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A Standing Invitation to the Gods: Philosophy of Religion and the Phenomenology of the Sacred

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Abstract: Does philosophy of religion, specifically, have anything to contribute to the cultural debate about the modern crisis of meaning, and particularly to attempts at retrieving a sense of enchantment beyond human construction? Suggesting a methodological rapprochement between philosophy of religion and phenomenology, I explore a recent popular attempt to reenchant the world through a retrieval of the sacred: *All Things Shining: Reading the Western Classics to Find Meaning in a Secular Age* (2011) by Hubert Dreyfus and Sean Dorrance Kelly. Using their work as a foil, I discuss the relation between phenomenology and metaphysics in the experience of the sacred, specifically the possibility of a pluralism that is nonetheless realist; the necessity of social embeddedness and pedagogy in the constitution of sacred meaning; and finally, the problem of moral discrimination within this sphere. Through this critical discussion a constructive argument emerges: philosophy of religion done in a phenomenological mode has resources to address these difficult issues, and thus to explore experiences of the sacred in ways that are metaphysically sophisticated, attentive to historical tradition and pedagogy in the constitution of meaning, as well as to the need of communal moral deliberation in the sphere of the sacred.

Keywords: *All Things Shining*; Charles Taylor; constructivism; crisis of meaning; Hubert Dreyfus; meaning; metaphysics; nihilism; phenomenology; philosophy of religion; polytheism; realism; reenchantment; religious experience; sacred; Sean Dorrance Kelly; secular



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1. Introduction: Retrieving the Sacred

One way of characterising the idea of modernity—whether we have actually ever been modern or not—is by an understanding of the non-human world as devoid of intrinsic meaning and purpose. This is an important part of what Max Weber described as the *disenchantment* of the world in the wake of modern science and technology, with important roots in religious history. Henceforth, said Weber in his famous address ‘Science as Vocation’, it must be understood and stoically accepted that meaning is not discovered in the bare facts of nature, as investigated by science, but constructed solely by human minds (Weber 2004, pp. 270–87; cf., Joas 2021). Apropos of this development, Charles Taylor observes that meaning comes to be associated only with mind; and mind becomes increasingly associated only with humans. The disenchanted world is therefore a *mind-centered* world, whereas a previous era had understood the world as enchanted in the sense that there is meaning to be found ‘out there’, in the cosmos itself (Taylor 2011a, pp. 287–302). In a word, disenchanted modernity tends to see meaning as the result of human construction. Yet another facet of the idea of modernity as disenchanted is found in the sharp distinction between *facts and values*, often traced back to David Hume: Only facts are discovered in non-human nature, whereas meaning and value inhere—once again—only in the (human) mind, and there is no way of deriving ethical normativity or existential meaning from the world of nature; we must construct it ourselves.¹

This modern cosmic imaginary is something that has been greeted in various ways. Some have seen it as an exhilarating opportunity to exercise human freedom in the creation

of new meaning and value, unshackled from the strictures of nature: Friedrich Nietzsche celebrated it as such, though he was also aware that Western culture might not be ready for this freedom. The polymath palaeontologist Stephen Jay Gould described it much later as an adventure, saying that ‘when we stop searching for moral truth in material reality . . . when we reject the siren song of false sources, we become free to seek solutions to questions of morals and meanings in the proper place—within ourselves’ (Gould 1999, pp. 196–97). But others have found this aspect of modernity more difficult to bear: Albert Camus seemed to speak for a generation when he described the human situation in the face of a world lacking intrinsic meaning as absurd: ‘The absurd is born of this confrontation between this human need and the unreasonable silence of the world’ (Camus [1940] 2018, p. 28).

The predicament of disenchantment in modern thought is therefore closely related to the perception of a widespread *crisis of meaning*, of a *nihilism* endemic to the modern situation in the sense that there is no meaning in the world *sans* human construction—and the suspicion that we cannot bear the full burden of such construction on our very slender human shoulders; even if we could, the notion of self-consciously constructed meaning and value seems to many to undercut itself. My task here is not to further analyse this predicament; I shall take it as given. What I would like to do, however, is to inquire into possible responses and into the role that philosophy of religion might play.

Does philosophy of religion, specifically, have anything to contribute to the cultural debate about this modern crisis of meaning? An affirmative answer to this question would seem to follow as soon as we acknowledge that the disenchanted world is also the *secular* world. But as Charles Taylor has demonstrated in his magnum opus *A Secular Age* (Taylor 2007), ‘secular’ is said in many ways and does not mean simply a decline in religious belief and practice. More interesting in this context is the idea that ‘secular’ names an age in which religious beliefs are contested rather than culturally axiomatic, an age in which religious faith remains a live option—but precisely as one option among others (cf., Joas 2013). Taylor describes this secular society as one in which we now observe ‘a spiritual supernova, a kind of galloping pluralism on the spiritual plane’ (Taylor 2007, p. 300).² If this accurately describes our age, one question is how these various forms of religious faith and spiritual practice are related to the crisis of meaning, perhaps as possible agents of rechantment.

Taylor helpfully suggests three possible categories of response to modernity’s crisis of meaning (Taylor 2011a): (1) *Grow up and face the situation with courage*; this is essentially the heroic response of someone like Camus. (2) *Question the modern rejection of a traditional transcendent or religious meaning*; this would be the response of a certain form of philosophy of religion seeking to retrieve theism. (3) *Embark on a quest to find new sources of meaning in the world beyond both human construction and traditional theism*. As I want to explore the role philosophy of religion might play in responding to the modern crisis of meaning, I shall have nothing more to say here about the first of the three responses. The ‘myth of growing up’ remains dominating at least among Westerners intellectuals, and in any case leaves little for philosophy of religion to do.³ The second approach does involve philosophy of religion and would be largely associated with analytic philosophy and the surprising resurgence of a successful theistic philosophy under its aegis. It suggests that in order to retrieve a sense of meaning beyond human construction or projection, it is necessary to also retrieve a theistic framework, and that theism does in fact have rational support even in modernity. While I have a great deal of respect for work carried out in this tradition, it seems to me that such analytic philosophy of religion, for whatever reasons, often fails to make a relevant connection to the wider debate about the modern crisis of meaning.⁴ And in any case, theistic analytic philosophy is already well-defined and clearly positioned.

It is instead the third in Taylor’s list of possible responses I wish to discuss in what follows, and specifically as it relates to doing philosophy of religion in a phenomenological mode, which I shall take to be characterised above all by a sustained investigation into religiously relevant experiences and their constitution. In the context of the debate about

disenchantment and existential meaning, such a phenomenologically inflected philosophy of religion would investigate religious experience—experience of the sacred—with a view to how it might serve to reenchanted the world and provide a deep sense of existential meaning. Among other things, it would inquire into whether there are experiences of a sacred reality that will fit neither the disenchanted nor the theistic framework of understanding.

Phenomenology is a philosophical tradition that has always been deeply engaged in questions to do with the cultural malaise of modernity. In fact, in the tribunal of intellectual debate in the twentieth century, phenomenology has often been called in to witness against modern disenchantment and nihilism. After all, it paradigmatically investigates how meaning emerges in the interaction between consciousness and the world, in such a way that the world discloses itself to the subject in the act of constitution. Moreover, phenomenology increasingly came to stress that this interaction originates at levels far deeper than that of the conscious mind, as witnessed in Edmund Husserl's and Maurice Merleau-Ponty's explorations of the *lived body's* disclosure of meaning before and always beneath that of the conscious mind (Husserl [1952] 1989; Merleau-Ponty [1945] 2002). If this is valid, then the default constructivism of much modern philosophy seems an utterly implausible position to take on the question of meaning and value, and phenomenology can be seen as a form of critique of modern assumptions about meaning.

Of course, the everyday constitution of meaning addressed by Husserl and Merleau-Ponty is not quite what the debate about the modern crisis of meaning is all about. Though questioning the adequacy of the constructivist framework may itself lead into the wider discussion, what is more immediately relevant is the phenomenological exploration of experiences that seem to interrupt the humdrum of everyday life and open toward something mysterious, even sacred or holy. While classical phenomenology of religion, such as that of Rudolph Otto and Mircea Eliade, has been preoccupied with the meaning-structure of traditional religious experiences, Espen Dahl, in his more recent work on the phenomenology of the holy, has explored how twentieth-century phenomenology was particularly attuned also to the mysterious dimension of more mundane things—perceived objects and human others (Dahl 2010). He sees Husserl's exploration of the passive givenness of things in perception, their inherently alien aspects and transcendence of our conscious grasp, as a case in point. Another is Levinas's calling of attention to the mystery of the human Other, which is Wholly Other in relation to the constituting powers of the ego—a mystery that cannot be tamed and that opens towards ethics. These experiences suggest a genuine encounter with an alien Other—with something mysterious—whose meaning cannot be reduced to the experiencing subject.⁵ On the other hand, argues Dahl, neither need they remain a mere formal oddity in the epistemology of everyday life. They can become intimations of something more, even of something sacred, but if so, their meaning must be mediated by history, tradition, and practice.

Dahl's sophisticated work suggests that philosophy of religion can be done in a phenomenological mode attentive to the mysteries of ordinary life; while not being reducible to our interpretive categories, such experiences nonetheless acquire a deep meaningfulness by being incorporated into a wider frame of religious life (and ultimately, for Dahl, into liturgical celebration). Rather than formal interruptions of the everyday, they become encounters with the holy. As such—and now I go beyond Dahl's own project—they will not fit within a disenchanted world, suggesting instead a retrieval of the sacred.

Interestingly, Dahl's fine balance between what is given as alien and mysterious and the need to incorporate this into a wider frame of religious life and practice in order to make sense of it suggests that these experiences could be developed in various frameworks of interpretation. They could become examples of Taylor's second response above, in so far as that wider framework may relate them to a theistic understanding of religious reality (though rather differently than what is typically the case in analytic philosophy). What I want to explore, however, is rather the possibility that such experiences of ordinary epiphanies could be incorporated into some other framework or way of life, wherein they would come to mean something different. Could they be developed as examples of Taylor's

third response—the quest to find new sources of meaning in the world beyond both human construction and theism?⁶

2. *All Things Shining*: Structure of the Argument

In the rest of this paper, I would like to explore this question through a critical discussion of a popular proposal for a phenomenology of the sacred, which like Dahl's account insists that there is a sacred dimension to ordinary phenomena, but which stresses more than he does that this dimension contains an antidote to the modern crisis of meaning. Attempting to speak to a wider audience, the book *All Things Shining: Reading the Western Classics to Find Meaning in a Secular Age*, by Dreyfus and Kelly (2011), succeeded in this endeavour at least by the standards of being a New York Times bestseller; something in it evidently struck a nerve.⁷ What Dreyfus and Kelly attempt in this book is explicitly a phenomenology of the sacred as a way of retrieving a non-constructed existential meaning in a secular and disenchanted culture. It is a kind of philosophy of religion in phenomenological mode pitted against nihilism. It is not the argument of this book as such that is my fundamental concern; rather, I want to use it as a way of exploring another way of doing philosophy of religion in our secular age. The argument of Dreyfus and Kelly, and especially its shortcomings, is instructive for all who seek to probe the possibility of re-enchantment through a phenomenology of the sacred.

I shall begin in this section with a summary of the argument. Its premise is that modern society is a nihilistic society, that is to say a society which sinks ever deeper into a crisis of meaning. As a way of fighting against this 'nihilism of our secular age' they are interested in 'accounts of human existence [that] show us who we are in relation to a source of meaning outside of us, in relation . . . to what we have held sacred in our various ways' (Dreyfus and Kelly 2011, p. 118). Thus, they immediately turn the crisis of meaning into a religious issue, in the sense that it hinges on the experience—or not, as the case may be—of the *sacred*. We live in a society, they claim, that has lost touch with the experience of sacred meaning that was available before the onset of modernity, and which therefore finds itself without any clear sense of why life is worth living, or why one should make this choice rather than that.

Who is to blame for the nihilism of modern society? What are its chief causes? As anyone familiar with the historical, sociological, and philosophical exploration of modernity is aware, answers to these questions are enormously complex and always debatable.⁸ For their part, Dreyfus and Kelly focus on a certain philosophical development in modernity, with roots in Luther's alleged individualism and finding a clear articulation in Descartes, namely the idea that the world holds no independent meaning, and that we humans are responsible for creating the only kind of meaning we can: 'After Descartes, we have come to see ourselves as almost infinitely free assigners of meaning who can give whatever meaning we choose to the meaningless objects around us' (Dreyfus and Kelly 2011, p. 139). Kant then continues the philosophical revolution in arguing for the absolute autonomy of the subject. 'In Kant's view the subject replaces God as the orderer of the world' (Dreyfus and Kelly 2011, p. 140), which of course places the burden of responsibility squarely on human shoulders. This anthropocentric or subject-centric framework of meaning finds its strongest proponent in Friedrich Nietzsche, but the genealogy terminates with Jean-Paul Sartre and the American novelist David Foster Williams, and therefore with the existentialist framework in which we all now live and breathe.

It is a freedom of will so complete that by its force one can experience searing pain as overwhelming joy; crushing, crushing boredom as instant bliss; hell itself as the sacred, mystical oneness of all things deep down. There are literally no constraints whatsoever to the meaning we can construct for our experiences (Dreyfus and Kelly 2011, p. 49).

So, what is the problem with this radically constructivist idea that we ourselves create meaning without constraint? The authors clearly side with those many thinkers who have found in this idea an unbearable burden. In a word, the problem is that we do not have

the resources to construct meaningful lives, or to choose this way of life rather than that. What we are left with instead is a culturally deep nihilistic refusal of meaning rooted in the understanding of meaning as something that is up to us. But what human beings desperately need is ‘to live a life guided by something experienced as beyond oneself’ (Dreyfus and Kelly 2011, p. 21). This amounts to a kind of realism with regard to values and meaning, an enchanted cosmic imaginary: to be guided *by something beyond ourselves*, something out there in the world that gives meaning to human life, and that we can consequently *discover* rather than construct. This indeed is the heart of their diagnosis of despair and project of existential retrieval.

What would be the shape of a cosmic imaginary able to sustain the needed kind of mind-independent meaning inhering in the world and to which we may respond? Dreyfus and Kelly argue that what we cannot do is to return to some kind of *monotheism* (Taylor’s second response). Because even though traditional monotheism did guarantee a kind of meaningfulness, it tended to place this meaningfulness not in this life but in a life hereafter, in heaven and not on earth—which is what Nietzsche insisted was the truly abhorrent nihilism (Nietzsche [1887] 2013). Monotheism tended to reject the more mundane meaningful values of family, friends, sexuality, good food, and so on.⁹ And in any case, they continue, since we live in a secular age, there is no possibility of going back to a society in which a belief in one God is self-evident to all. What we need, therefore, is to find some third way between two kinds of nihilism: *modern nihilism’s rejection* of values and its futile turn to constructivism and *monotheistic nihilism’s relocation* of values to somewhere else.

This brings me to the constructive proposal developed in *All Things Shining*. What can lead secular people out of a despairing nihilism and into a meaningful life even after the cultural death of God? Answer: We must attune ourselves once again to the sacred! What the authors have in mind is intended to circumvent both types of nihilism by turning to a different source of the sacred, namely the Greek gods of Homer, that is to say to an ancient *polytheism*.¹⁰ ‘To lure back these Homeric gods is a saving possibility after the death of God: it would allow us to survive the breakdown of monotheism while resisting the decent into a nihilistic existence’ (Dreyfus and Kelly 2011, p. 61). But what do they mean when they say that we need to return to polytheism?

They do *not* mean that we are to start believing that the Greek gods actually exist, or that we are to give up explaining the world scientifically, in terms of causes and effects: ‘Whatever we retrieve from the Greeks it must be consistent with our understanding of the physical makeup of the universe’ (Dreyfus and Kelly 2011, p. 64). This important point is elsewhere repeated:

It should be clear from what we have said that one does not have to believe that the Greek gods actually existed in order to gain something deep and important from Homer’s sense of the sacred. [...] One does, however, have to reject the modern idea that to be a human agent is to be the sole and self-sufficient source of the actions one performs (Dreyfus and Kelly 2011, p. 138).

The authors believe, in short, that the polytheism of the Greeks code for a set of experiences of sacred meaning that they actually had, and that we can approach phenomenologically. The Greeks had experiences in which they seemed to be caught up in something sacred, something for which they felt grateful, something that gave their lives a meaning that they did not have to construct for themselves—and that saved them from nihilism. The phenomenology of *moods* is important to the argument at this point. While we moderns think of moods as something private, something we experience on the inside, as it were, the Greeks understood moods to be something that was out there in the world, and in which we could be caught up and swept away. For the Greeks, these moods were a manifestation of divine influence and represented something sacred, for which admiration and gratitude was due. For example, Helen, wife of Menelaus, is caught up in a powerful erotic mood which draws her into a love affair with prince Paris of Troy, thus setting off the Trojan war. Ultimately this is attributed to the goddess Aphrodite, who ‘illuminates a situation’s erotic possibilities’ (Dreyfus and Kelly 2011, p. 60). Another significant theme is

the phenomenology of *gratitude*, as when Athena saves Odysseus from being pierced by the spears of six suitors thrown at him from point-blank range. ‘Athena’s work’, Homer laconically remarks (Dreyfus and Kelly 2011, p. 67). The scenario is one in which Odysseus does not act, but becomes the beneficiary of circumstances over which he has no control. In such situations the Homeric Greeks understood themselves to be under the care of the gods and they felt gratitude and expressed it publicly through a variety of ritual sacrifice. Through their attunement to moods and the centrality of wonder and gratitude, the Greeks model for us even today a way of experiencing the world around us as full of sacred meaning, a way for the modern world to escape both monotheistic nihilism, where all true meaning is located in a heaven somewhere else, and modern nihilism, where there is no meaning whatsoever apart from human construction.

What matters, then, is to gain access once more to the deeper phenomena of human existence, which are not dependent on the metaphysical framework of ancient polytheism. To flesh out this constructive proposal, let me offer a couple of examples given by Dreyfus and Kelly of this anti-nihilistic and phenomenologically accessible meaning.

The first is the experience of being in the crowd at a great *sporting event*, such as a baseball game or a tennis match. Something so beautiful and magnificent may happen on the field or court that the audience rises up as one and roars in excitement and appreciation. At that time no one is asking, what is the meaning of my life? The audience is grasped by something intensely meaningful that they did not themselves create; it rather happened to them on this occasion. The audience, Dreyfus and Kelly say, is ‘whooshed’ away in a great wave of excitement, in something like what the Greeks experienced and attributed to the gods. They called it *phusis*. And still today, they say, we need to attribute these experiences to something outside of ourselves, and feel a sense of gratitude when they happen.

Another example is *romantic love*. Here, too, we are grasped by something outside of ourselves, an experience that can be akin to the sacred in that it provides a deep sense of meaningfulness. But it cannot simply be constructed by sheer willpower; it must be given (Dreyfus and Kelly 2011, p. 130). It is like a mood, something out there in the world, so to speak, that you become caught up in.

All Things Shining attempts to give a phenomenology of the sacred, and so they ask us to pay attention to the very *phenomenon* of being caught up in sacred moments like these. The problem is that in modernity we have such strong ideas about human agency—that we are the sole constructors of our own meaning—that we risk missing, or covering up or hiding, the true phenomenon when sacred meaning is given to us as we are being swept up by powerful moods and moments. Our theoretical understanding of the world blinds us to the sacred dimension of life. What we need, therefore, is to re-attune ourselves to this dimension of reality, so that we do not miss the phenomenon.¹¹ ‘What if we haven’t lost the sacred shining gods, but have simply lost touch with the meanings they offer’ (Dreyfus and Kelly 2011, p. 89)?

This brings us to the final question that needs addressing in this phenomenology of the sacred: Is there something we can do to become receptive to the sacred as here defined, to become, as Dreyfus and Kelly say, ‘a standing invitation to the gods’ (Dreyfus and Kelly 2011, p. 84)? The important thing is that we once again learn—like the Greeks—to *cultivate* a receptivity to the sacred, to the gods. What would it look like to learn this receptivity in a modern culture? To answer this question, the authors bring in the notion of *skill*, what the Greeks called *poiesis*. The learning of a skill—such as carpentry, sports, playing an instrument, etc.—always means learning to see the world differently. Even more, it involves being able to bring out certain aspects of the world that the unskilled are not able to perceive or to bring out. And in a similar way, we ought to be able to cultivate in ourselves the skill to apprehend the sacred as it is available in a contemporary context. This cultivation will be something of a discovery of a lost art and it begins by reflecting on what it is we really care about in life. Clearly, we care about very different things, and so the sacred that we will be able to bring out in the world will not be one—monotheistic—sacred meaning, but it will be a ‘poly-sacred’ world in which any number of meaningful experiences are

available, some of which may well contradict each other, morally and in other ways. This is the polytheistic or pluralistic element in the proposal. Which phenomena we will be able to bring out all turns on what we as individuals care deeply for. What matters is that we discover which experiences give our lives a kind of sacred meaning, and then cultivate in ourselves the skill to bring out the most of these experiences—so that in the end they begin to shine! Hence the title: *All Things Shining*.

This, then, is the proposal in a nutshell: We need to leave behind the world of nihilism, modern as well as monotheistic, and embrace the experience of the sacred that this world still has to offer, guided by the model of the Homeric Greeks, and we need to cultivate in ourselves the skill to perceive and bring out the most of these experiences.

3. Difficult Retrieval: A Critical Discussion

While *All Things Shining* found a receptive popular audience, it was also subject to much criticism. The prominent historian Garry Wills, for instance, thought its genealogy of nihilism a travesty (Wills 2011). The philosopher Kyla Ebels-Duggan charged that its contemporary examples of the sacred—such as sporting events and coffee rituals—were banal, unable to stave off modern despair, and in any case only for the privileged classes (Ebels-Duggan 2011). Charles Taylor worried that the happy polytheism of the Greeks contained no resources to resist evil forms of being ‘whooshed away’ and the injustice this might entail (Taylor 2011b). James K. A. Smith contended that the central characterisation of David Foster Wallace (and the modernity he epitomizes in the book) as unhaunted by religious sensibilities was entirely mistaken (Smith 2014). To this might be added an, at times, questionable phenomenology: What could have led two distinguished phenomenologists to claim, for instance, that ‘there is no essential difference, really, in how it feels to rise as one in joy to sing the praises of the Lord, or to rise as one in joy to sing the praises of the Hail Mary pass’ (Dreyfus and Kelly 2011, pp. 192–93)? These are not just analogous experiences, they claim; they are in fact essentially the same! On the face of it, this seems bizarrely implausible.¹²

Why, then, engage at such length with Dreyfus and Kelly’s proposal? For at least two reasons: It is one of few contemporary attempts to bring phenomenological theory into a more general and popular discussion about the crisis of meaning in modernity, and thus to make this mode of philosophy of religion existentially relevant. Moreover, the criticisms raised, while important, perhaps do not touch the theoretical heart of the matter: whether there is in fact a deeply meaningful experience of the sacred along these lines to be explored, and the question of what kind of framework such exploration demands. In other words, while I concur with some of the criticism, and will offer my own critical perspective below, I nonetheless believe that there is much to be learnt from Dreyfus and Kelly’s general approach. It should not be seen as a final word but as a catalyst for a wider set of explorations in philosophy of religion along the lines of a phenomenology of the sacred. The point of what follows, therefore, is neither to justify nor condemn their proposal as such, but to use it as a way of exploring some critical issues facing any such project of reenchantment, and by the same token any philosophy of religion seeking a rapprochement with the phenomenology of religious experience as a way of addressing the existential crisis of meaning following from the processes of disenchantment in modernity.

3.1. Phenomenology and Metaphysics

Clearly, the talk of Greek polytheism is meant to capture two things in the contemporary context: the pluralism of meaning and value (against ‘monotheistic’ exclusivism) and the realism of meaning and value (against modern constructivism). This requires the authors to seek out a narrow and difficult path, and it seems to me that the sought-after realism is very hard to sustain and ends up being short-changed by the overall framework, which therefore veers in the direction of constructivism.

Dreyfus and Kelly suggest that we ought to cut the bond between the experience of polytheism and its theological or metaphysical articulation, keeping the former while

rejecting the latter. Why is this? Again, because our scientifically informed understanding of reality does not admit of a real pantheon of gods acting in the world. Instead, as they put it, the ‘Homeric notion of reality is orthogonal to our contemporary scientific understanding . . . we think one should embrace both notions—without any conflict’ (Dreyfus and Kelly 2011, p. 201). Science is here taken to articulate reality; polytheism is taken to articulate the experience of sacred meaning. The authors suggest that you can have a working phenomenology of the sacred without at the same time engaging in metaphysical reflection or theory about the reality underlying these phenomena. And so, they say, for instance, that we could bring back the experience of the Greeks, their experience of being grateful to the gods for the surprising, good things that occur in their lives, without in the least believing that such divinities actually exist. But is it possible to decouple the religious experience of the Greeks on the one hand from the metaphysical reasoning that were also part of Greek religion on the other?

Here, we encounter an instructive problem at the heart of the proposal presented in *All Things Shining*: If we say that a certain kind of experience of the sacred can be decoupled from its original metaphysical framework and be available in the entirely new context of modernity, then it would seem we need to find a way of theoretically articulating this kind of experience, a new way of making sense of it such that it does not appear as a brute and inexplicable happening.¹³ Dreyfus and Kelly seem to suggest that the naked Greek experience of the sacred could sail into the modern world without there being clothed in new cultural–linguistic concepts that work in the new context; they believe that we could keep the experience without the theory or the reality to which it points. But if experience and theory go together this will be impossible. As the noted religion scholar Robert Bellah puts it, ‘we cannot disentangle raw experience from cultural form.’ Nevertheless, he continues, ‘we can see them as equally essential, like the Aristotelian notions of matter and form’ (Bellah 2011, p. 12). As the hylomorphic analogy suggests, this approach does not commit us to a strong form of framework theory, as if cultural frameworks create experience without remainder; this would be a constructivist rather than a realist approach. The point for Bellah, rather, is that we can recognise the importance of the cultural–linguistic framework without reducing experience to it in a constructivist manner.¹⁴

This is not to say, of course, that a philosophy of religion that tried to take these kinds of experiences seriously would necessarily have to take the Greek theology at face value. But it is to say that it would have to propose something that the experience is *of*, a reality that is encountered. Why is this, precisely? Because if it remains silent on this question it reduces the experience of the sacred once more to subjective construction (after the manner of someone like Don Cupitt) and thus ends up in bed with modern nihilism after all.¹⁵

In fact, however, Dreyfus and Kelly do address the metaphysics, if only indirectly and negatively. For is it not the case that they have begun to interpret the experience of the sacred for us by setting certain limits, derived as they see it from modern science, to what we can think? They do not remain neutral with regard to metaphysics, but propose what is essentially a naturalist framework. It is within such a framework that the Greek experience of being cared for by a divinity, or something analogous to it, with its attendant feeling of gratitude, must find a home. But is it not the case that if we insist on some form of naturalism, with limits set by modern science, the most sensible interpretation of such experiences of the sacred would be along the lines of a hermeneutics of suspicion—we do not encounter a real sacredness but project it out of some hidden need?¹⁶ If so, the whole project once more reduces to a form of subjective constructivism, the very thing it was meant to help us escape. It seems to me that the only way out of this conundrum would be to tackle the metaphysical issues head-on. Especially if we expect the experiences in question to guide us as we search for a meaningful life beyond modern nihilism.

What metaphysical framework—what interpretation of reality—could sustain these experiences of the sacred? If the kind of religious experience of sacred meaning that *All Things Shining* describes as analogous to the experience of the ancient Greeks is still possible in contemporary culture, and if such experience is to become culturally meaningful for us,

then it must be interpreted in a way that makes sense of it. To be sure, one way of doing that would be to reinterpret it along the lines of a traditional theistic metaphysics, which we saw Charles Taylor describe as a still live though not hegemonic option, even in a secular age. (This would, of course, require a defence against the Nietzschean accusation that monotheism leads to a nihilistic relocation of meaning.) Such, however, is not my project here as I want to explore other ways of making sense of these experiences, in line with Taylor's third response above. Robert Bellah, once again, gestures in this direction when he talks of 'multiple' and 'overlapping realities', suggesting that a distinction between ordinary and non-ordinary experiences might not coincide with the distinction between the real and the merely imagined. As he puts it, 'the notion that the world of daily life is uniquely real is itself a fiction that is maintained only with effort' (Bellah 2011, p. 3). Bellah thus proposes a pluralistic ontology that is nonetheless realist in orientation, resolutely leaving behind any notion that reality is nothing but what the hard sciences provide the account of.

Bellah's approach is inspired by early phenomenology, and, as a matter of fact, phenomenology has rich resources for staking out the difficult position that is both realist and pluralist. Here, I am thinking particularly of an idea fundamental to the phenomenological enterprise as such, namely that intentionality names a relation between subject and object, and that the constitution of meaning is the result of a dialogue between two parts. Maurice Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of perception is particularly generative here (Merleau-Ponty [1945] 2002). He stresses the dialogical character of perception, where the subject—primarily the corporeal subject—responds to a solicitation or call from its milieu through attention and making itself available in various ways to a meaning about to be born. In a dialectical process that never really ends, body and world carry on a dialogue in which meaning emerges as a co-production. It follows from this that perception is not so much about constructing reality as it is about making oneself open to a reality that beckons, so as to be able to disclose a perceptual world. It follows too that different ways of responding may yield different structures of perceptual meaning.¹⁷ Now, what if we were to apply the same phenomenological approach to the emergence of religious meaning?

This is precisely what the co-creative or enactive account of religious meaning-making developed by Ferrer and Sherman (2008; Sherman 2014) attempts to do. The notion of co-creation and enaction is specifically derived from the phenomenology of perception and has been picked up in contemporary cognitive science through the influential book *The Embodied Mind: Cognitive Science and Human Experience* (Varela et al. 1991).¹⁸ As the authors explain it, enaction describes the meaningful domains that result from the embodied and mutually specifying action of organism and environment. Ferrer and Sherman extend this idea to include the co-production of religious meaning that emerges in the interaction between human cognition and a generative religious reality, which—critically, for our purposes—need not be specified as one. There may indeed be multiple religious realities with which human beings are able to interact so as to bring forth the variety of religious experiences. This position achieves an integration of a certain pluralism and realism that is both intellectually coherent and religiously relevant. They develop this idea in some detail in their work, which I will not trace out here. The point is simply that something like this would be able to undergird the kinds of experiences of the sacred that Dreyfus and Kelly seek to retrieve—beyond both monotheism and scientific materialism.

These reflections yield a negative conclusion vis à vis Dreyfus and Kelly's project: A philosophy of religion that would seek to retrieve a substantial account of the sacred as an antidote to existential nihilism has to engage questions of a more metaphysical nature; it cannot rest content with a default metaphysical naturalism. Such a philosophy of the sacred would arguably be more in tune with the phenomenological approach sketched above. And this, then, yields a positive conclusion: Phenomenology, specifically as developed in enactive theories of meaning, does contain important resources for a philosophical account of the experience of the sacred able to embrace both pluralism and realism.

3.2. The Social Dimension of Sacred Meaning

My second critical point—again, meant to be instructive—is related to the first: If Dreyfus and Kelly’s proposal threatens to reduce to but another form of modern constructivism, and thus ultimately to offer no way out of the nihilism they aptly diagnose, this is not only because they short-change the metaphysical questions, but also because they lack a sufficiently thick description of the social dimension of all meaning-making, as well as the dimension of pedagogy and tradition through which one learns with others the necessary skills in question. Absent this emphasis on social embeddedness, the constitution of sacred meaning begins to look an awful lot like—an existentialist choice!

Dreyfus and Kelly do underline the need to *learn* the skills that would enable us to become receptive to the sacred dimensions of life. Skill—*poiesis*—is the ability to bring something out from experience that those who are unskilled cannot. The skills of the cook, the musician, and the carpenter have this in common. But how does one learn such skills in the first place? Clearly, one normally learns it from someone else; one learns it through taking part in socially enacted practices. In religious history, this is a very obvious point: religious experience is normally cultivated within specific traditions. In analytic philosophy of religion, William Alston made this a central part of the argument in his ground-breaking *Perceiving God: The Epistemology of Religious Experience* (Alston 1991), where he spoke of spiritual traditions as ‘doxastic practices’ through which religious reality is manifested and receive a measure of justification. In the phenomenological tradition too, there has been a growing recognition of the function of tradition and history in the mediation of meaning, inspired not least by developments in the later Husserl and more recent work by Anthony Steinbock (1995). As mentioned in the introduction, Dahl recruits Husserl’s understanding of the constitutive role of tradition in his account of the experience of the holy. The mysterious interruptions of the everyday, he writes, ‘stands out and radiates backwards and awakens relatively similar sedimentations of meaning. . . . Without such awakening [of the sedimented meaning-layers of tradition], alienness will be nothing more than a formal trait of only epistemological interest’ (Dahl 2010, p. 213). The ‘interruptions’ in question here primarily refers to the epistemological alienness and mystery of things and Others, which must be mediated by a tradition if they are to be experienced as traces of the holy, but the main point is that any phenomenology of the sacred must take proper account of its inscription into traditions of various kinds.

Now, it might be argued that what Dreyfus and Kelly seek to achieve is precisely such a reintegration between contemporary phenomena and tradition, only it is not the ‘monotheistic’ tradition of the West they want to retrieve but the polytheism of a prior Greek tradition. But as we have seen, they refuse so much of this tradition’s metaphysics that what remains is not so much a tradition as the curious formality Dahl criticizes. His characterisation of the relation between experience and tradition points up precisely what is lacking in Dreyfus and Kelly’s account, and by implication any account that would attempt a clean separation between subjective experience of religious meaning and its socio-historical embeddedness. For as Dahl describes such experiences, meaning sedimented in tradition cannot be ignored: ‘Interruptions of the alien will in relevant contexts evoke the religious tradition, which will inform and confer religious sense on the mystery . . . [it will] confer a sense so that familiarity gives direction to the experience of the alien’ (Dahl 2010, p. 213).

In the account of *All Things Shining*, the lack of a substantial account of tradition means that the sacred meaning of certain events ironically appears much more like a construction that we can *choose* to confer. To be sure, they *want* to say that we cannot choose this meaning at will but must discover it in the phenomena themselves; this is the precondition for the anti-nihilistic thrust of their argument. But in fact, they give us no tools for recognizing what we discover, since the experiences they invoke are not mediated by any tradition at all. Rather, each one is encouraged to try to learn individually what gives them a sense of the sacred. Thus, they speak of our need to cultivate a sensitivity to the sacred without ever mentioning the social framework needed to do this. To be sure, several of their examples of

the experience of the sacred are social in nature, but it remains that it is the lone individual who must discover which of these work for him or her. But how is such individual reflection to lead to the development of the relevant skills? Are there no masters to learn from in this area as there are in other areas that require specific competences? Are there no traditions?

Such questions also lead us to recognize the absence of what we could call *pedagogy*. Ancient philosophy, both Greek and Christian, clearly understood the need for pedagogical formation if a person is to develop into someone who sees the world in a particular way, not least when it comes to experience of the divine. And pedagogical formation requires a student to submit to particular kinds of discipline and practice. In order to see certain things in the world, especially if these things are partly hidden, one needs to go through a pedagogical formation in order to train one's power of vision. As Jacob Sherman writes,

the physiognomy of the world is not set in stone; it changes with regard to our means of approach and *in response* to our means of approach. Contemplative practice—measured in terms of years rather than months, weeks, or minutes—transforms the practitioner's alignment to both the world and God, thus eliciting new responses and opening entirely new avenues of inquiry (Sherman 2014, p. 251).

The mention of contemplative practice here already implies incorporation into some kind of religious or philosophical tradition. By contrast, Dreyfus and Kelly suggest that it is enough to think clearly about this in order to perceive the sacred dimension. There is a kind of intellectualism here that imagines that what we care deeply for is a neutral given that we can perceive with undistorted lenses if only we open our eyes. What the tradition of pedagogy has always recognized, by contrast, is that what we care about and desire is malleable and under the sway of forces external to us, recalcitrant to volitional control—hence the need for discipline. Otherwise, it might turn out that what we care about most deeply is sex, power, and money, or perhaps sugar and endless entertainment. Not because this reflects our true selves but because these selves have been deformed by powerfully attracting forces operating in the society in which we live. An uncharitable reader might even suggest that Dreyfus and Kelly's examples of perfectly constructed and meaning-bestowing coffee rituals and sports events respond less to what we really care about as human beings than to a late capitalist commodification of existential meaning. If we were to relate their phenomenology of the sacred to the traditional terms of the phenomenology of religion as deployed by Rudolf Otto, we might say that they reduce the holy (or sacred) to *fascinans* and reject the *tremendum*. For without the aspect of holy fear the sacred easily becomes commodified, nothing more than a private pursuit of existential meaning through coffee, sport, romantic liaisons, etc., which so easily become co-opted by market forces. Here, the holy has moved entirely out of its transcendent otherness and into the everyday world.¹⁹

Again, we may draw a negative conclusion vis à vis Dreyfus and Kelly's proposal. It arguably falls prey to a kind of phenomenological intellectualist problem that would beset any approach neglecting the social embeddedness of tradition and pedagogy; it is never mentioned that if we are truly to become aware of the dimension of experience they call sacred, surely we need more than intellectual resources. But here too we can formulate an instructive positive point: We need social structures, traditions extended over time, and pedagogical formation in order to help us discern what is truly meaningful. Otherwise, the sacred will likely be hijacked—not all the gods, after all, are interested in our well-being.²⁰ And that is why a philosophy of the sacred proposed as an alternative to the modern crisis of meaning must be ever attentive to its social dimension.

3.3. The Sacred and the Problem of Moral Discrimination

The two problems discussed above—that of the existential framework and that of the social embeddedness of the sacred—come together in what is perhaps the most significant problem associated with becoming 'a standing invitation to the gods', always attentive to the sacred meanings around us; it is anticipated by Dreyfus and Kelly: How do we

learn to distinguish between good and evil in the sphere of the sacred? If we must learn to be whooshed away, swept up in the mood of the moment, such as at a great sporting event or at a political rally, it is very easy to imagine a situation where this kind of letting go would be wholly inappropriate and very dangerous. Imagine being swept up by the mood of a lynching mob, or by the political mood of Nazi Germany, or by any other kind of strong communal emotion that is morally wrong. Dreyfus and Kelly try to meet this challenge by suggesting that we need to develop the meta-skill—they call it *meta-poiesis*—of deciding which moods to be swept up in, and which we must walk away from. How do we develop this skill? By trial and error, it seems. What they say is that we must risk the danger of being swept away by evil in order then to learn how to discriminate between what is good and what is evil. ‘Only by having been taken over by the fanatical leader’s totalizing rhetoric, and experienced the dangerous and devastating consequences it has, does one learn to discriminate between leaders worth following and those upon whom one must turn one’s back’ (Dreyfus and Kelly 2011, p. 220).

This is once again too individualist a vision; the proposal is formulated in such a way that each and every individual must learn the meta-skills of discernment for themselves, that each and all must go through the experience of being swept up by dangerous moods. This means that human beings must make the same mistakes a thousand times over. If instead we have recourse to the notions of tradition and pedagogy, we are at least able to see that traditions typically embody not only certain ways of experiencing the sacred, but also deep reflection on its potential dangers. My point is simply that most religious traditions, broadly defined, contain within themselves resources to learn moral discrimination, to distinguish good from evil. This is obviously not to say that they always get it right, that they automatically produce saints—far from it. However, with the approach of *All Things Shining* to the moral dimension of the sacred, each individual must on his or her own reinvent the wheel; each person must begin their moral education from scratch, without the benefit of previous generations of practitioners.

Moral education belongs to the quest for sacred meaning, for in our world not all things are shining, some things are dark indeed. More significant here, however, is that many things are neither black nor white but instead require very fine moral discriminations, something that Dreyfus and Kelly’s moral binary between good and evil—Martin Luther King and Hitler—does not recognize. What are we to say, for instance, about being whooshed away by the powerful mood of #metoo. No doubt, much about this movement was and is positive and worth affirming. But there was also the aspect of mob-like behaviour, internet trials, and ritual ‘killings’, after the model of the end justifying the means. This is just one example of a mood which is clearly neither black nor white, to be rejected or affirmed wholesale. The point is that to make these discriminations we are going to need other tools than a meta-poiesis individualistically conceived; we will need tradition, historical community, pedagogy. I hasten to add that such traditions, when they are in good order, embody a continuous deliberation about the good—they should obviously not be thought of as statically given historical relics (Cf. MacIntyre 1988).

It seems to me that at this point too a phenomenologically inflected philosophy of the sacred is poised to make a difference, in so far as it inquires into religious and spiritual traditions, their intellectual viability and moral consequences. More attentive to the thick description of religious experience available through phenomenology, it would recognise not only the need to address fundamental metaphysical issues, but also the need to discuss the relation between the religious and the ethical in a way that much mainstream philosophy and ethics have not. Charles Taylor points out the decisive issue in relation *All Things Shining*: The moral resources needed to evaluate the plurality of moods tend to be rooted precisely in the kinds of Axial-Age traditions that Dreyfus and Kelly reject in favour of a polytheism of values and meaning (Taylor 2011b). This move leaves them bereft of the resources that such Axial Age ethics provided precisely as a critique of the polytheistic regime and its inevitable victims, and they put nothing in its place.

This is a significant weakness that is, once again, instructive for those who would seek to pursue philosophy of religion along the lines of a phenomenology of the sacred. We begin to see that the decoupling of religious experience from metaphysical frameworks and social embeddedness has also meant a decoupling of such experience from valuable moral resources and left it vulnerable to abuse, especially if proposed in an overly individualistic context. And if this is true, while traditions—religious or not—are always liable to become destructive and immoral, there is simply no viable alternative to being formed into a moral subject by traditional communities and practices.²¹ Dreyfus and Kelly are right, therefore, in saying that there is always a risk involved in being drawn into powerful experiences; the meta-poietic skills they suggest as a remedy, however, can only be cultivated within moral communities deliberating about the good, and extending their argument over time so as to form a tradition—and in one of these we must always locate ourselves.²² It is clear, therefore, that a discussion of the moral resources (and liabilities) of monotheistic and polytheistic traditions cannot be brushed aside with a reference to some individualistically conceived *meta-poiesis*, but must become the focus of sustained philosophical investigation in relation to experiences of the sacred.

4. Conclusions: Philosophy of Religion in Phenomenological Mode

If the analysis of *All Things Shining* suggests anything, it is that it is very hard to escape from constructivism and individualism in the sphere of value and meaning—of the sacred—even when that is the explicit project. Dreyfus and Kelly want to affirm the reality of sacred meaning, which we can perhaps once again learn to disclose but cannot construct or simply—per existentialism—choose. Still, since it seems almost anything can be perceived as sacred in this sense, and since it is up to everyone to find what works for them, without tradition and its pedagogical and critical tools, the suggested pluralism veers significantly towards such constructivism after all; sacred meaning is diluted, making it hard to distinguish the sacred from personal choice or whim or—what is worse—from manufactured desire. What is lacking is a conception of a sacred reality robust enough to bear the weight of meaning; otherwise, the connection between ancient Greek religiosity and the modern rituals of coffee, sport, and romance begins to look like a sleight of hand rather than a meaningful analogy.

I have suggested throughout that phenomenology has important resources to bring to the philosophical exploration of the sacred, resources that I find missing in Dreyfus and Kelly's proposal. I want to tie all of this together now by briefly turning—somewhat surprisingly perhaps—to other work by Hubert Dreyfus, which do contain these resources. For as a matter of fact, Dreyfus is otherwise known as a philosopher keen to use phenomenology in an attempt to reconnect with reality, beyond the mediational or correlational view of much modern philosophy at least since Kant; his philosophy is decisively realist in orientation. In 2015 he published *Retrieving Realism* together with Charles Taylor, which uses the concept of 'contact theory' to describe a version of realism grounded in the preconceptual and embodied relation between human subjects and the world (Dreyfus and Taylor 2015, pp. 71–101). The inspiration here is drawn from theories we have already encountered, above all from Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of the body and the theory of enaction. Hence, Dreyfus and Taylor argue that understanding should be seen as a 'co-production of me and the world' (Dreyfus and Taylor 2015, p. 92, quotation marks omitted). My point has been that this general approach might also govern our understanding of sacred meaning, i.e., sacred meaning must be taken to emerge in an encounter with and disclosure of reality, or a dimension thereof. In fact, at this point Dreyfus's realism could assist Dreyfus's account of sacred meaning with a more robust notion of that which is encountered. As Dreyfus and Taylor say: Language and world-making are not arbitrary; they are in response to something' (Dreyfus and Taylor 2015, p. 129).

What about the fact that the experience of the sacred varies so much across cultures? Does a more robust realism not commit us to the notion that there is only one underlying religious or sacred reality, perhaps processed in different conceptual schemes across cultures? Not necessarily. Dreyfus and Taylor develop what they call a ‘pluralist realism’: various practices and traditions (rather than choices or intellectual manoeuvres) might give us access to various realities, without necessarily converging on a unified understanding (Dreyfus and Taylor 2015, pp. 148–68). In the same way, I have argued that various traditions and practices might allow us to encounter plural realities that might be called sacred, and where we lack any means of unifying them into one and the same reality. In short, even in the sphere of the sacred, realism could be robust even if pluralistically conceived.²³ Again, Dreyfus himself points the way.

Developing the metaphysical framework in this way would arguably save the phenomenology of the sacred from being short-circuited by simply assuming some sorts of metaphysical naturalism as the default framework; for within such a naturalist framework the experience of the sacred will always be more plausibly thought of as epiphenomenal. Of course, any metaphysical framework should be critically approached, and I have indicated that the phenomenology of the sacred as here conceived does not necessitate a theistic framework (though it might operate within such a framework too). What *is* necessary, it seems to me, is for religious experience to be an encounter with a religious reality, such that meaning can be seen as the coproduction or enaction of human subjectivity and said religious reality, however conceived. This is neither to be seen as a normative proposal of religious pluralism, nor a desire to circumvent important questions of truth. It is to be seen, rather, as specifying the logic of religious experience *if indeed it is to be something more than subjective construction*, and so be able to respond to the crisis of meaning.

Community, historical tradition, and pedagogical formation of some kind would have to be integral to experience of the sacred so conceived. Indeed, the notion of a co-production of meaning invites attention to precisely these social dimensions of meaning: I must *learn* to play my role in the production. Here, I suggested that we avail ourselves of the rich phenomenological reflection on historically sedimented meaning, which is carried forward by living tradition, as explored in Dahl’s work. It is such traditions that also form us in the skills needed to become receptive to that of which they speak—‘a standing invitation to the gods’; we do not have to cultivate this receptivity by individual choice, but may step into established structures. To be sure, in religious studies this dimension of religious experience has often been taken in a reductionistic sense, as if religious experience were nothing but a social construction serving this or that sociologically or psychologically specified function. But it is here that the phenomenological approach (or the co-productive, enactive approach inspired by it) provides a richer set of conceptual tools. Constitution, after all, is most helpfully understood as being open to the world or an aspect of it; it should be understood as ‘world disclosure’. But as such, it is never an isolated, individual or a-historic achievement, never a simple choice. Instead, my openness is qualified by the sedimented meaning-structures in which I already live. As Maurice Merleau-Ponty says (with reference to Marcel Proust): ‘We are perched on a pyramid of past life’ (Merleau-Ponty [1945] 2002, p. 457). This is arguably as true for sacred meaning as it is for ordinary perception.

If this is true, then the prospect of a phenomenology of the sacred as an antidote to modernity’s crisis of meaning—as a way of rekindling a sense of enchantment in the face of a constructivist culture—appears as a live option, opening suggestive ways forward for an existentially relevant philosophy of religion in phenomenological mode.

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Notes

- 1 For a lucid discussion of the fact-value distinction and its concomitant expressivist moral philosophy, see Alasdair [MacIntyre \(2016\)](#).
- 2 Secularity in this sense can also be called *postsecular* since it is what we are left with *after* the demise of mainstream secularization theory of modern sociology. Taylor brings up the term ([Taylor 2007](#), p. 535); for further discussion, see Ola [Sigurdson \(2009\)](#).
- 3 For the notion of growing up as part of a Western myth of modernity, see C. [Smith \(2009\)](#).
- 4 There are signs that this is changing as some analytic philosophers have recently turned to questions of existential meaning, including some that approach it from a theistic point of view. See [Goetz \(2012\)](#) and [Mawson \(2016\)](#). I would also add that in the form of a more popular Christian apologetics, such as that of Alister McGrath or William Lane Craig, theistic philosophy do give questions of meaning a certain prominence.
- 5 The extent to which such experiences nonetheless require pre-given and transcendental conditions of reception is a contested question, and one we need not pursue here. This question occupies a central position in Dahl's work, where he argues against a phenomenological desire for purity, i.e., for a condition-less reception, associated with the likes of Emmanuel Levinas and Jean-Luc Marion.
- 6 A recent argument for such a disciplinary reconnection is made in [Sherman \(2023\)](#).
- 7 Hubert Dreyfus was one of the foremost interpreters of phenomenology in the English-speaking world in the latter half of the twentieth century; Sean Dorrance Kelly is his erstwhile student and at the time of writing chair of the philosophy department at Harvard University.
- 8 It seems to me that the most authoritative and balanced account given in recent years remains that of Charles [Taylor \(2007\)](#). I would also mention the work of Thomas [Pfauf \(2013\)](#) and Hartmut [Rosa \(2019\)](#) as essential reading in this field.
- 9 The logic ascribed to theism here is thus the staple criticism of such as Nietzsche, Feuerbach, or Marx; it has recently been picked up again in [Häggglund \(2019\)](#).
- 10 They differ from the analysis of Charles Taylor in this respect: 'We are more sceptical than Taylor that Judeo-Christian monotheism can be culturally satisfying in the modern age. Even if it could be, there are other religious traditions in the history of the West that allow one to live a life guided by something experienced as beyond oneself' (21).
- 11 The resonance between this proposal and (especially the later) Heidegger will be evident, though since it is not much thematized in the book I shall not explore the Heideggerian sources of the book's constructive proposal.
- 12 This is perhaps a more interesting question than it at first appears. Why does it seem plausible for Dreyfus and Kelly to equate football games and coffee drinking with religious experience proper? Some interaction with the discipline of religious studies, and the phenomenology of religion in particular, would have aided the project with a thicker set of descriptions—but would also have made it more difficult.
- 13 Dahl's Husserlian point applies here: For these experiences to be more than epistemologically odd, they cannot be entirely free-floating but need to be related to already constituted meanings.
- 14 I take it that much social constructivism in religious studies in general falls into the same trap, stressing the interpretive framework without explicitly working out the metaphysical implications, thus short-changing encountered reality. For a realist critique of 'framework theory', which nonetheless seeks to retain the role of frameworks, see [Dreyfus and Taylor \(2015\)](#), to which I shall return.
- 15 I am thinking here of what Cupitt suggests about the meaningfulness of praying to a God you are convinced does not exist, which would be analogous to expressing gratitude to a divinity you think science has somehow disproved ([Cupitt 1980](#)).
- 16 For a rich discussion of the hermeneutics of suspicion in the context of religious experience, see [Westphal \(1998\)](#).
- 17 I have explored Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of perception in *Figuring Flesh in Creation* (2011). An important account of phenomenology's dialogical approach to meaning-making is found in David Abram's *Spell of the Sensuous* ([Abram 1996](#)).
- 18 Thompson develops this framework further in his more recent *Mind in Life: Biology, Phenomenology, and the Sciences of Mind* ([Thompson 2007](#)).
- 19 As Dahl perceptively argues, there is a sense in which the earlier phenomenology of religion of Otto, even of Mircea Eliade, overemphasized the opposition between the sacred and the profane, the holy and the everyday (though Eliade points beyond Otto in the interconnections that nonetheless exist between the sacred and profane); the remedy, however, is not to collapse the distinction altogether. Cf. [Dahl \(2010, p. 44\)](#). The theologian William T. Cavanaugh suggests that the holy in modernity is all too prone to 'migrate' to less worthy objects ([Cavanaugh 2008, 2011](#)).
- 20 For a phenomenological account of the sacred that stresses the need of a *practical* rather than an intellectual epoché, see Erazim [Kohák \(1984\)](#).
- 21 I will not argue this case here but simply refer the reader to the work of Alasdair [MacIntyre \(2016\)](#), and his analysis of our moral predicament.

- ²² The point here is obviously not that Dreyfus and Kelly should have written an academic tome instead of a popular book; rather, it is that the suggestions they do offer are in the wrong direction.
- ²³ This is not to say that different understandings of religious reality could not be converging; certainly they could. The point is rather to suggest that this is an open question, and if a plurality remains this in itself does not threaten a theory that is both pluralist and realist.

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