actually result in the human person being able to reach out and touch God. Augustine’s concern in the “heaven’s heaven” is to offer a beginning of creation, to show that God had an “idea” of what was going to be created and how this plan was to be executed.217

When God comes to actually creating “stuff” outside of the “heaven’s heaven”, Augustine posits that what God does in creation is to give form to the creature.218 The nature of creation is the giving of form by God to the other.219 In City of God Augustine talks of how God creates in originating and giving being to all things220 and in Faith and


217 Here, there are many problems with Augustine’s account, some of which he seems to be aware of. Mostly, he posits the “heaven’s heaven” as a way of thinking through the creation and the way that God creates as a way of keeping God from being some sort of material or even being touched by the material. Also, the implications of what God knows and when and how this knowledge affects time would be necessary here—such as, does God not know before God creates the “heaven’s heaven” what God is going to create? And, how does time elapse here? These point to the limits of what Augustine is doing here.

218 See Augustine, On Genesis: A Refutation of the Manichees, 1.5, 42; and Augustine, Faith and the Creed, 2, 156-57.

219 See Augustine’s allegorical exposition of the seven days of creation in Confessions, XIII.13-47, 350-77.
the Creed he says that God has a “well-ordered design” out of which comes the “capacity for receiving forms” and “what was subsequently destined to receive forms…”

However, Augustine leaves God without a form. God is formless. God’s formlessness, though, is pre-existent and other than the formlessness of the void and nothingness out of which God creates. Rather, God’s formlessness is being beyond form, not without form, as God can encompass an infinite number of forms. So, God is not a form because God is incomprehensible, ineffable and infinite. This leads Augustine to an understanding that the theologian cannot seek a form for God, but must be attuned to God by developing one’s “inner ear” through the recitation and singing of Psalms. It is through this attuned ear that God “speaks” (or sings) through the creation.

This attunement to God allows the theologian to look at all things that have a form and realize that they only have a form because there was One who gave them form; this allows them the opportunity to think through the One who did create by giving form. Augustine talks of how understanding how things are made directs one’s gaze to the creator which subsequently allows people to see the trace of God in the created. Creation is the only way available for humanity to know God since God cannot be known by humanity as God knows God but only through the knowledge that God has bestowed upon and within creation which can help humanity move to contemplation and

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220 Augustine, *City of God*, XII.25, 408.


wisdom. In the *Confessions*, Augustine echoes this, saying that the knowledge of God can be made available to people as they are attuned to the Spirit of God that dwells in all that was created. Augustine says that one only knows God in the Spirit of God, with the Spirit being the One who makes possible such knowledge as it is not human knowledge. Human knowledge comes through a contemplation of creation which is only possible through the reality communicated in the Spirit who opens up the possibilities of God as Creator. One such possibility is that in hearing “And God saw that it was good,” one realizes the goodness extended by God in the act of making creation, but also the goodness of God in the sustaining of creation.

Even in this discussion, Augustine refuses to place a form upon God as this would close thought upon God and also lead to idolatry. Augustine proposes this idea of a God with no form in a discussion of Jesus sitting at the right hand of the Father; he makes the point that this is figurative because God has no form, but that conceptions of God should evoke and press people on to “where justice, peace, and joy are to be found.” The forms used to think God are meant more to be evocative rather than an attempt to name the substance of God. God is not bound by a form but is formless and this formlessness necessitates a theological thinking that gives rise to this (non)reality. God is formless matter and God never takes on form because God, as God, is able to give form and so

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225 Augustine, *Confessions*, XIII.46, 375.
cannot be limited to only one form. The only response to this reality of the divine is a theology that is based upon love, leading to praise.

In *Confessions XI*, Augustine uses the singing of the Psalms as a way of thinking about eternity and time and, subsequently, God. Through this he notices a “hymnic” aspect to creation. For him, the song carries within it the completeness of time in eternity and yet still opens the possibility of thinking eternity. Music is also a non-conceptual mode of going about thinking something that can only exist in God, like eternity. Time also reflects God in that no one can actually “pin down” the mensuration of time, with no absolute conception of time ever coming to the fore because of the fact that time is slippery and always varying. This aspect of time—always varying, never settled—is also enhanced by the numerous “beautiful rhythms” that are part of creation. Part of the human understanding of God as Creator comes from seeing time as full of “beautiful rhythms” which makes the soul long for its Creator. The discussion of time

228 Augustine, *Confessions*, XII.38, 336.

229 Ibid., XIII.48, 377.


232 Augustine, *Confessions*, XI.33, 305-6. To explain the varying nature of time, Augustine uses the example of a short line spoken slowly due to a drawl as actually being longer than a longer line that is spoken quickly.

233 Augustine, *True Religion*, 40, 54. John C. Cavadini reiterates this when he talks about how the awareness of time is ultimately a “self-awareness” which opens the self to the fact that God is creator of all (Cavadini, “Time and Ascent in *Confessions XI*,” 173).
argues that any attempt to try and understand the nature of God as Creator cannot attempt to take hold of the concept of Creator and “peg it down.” Augustine is using the concept of time, partly, to think God in a way that avoids closure and is still open to the infinite possibilities which arise when taking seriously the nature of God as non-conceivable.

The issue arises as to what the theologian can say in relation to God if God is formless. The answer that Augustine gives is that theology is a response to God in love “for it is only through love that we are reconciled to God…” Augustine asks God to increase his love so that he can in turn understand God more deeply. When it comes to being able to interpret, not only creation but even Scripture, the hermeneutic must be that of love. The theologian must be an interpreter who works in charity. The theology that takes place is an improvisation that responds through the love of God shaped in one’s attunement to God. This improvisation through love is based on the fact that thinking God always undoes or unstructures any concept of God because God is non-conceivable due to God’s infinite, ineffable nature. Charity acts as that piece that allows the theologian to interpret correctly by appropriately responding to God through the attunement that comes through love. The result of his meditation upon creation and the

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234 Augustine, *Confessions*, XI.13, 293.


237 Ibid., XII.27, 327.

238 Ibid., XII.35, 334.
way that God works here is to have his love increased, so that he can respond in love to both God and neighbor, which is the goal of theology. Thus, the theologian loves. It is this love that allows the theologian to improvise in one’s thinking of God.

The goal of Augustine’s theology is that one loves and that this love increases knowledge of God since to know God is to love God and to love God is to know God. When Augustine rhetorically asks why he has written this—with the question addressed explicitly to God and implicitly to a reader—the answer is to arouse devotion and love for God, not only in himself but also in his readers, that they all can attain the hope of finding beatitude in God. For Augustine, this is the happy life that brings one’s fulfillment as a human person. The theology he advances is one that loves God and follows that love. It opens theological thinking to the love of God in an originary way by giving rise to the multitude of forms that are necessary to think through the idea of God. Through his turn to love, Augustine opens the ability for the theologian to find the unstructured, nonconstraining nature of theology. A theology that gives credence to the unstructured, nonconstraining nature of thinking God begins and ends through the formation of a disposition of attunement and an understanding of a relation to its object—God—that always exceeds human grasp while also affecting the theologian in profound ways. The connection the theologian can possess is through love. The only option is to

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239 Ibid., XII.41, 340-41.

240 Augustine, The Trinity, VIII.10-12, 251-54.

241 Augustine, Confessions, XI.1, 284.

be open and welcoming to God in and through love. Thus, for Augustine, an improvisational theology is only built upon the nonconstraining, formless, unstructured nature of love, which does not dominate or totalize God, but responds through the creation’s evocation.

D. Conclusion

The goal of this chapter has been to sketch the way that theology might proceed in the face of the inconceivable, ineffable nature of God. Augustine offers a theological vision concerned with using a multiplicity of forms to speak to the reality that is God. He does so because no one form could possibly be the “right” form for thinking God. As Augustine shows, the forms used to think God need to be those that actively avoid closure while opening up the possibilities for thinking God in unique and other ways. Throughout his career, Augustine uses a number of forms to think God, whether doctrinal treatises, sermons, letters, polemics, or the liberal arts. In this chapter, the focus has been on Augustine’s use of the forms of music, rhetoric, and love.

The first form the chapter examined was music, as exemplified in Augustine’s treatise *De Musica*. This is a text that was written near the time of Augustine’s conversion. As such, it offers a unique glance in the way that he initially sees the world as a Christian and how this view stays the same and changes throughout the entirety of his thinking. The turn to music allows Augustine to view creation as containing a trace of the divine. This divine trace comes through in the rhythm and harmony that exists within creation. The knowledge of God comes from contemplating the harmony and rhythm of God as it occurs in creation. One’s knowledge of God is cultivated as one
learns to hear the rhythm and harmony of God in creation. This knowledge comes through one’s formation into the type of person that is able to hear the music of God. This formation into one who hears the music of God should result in one’s attunement to God which gives one the ability to notice the divine trace throughout creation.

The second form examined by the chapter is that of rhetoric, specifically as it is spelled out in *De Doctrina Christiana*. Augustine’s discussion of rhetoric is built upon the work he did in *De Musica*, especially the idea of the formation of the thinker and the inconceivable nature of God. In Book IV he shows the importance of one being formed correctly in order to speak God correctly. For Augustine, the one who is formed correctly speaks with one’s entire existence. This existence is built upon prayer and this activity of prayer leads one to be attuned to God. When one is attuned, one can rightly love God and neighbor in a way that speaks the Christian religion rightly. Book I shows the basis of this life to be the incarnation. The incarnation allows the attunement of God to humanity and that of humanity to God. The possibility of attunement comes from God’s taking on full humanity while remaining fully God. In doing this, God baptizes the whole of creation in the divine so that it has the divine trace. The one who is rightly attuned in love through prayer is able to hear this divine trace. Through hearing the divine in all things, one loves all as God is in all. This love allows one to live the rhetoric that Augustine puts forward in Book IV.

The last form examined in this chapter was that of confession. The *Confessions* begin by introducing the form of narrative. Augustine uses the confession as an opportunity to show how God has been attuned to him and that his life has been an
attempt to become reconciled to God. The importance of the confession as a form for thinking God is that it takes seriously the story of God as Creator. This is seen in the last books of *Confessions*, where Augustine is taken up with the first chapter of Genesis. In his meditation, he shows the difference between created and Creator to be that between what has a fixed form and what is formless. The creation has a form and must have form, while the Creator has a multiplicity of forms in which God is revealed. For Augustine, the Creator is formless as God does not have a set form and does not have to inhabit form. God unstructures every form in which God comes because no form can think God completely. Rather, as is exemplified in Augustine’s corpus, the necessity is for the theologian to use a plurality of forms in order to begin to think God rightly.

For the purposes of the argument of this project, Augustine’s thought shows one who actually uses a multiplicity of forms for thinking God. Augustine offers an example of one who actually practices theology in a way that God avoids all form. Augustine’s thought also shows a way for actively avoiding the closure of any discourse on God. Augustine’s work does this through his take up of ways of thinking that are not set but embrace a malleable nature. This is specifically seen in his taking up of the forms of music, rhetoric, and love.
CONCLUSION

The goal of the conclusion is twofold. The first is to offer a summation of the argument. This will help tie together any “loose ends” as well as show the nature of argument that theology is improvisation. The second goal is to offer a few constructive conclusions in light of the argument. In offering these, the conclusion points to possible places where theology is affected in light of the current proposal.

A. Rehearsing the Argument

The thesis of this project is that theology is improvisation. I have argued this by showing the shared ways of thinking within theology and improvisation around the notion of attunement. I also used the idea of attunement to show how theology can be done in an improvisatory way through the fragmenting and unstructuring of theological forms. This argument shows the improvisatory nature of theological thinking. The argument takes three steps: first, I offered an account of attunement through an analysis of the work of Martin Heidegger and Jacques Derrida; second, I connected the account of attunement with how attunement works in the ways of thinking in improvisation; and third, I focused on the fragmenting and dislocation of form that takes place in theology.

The first part of this project outlines an understanding of attunement through an engagement with the philosophers Martin Heidegger and Jacques Derrida. The first chapter outlines Heidegger’s *Destruktion* of Western metaphysics. I outlined how this way of thinking is reliant upon and leads to a new understanding of attunement. The
chapter makes three basic moves. First, it follows Heidegger in pursuing a path that reorients thinking away from onto-theological and totalizing forms. Instead, the project takes up a way of thinking that is concerned with understanding one’s involvement in one’s thinking. This places a great emphasis on the role that disposition plays for thinking in the Heideggerian sense. Second, the chapter relies upon an elucidation of the “step back.” The step back is move out of metaphysics and into a path of thinking inaugurated by the Pre-Socratic Greeks. The step back avoids philosophizing in a way that endorses closure and offers “full” explanations. Heidegger embraces a way of thinking that begins with astonishment and ends with astonishment. Third, the chapter opens the path for thinking by analyzing how Heidegger understands thinking as attunement. This section follows the progression of Heidegger’s thought on attunement from *Being and Time* to *What is Philosophy?* Through this analysis, one can see the centrality of attunement for thinking rightly. Through these three moves, this chapter clears the conceptual ground which this project traverses and allows a thinking of the originary moment that begins theology.

The second chapter continues the account of attunement by turning to Jacques Derrida. This account of Derrida argues that his notion of deconstruction is predicated upon attunement. This chapter makes its argument in three steps. The first outlines the idea of deconstruction as attunement through an analysis of the use of “rhythm” within Derrida’s corpus, most notably *Psyche* and “Différance.” Derrida’s idea of reading is predicated upon one finding and being in rhythm with the text. Finding this rhythm is predicated upon attunement. The second section uses the idea of hospitality in Derrida to
further his understanding of attunement. For Derrida, hospitality is attunement because of its concern to be for the other. This welcome is only able to occur if one is attuned to the other. Thus, hospitality is built upon attunement. When one is open to the other in the text then one notices the deconstruction taking place in texts. The third section deals with Derrida’s notion of translation. Translation is the outcome of one’s attunement as it not only welcomes the other but also wants to speak with the other. Translation transforms a text and risks an interpretation. For Derrida, deconstruction must translate as this is part and parcel of what happens in interpretation. The translation is a transformation of the text or concept from one context to another. The chapter on Derrida further solidifies the understanding of attunement at work within this project as well as projecting the way that the argument will take place in the final three chapters.

The third chapter focuses on expanding the understanding of attunement through an analysis of improvisation by showing how attunement is the way of thinking practiced in improvisation. The chapter builds upon the idea of listening and how this leads to attunement. Listening is the central practice at the heart of attunement because it is both passive and active, allowing one not only to take in but also to respond. Listening also keeps open the possibilities available for thinking. This listening is then brought to bear on the way attunement works in music through the interaction that occurs between piece and musician, musician and tradition, musician and other musicians, and musician and audience. In order for improvisation to occur, attunement must be at the heart of each one of these relationships. The third section makes the case that improvisation is concerned with transformation through the breaking of musical form. This section
follows the thought of Derrida by arguing that interpretation requires translation or
transformation of the form. Improvisation does this through the move not to allow
closure, never ending a piece. Improvisation leads to the piece always being heard anew
in different ways through different contexts and situations.

The fourth chapter focuses on David Tracy. This chapter begins by outlining
Tracy’s overall project of thinking theology as conversation. Tracy believes that he is
able to counter two problems that he thinks plague theology: the problem of totality and
that of plurality. By turning to conversation he puts forward a way of thinking that is
able to deal with both problems: first, a conversation is never closed so it should not slip
into a totalizing form; and, second, a conversation includes a plurality of voices. The
question that arises is how one names and thinks God in this conversation. Focusing on
his later work, the chapter argues that his embrace of the form of fragments is what gives
the ability to think God in and through conversation. Tracy’s use of the form of
fragments helps theology think God in a way that is non-totalizing as well as one that
deals with the plurality of forms available for thinking God. Tracy deals with the
plurality of forms available for thinking God by turning to the notion of the gathering. In
order to think through how one goes about bringing the forms together, Tracy turns to the
idea of the gathering. The gathering is the place where disparate discourses and forms
can come together and critique each other while still being together. This turn to the
gathering opens a way of thinking ethics. Tracy uses the gathering to show the
importance of ethics within his thought. In a manner similar to Derrida, Tracy offers an
ethics of resistance. This chapter ultimately shows the need in theology for a non-
totalizing discourse and a thinking of forms for naming and thinking God that are based upon the fragment.

The last chapter is on Augustine of Hippo. I turn to Augustine to show how he sees the necessity of using multiple forms to think and name God. The three forms dealt with in this chapter are music in *De Musica*, rhetoric in *De Doctrina Christiana*, and narrative/autobiography in *Confessions*. The first section outlines his use of music in constructing his theology. The importance of music to him is that it offers a way of viewing the world and God’s interaction with the world. The second section deals with the rhetoric he puts forward in *De Doctrina Christiana*. This text shows the importance of one’s disposition and orientation for thinking theologically. In this text, Augustine shows the necessity of attunement to God to do theology. He thinks this through a hermeneutic of love. The last section deals with the use of narrative and autobiography in *Confessions*. Augustine uses narrative to unstructure any forms that dominate thinking on God. He does this through a meditation upon how God creates by giving form, but consistently stays formless. In so doing, Augustine shows the unstructured form of theology. In his use of multiple discourses, Augustine shows the need for theology to engage a multiplicity of ways of thinking God, with no “one” way dominating in order to think God in a way that actually correlates to the belief in God.

The argument of the project is to first lay out an understanding of attunement as a way of thinking. This leads to the use of improvisational music for thinking the way that attunement works in thinking. This has implications for the task of theology. The last two chapters explore the improvisation that is at the heart of theology, furthering the
thesis that theology is improvisation. This is done by showing how David Tracy and Augustine fragment and unstructur forms so that they may be used and thought otherwise, especially when one tries to think God. The rest of this conclusion will be used to point to various places where this project may provide constructive insights for theology.

B. Constructive Conclusions

The first constructive conclusion I make has to do with the importance of the incomprehensibility of God for theology. This project arises out of a concern as to how theology speaks and thinks God. Part of this concern stems from the fact that theology attempts to say something about God, which is that about which nothing can be said. And, in a typically Augustinian dilemma, theology still talks about God because it must say something. This project takes very seriously this dilemma and tries to navigate through it. Focusing on the incomprehensibility of God, foremost, drives the way that theology can think through this seeming problem.

Within the discussion on the incomprehensibility of God, theology should begin by focusing on that aspect of God that is unsayable. This aspect of God defies language. Because the idea of God actually works against language, theology finds itself using something—language—to think something—God—that actually works against this. Theology needs to find a language that allows the unsayable aspect of God to come out. In this project, part of that language was found in the ideas of the formless or unstructured form as elucidated by both David Tracy and Augustine. These chapters point in the direction of a way of thinking that not only takes seriously the unsayable in
God but searches for an “unsayable” language. Tracy does this in the turn to conversation which evokes a language that is multiple and contains many languages. Augustine finds the unsayable language for God in those forms—like music—that resist being placed in a language. He also takes those overly linguistic forms—like rhetoric and confession—and pushes them to show that at their heart there is something that is unspeakable, so that, for example, rhetoric emanates from the whole of one’s life.

Tracy and Augustine, then, show a theology that works against a language that tries to overly conceptualize God. When one examines the discipline, one notices that theology tends to utilize metaphors of sight to think God. One can see this in almost all aspects of theological thinking from the creation that is seen to the eschaton that results in the vision of God. The theologian can notice this in systematic theology as well as mystical theologies. Systematic theologies tend to rely on vision metaphors as a conceptual language and apparatus for thinking God. Mystical theologians resort to vision metaphors in order to feel the closeness of God that is associated with one’s vision. In both cases, the idea of God is reduced to something that humanity can comprehend and the incomprehensible, ineffable nature of God is lost (even thought it may be paid lip service).

This project counters this use of metaphors of vision by suggesting that sound and hearing are also metaphors for understanding God and may even be more appropriate to the unsayable, incomprehensible nature of God. The attempt to move language about God from sight to hearing opens possibilities for thinking God in a non-visual way that is more in line with how theology should actually think God. Theology should think God in
a way that allows the incomprehensible, unsayable nature of God to arise. This project
does so by introducing the language of music into the theological lexicon.¹ One such
way is to introduce the idea of “groove” as a place of attunement. When one grooves,
one is in-tune rhythmically and harmonically—there is “just something about it.” The
goal of theology would be to “groove” with God. Or, one could follow the attempts on
the part of improvisational musicians to “say something” in a way that introduces
newness into old ideas and compositions. Or, one could look at the creation as the place
where God plays, with God’s melody and harmony ringing throughout the cosmos. The
commonality in all of these possibilities is that these all are ways of thinking that resist
closure and, in so doing, leave open the possibilities for thinking the God who is
incomprehensible, unsayable, and ineffable.

The second constructive conclusion I want to make is the contribution toward is
the role of form in thinking God. The “forms” that are used within this project to think
and name God are those that deal with sound and hearing. In doing this, the project looks
to forms that are formless and unstructured. By preferring those forms, I look for ways of
thinking theologically that consistently unravel and undo themselves. These forms avoid
closure due to the incomprehensible, unsayable nature of God. The idiom of jazz offers
ways of thinking forms that are always unstructuring themselves. In fact, the tradition of
jazz is built upon the rethinking and replaying of various compositions so that they are
never closed but open always to interpretation.

¹This is not to say that this project is the only one that does so, but that there is a definitive turn to
a musical logic that relies on listening and hearing over and against the use of visual metaphors. However,
visual metaphors are still prominent because they are a prominent part of the tradition this project comes
from.
The attempt to reorient theology around metaphors of hearing and away from conceptual language to sounds moves into the realm of attunement. This move, though, is not into a more thoroughgoing “hearing of the Word” in revelation. This move is rather to think about what gives rise to allow the ability even to hear the Word. Then the task is set to explain what happens in this originary moment of the Word coming and being received. Thus, part of what the turn to sounds does is to evoke someone/something to respond. Thus, the project moves beyond being an attempt to offer a certain way that theology comments upon creeds and scripture. The proposal here looks for forms that broaden the horizons of theological thinking beyond the creeds and scripture so that theology is not strictly a commentary on “words.” Rather, in this, theology becomes a response to the melody and harmony of God that comes when one grooves with God.

From this proposal, theology is a discipline that gathers together a number of disparate discourses and sounds in order to think God. What is needed are places where one can think this gathering. One such place is in the work of Mark C. Taylor on emergent networks and complexity theory. Taylor uses the vast amount of connection that exists in the world to think about what it means to think, especially thinking God. He takes up the vast amount of information available and explores how this multiplies constantly. Taylor uses this to think how there is no set center for a way of thinking; rather, one just enters thinking and can follow it where it may go. This is similar to the

way that one may do research on the internet. Here, one does a search, finds a website on a topic, this website links to another and that one to another, and so on and so on. The result is a path of thought but one that is not concretized. This way of thinking could go differently depending upon where one started, what search engine was used, or even how quotations were placed. And, this search could look differently a week later because of the amount of information available. Thus, this way of thinking has a direction, but the form is a center-less web that shifts and moves with the path that one follows or how one moves thought.

A way of thinking similar to what happens in Taylor’s emergent networks is the example of the DJ. The DJ being discussed here is not the disc jockey on the radio who simply plays recordings. This is the DJ who takes a piece of music and changes it in some way. Oftentimes the DJ will take a another piece of music and “sample” it by playing only a part or a famous riff. The DJ will then do something different with it, changing it in some way. The DJ also may “mash” up two different samples or albums. An example of this is Danger Mouse, who mashed The Beatles’ album The Beatles (referred to as the White Album) and Jay-Z’s Black Album. The result was not a Beatles album or Jay-Z album. It was something other, something different. Other DJs will use other musicians’ recordings to make their own by layering and looping the material in such a way that, while still recognizable, makes something different than the pieces being used.3 Theology may look like this when it takes many, seemingly disparate views and

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3 See the documentary “Rip! A Remix Manifesto” for multiple examples of DJs doing this. This is available at http://ripremix.com
discourses and “mashes” them together to think differently about a given doctrine. The theologian, as DJ, may also take sources that are not traditionally used and play with them, manipulating them to hear something different at work in theology.

If one is not willing to go the route of Taylor’s emergent networks or the theologian as DJ, then one could turn the theologian as one who performs “covers.” The cover song is a reinterpretation of someone else’s song. Usually, for good covers, the song is still recognizable and carries the same general form. The covering person/group, though, change(s) something about the original so that it is not a repetition of the original but is something new. An example of this would be the cover of Aerosmith’s “Walk This Way” by the rap group Run DMC. The song by Aerosmith is a typical Aerosmith song with loud, bluesy guitars, straight ahead rhythms, and the vocal of Steven Tyler. Run DMC does something quite different by rapping the verses and driving the rhythm in a more deliberate way. Run DMC transforms the song into their own, even though it was first Aerosmith’s. Another example is the cover of Bob Dylan’s “All Along the Watchtower” by Jimi Hendrix. Dylan’s version contains elements of folk and is more subdued. Hendrix plays the song with a strong blues emphasis and uses it as a vehicle for improvisation on his guitar. Hendrix’ version, though, was so good and popular that many people associate the song with him instead of Dylan. This is an example of a cover that opens the possibilities of the song. A cover, while relying on repetition, still transforms the piece. The theologian working in this way should do the same. The sources that one uses should be transformed in some way so that they can be heard differently.
The last example of the type of form that may be used in theology through this project is the “mixtape” (or “burned CD” or “Playlist”). The mixtape is an example of a gathering together of several pieces that were not meant to go together and, yet, still fit. The mixtape is usually put together on some occasion or for some event. Sometimes this can be a mixtape for a road trip or one for a lover; the mixtape can be for one’s exercise or just to mellow out to. The mixtape offers a place where one can think how many different pieces can be gathered together in a coherent, but non-totalizing way. Because the mixtape is put together for some event, it has a certain “feel” to it with a logic that one wants to convey. The mixtape is usually not put together randomly, but has a structure that gives some meaning. As such, the mixtape offers a way of thinking that theology can use. Specifically, the mixtape offers a logic to be used by those who are gathering together fragments into some form(s). This gathering is a whole but is not a totalizing way of thinking. Rather, like the mixtape, it is a collection that is given a structure to convey meaning but this does not preclude the fact that the same material could be structured differently at another time to convey a different meaning.

The difficulty that arises from this constructive conclusion is saying something about these musical forms for theological thinking. This project has described and said something, but the something said was that saying something is, at best, problematic and, at worst, impossible. This is the aporetic nature of theological thinking. The goal of the above forms is to spur and open possibilities for thinking. As forms, their purpose is to keep open thinking while giving a direction to thought. In giving direction, though, these
forms do not dominate but they open a space wherein the theologian can dwell and try possibilities for theology.

The third constructive conclusion that arises from this project is the idea that theology is affective and responsive. Theology begins from what affects one whether that is a feeling of absolute dependence or ultimate concern. The theologian is one who responds to that which places a call on one’s life. This is why attunement is important to this project: it points to the moments that give a rise to the affections of the theologian. Theology becomes the reflection of these affections. This conclusion points to how the theologian is formed in order to be attuned as well as the place the evocation plays in theology.

This project brings to the fore the issue of how the theologian is formed. The argument made within this project relies on the idea that a person is formed in a certain way in order to do theology. This notion of the theologian’s formation springs from the idea of attunement that is at work throughout the project. In order to be attuned, one must have a certain disposition. The theologian then needs a disposition that leads to attunement. This disposition includes being open to the coming of the other, listening, welcoming, responding, and, generally, being in such a way as be hospitable. This disposition comes from one’s immersion in a tradition that opens up one’s thinking about God while also teaching openness. It is learned through the various ways that one engages the other. This learning may take place in the church as one listens to a sermon or mass; it may take place in one’s room in prayer as one opens oneself to the Wholly Other; it may take place in a classroom as one learns to listen to the other in a way that
facilitates thinking. The importance is that the theologian learns a disposition of welcoming the other in a way that affects and opens one up to receive and respond.

One is able to respond when one is disposed in a way that opens one up to attunement. This response comes from the calling of the other. The calling of the other evokes something in the theologian—it affects. This evocation is at the center of how a theologian works. The theologian is evoked by some form in some way. Oftentimes the theologian then goes on to write or think in a way that does not evoke anything of anyone, nor does it even acknowledge this evocation. I want to place the evocation of the theologian by the other—and to the other—at the center of what it means to do theology. The attunement that theology embraces comes from this originary moment of evocation. Theology then responds. The response should be one that points to this evocation while moving past it. The goal is not to get caught in the originary moment of being evoked but to understand how this projects the theologian into certain ways of thinking. The end result is a theology that is based upon one’s attunement which comes in an originary way when one is evoked.

The last constructive conclusion offered is the role of listening in theology. Listening stems from the formational process of the theologian. Part of this process is to teach and form the theologian into one who listens. Listening leads to attunement. It is both passive and active. Listening is passive as it simply receives something from somewhere else. There is no possibility of listening happening if there is no noise or communication in some way. Listening, though, is also active in that what it gives is
actively taken in and processed in some way. Listening goes out searching for something that will give itself so that listening will take place.

Listening is important for theology. In fact, one could say that the basis for theology is listening, due to its active-passive nature. The theologian is one who actively pursues God by searching for God in different places. However, the theologian is also aware that the divine only comes in giving itself over to the person. One cannot force God to do something so the theologian passively waits for God to give Godself. This passivity is aware and active, but passive nonetheless. When God does give Godself and the theologian listens, both taking in and responding, then one can begin thinking theologically. This thinking comes not only in listening for God, but also searching other places for the divine trace and listening for God in these places. This may come as one reads the creeds or scripture but may also occur as one views creation or watches a movie, listens to music, or reads the newspaper. The theologian actively engages all of these (and more) in a way that allows God to call and evoke through these. The theologian can use these various mediums as forms for thinking God as places that open up the possibilities of thinking the God who is unsayable and incomprehensible.

The result of this listening is an approach to theology that takes seriously its character as a conversation or dialogue. Improvisation is viewed by many musicians as a conversation. This conversation is predicated upon the musicians listening to each other. If they do not listen they cannot “say something.” This way of thinking extends into theology. However, instead of a group of theologians interacting immediately one has centuries of theological thought as well as numerous other venues where religion has
been discussed. There are also other places that give rise to theological reflection. The theologian is the one who puts all of these into conversation with one another in order to “say something.” In doing this, the theologian is conducting a conversation around whatever topic has been presented. The theologian mediates the dialogue in a way that allows critique and endorsement as well as putting forth an argument. Through this theology says something.

I offer these four constructive conclusions as places for further theological thinking in light of this project. The goal has not been to be comprehensive but to point to avenues that could be explored in more detail. The “next step” after the dissertation is to engage these and other ways of thinking in order to offer improvisations upon and within theology.
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