"A PICTURE HELD US CAPTIVE" : INVESTIGATIONS TOWARDS AN ICONOCLASTIC PRAXEOLOGY

Janice L. Deary

A Thesis Submitted for the Degree of PhD at the University of St. Andrews

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“A Picture Held us Captive”:

Investigations Towards an Iconoclastic Praxeology

Janice L. Deary

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In Candidacy for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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ABSTRACT

Iconoclastic discourse, as a critique of ‘idols’ of various kinds, has been appropriated by a range of different thinkers and traditions – often not always explicitly religious – throughout history. One of the more recent targets of iconoclasm is *metaphysics*, understood as a way of doing philosophy that appeals to an ideal or transcendent ground that is used to offer a totalising explanation of ‘reality’. For some reason, the issue of ‘metaphysical idolatry’ has become entangled with the problem of ‘writing’, or ‘representation’ more generally, which is pictured in some rather strange ways by a range of thinkers and theorists – including philosophers and theologians such as Jacques Derrida, Jean-Luc Marion, and Catherine Pickstock – in order to either challenge, or to be held accountable for, the ‘idolatry’ of metaphysical thought. It seems, however, that these strange pictures of writing compound rather than solve the problem of metaphysics, and it is towards pictures such as these that we direct our own iconoclastic critique. What many critics of metaphysics have failed to comprehend, we argue, is that metaphysics is a certain type of philosophical *practice*, and it must therefore be judged from this perspective. Idolatry itself has, since biblical times, been understood as a form of sinful practice, and unless we understand iconoclastic problems in a praxeological way, we risk basing our critical arguments on delusional assumptions. We turn to the work of thinkers as diverse as Marx, Wittgenstein, Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, Ryle, Bourdieu, Ingold, and others, who have challenged metaphysics, and the strange pictures that metaphysical thought has inspired, through the adoption of what we call a praxeological approach. It is from this perspective, we argue, that we can make iconoclastic judgements, and justify these judgements, in a way that avoids the speculative conundrums of some other more problematic approaches.
Declarations

(i) I, Janice Deary, hereby certify that this thesis, which is approximately 100,000 words in length, has been written by me, that it is a record of work carried out by me and that it has not been submitted in any previous application for a higher degree.

Date

Signature of Candidate

(ii) I was admitted as a research student in September 2002 and as a candidate for the degree of Ph.D in September 2003; the higher study for which this is a record was carried out in the University of St Andrews between September 2002 and March 2007.

Date

Signature of Candidate

(iii) I hereby certify that the candidate has fulfilled the conditions for the Resolution and Regulations appropriate for the degree of Ph.D in the University of St Andrews and that the candidate is qualified to submit this thesis in application for this degree.

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Acknowledgements

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Einig zu seyn, ist göttlich und gut; woher ist die Sucht denn
Unter den Menschen, daß nur Einer und Eines nur sei? ¹

Being at one is god-like and good, but human, too human, the mania
Which insists there is only the One, one country, one truth and one way.

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Richard Dawkins’ recently published book, *The God-Delusion*, is intended to be a critique of what he calls the “God Hypothesis”, from a scientific (and atheistic) perspective. Dawkins defines ‘delusion’ as a “persistent false belief held in the face of strong contradictory evidence, especially as a symptom of psychiatric disorder,” and it is against this type of ‘disorder’ that he defends Darwinism as “the story of humanity’s liberation from the delusion that its destiny is controlled by a power higher than itself.” He argues that the "God Hypothesis" (which he describes as the idea that “there exists a super-human, supernatural intelligence who deliberately designed and created the universe and everything in it, including us”) should be treated with as much scepticism as any other theory offering a totalising explanation of the universe. Following Fred Hoyle’s argument that the “probability of life originating on earth is no greater than the chance that a hurricane sweeping through a scrap-yard would have the luck to assemble a Boeing 747,” Dawkins actually feels that we could describe God as “the Ultimate Boeing 747.”

Although Dawkins would balk at the idea, it seems that it is possible to understand his work as part of an iconoclastic tradition that can be traced all the way back to the ancient Israelite’s defence of the ‘real’ God, against other ‘impostors’. The target of iconoclastic criticism – *idolatry* – could be understood as a form of ‘delusion’ that occurs when an idolater worships, or attributes ultimate value to, something that is really worth far less than he thinks it is. Iconoclasm, as the critical response to idolatry, is most famously described in the Hebrew scriptures, although iconoclastic sentiments and practices can perhaps be traced all the way back to the Pharaoh Akhenaton’s defence of...
monotheism against the complex hierarchy of Egyptian gods in the twelfth century B.C.E. Iconoclastic attitudes and practices can be found throughout the history of Western religion, theology, culture, and even philosophy, although the meaning of the term ‘iconoclasm’, and ‘idolatry’, as its critical target, are usually dependent on the way they are employed in the context of different critical practices or traditions.

One branch of iconoclasm that has been prominent in the history of Western thought is iconoclasm of the philosophical variety, although the ironic thing is that many of the iconoclasts in this tradition are avowedly atheistic. The philosophical war against ‘idolatrous error’ is evident, for example, in the work of thinkers such as Francis Bacon, Ludwig Feuerbach and Friedrich Nietzsche, although it is perhaps Marx’s critique of ‘alienation’ that is most akin to the iconoclastic critique of idolatry found in the Judaic tradition. According to Moshe Halbertal and Avishai Margalit, authors of an extensive study on the concept of idolatry in Judaism and other religions: “The critical and liberating role of philosophy is the uncovering of deep illusions. Philosophy, by its nature, or at its best, is iconoclastic, in the sense of removing ideological masks or breaking idols.” Philosophy, in a way similar to religious iconoclasm, they say, “has the same role of liberation from error.” Of course, philosophy has a number of other roles, and a number of different ways of being practised; but this idea of philosophy as having an ‘iconoclastic’ function is one that has influenced a number of important thinkers throughout the history of the tradition.

It is in this light that we might consider Dawkins’ work as the most recent in a long line of iconoclastic projects, even though he claims to be a staunch atheist. For Dawkins, science offers the only ‘true’ and ‘real’ explanation of reality that we should endorse if we wish to avoid the delusion of believing in something that cannot be proven or even falsified. It is important to note, however, that this appeal to something more ‘real’ or more ‘true’ than that which is valued by an ‘idolater’, is a classic move that is made throughout the history of the various traditions of iconoclastic rhetoric and practice. Iconoclasm usually goes hand in hand with the defence of an ‘icon’; that is, the defence of an ideal or an object considered more worthy of reverence than the ‘idols’ of one’s opponents. Something like an ‘iconoclastic chain’ is formed, when one person’s ‘icon’ is considered an ‘idol’ in the eyes of an opponent, or another generation of iconoclasts. It is

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7 Halbertal and Margalit. Idolatry, p. 6.
8 According to Dawkins, although we “cannot disprove the existence of God,” it is equally impossible to “disprove the existence of unicorns, orbiting teapots, the Flying Spaghetti Monster or tooth fairies” (The God Delusion, p. 53).
this ‘iconoclastic chain’ that will form the basis of the discussion in Chapter 1, where we will introduce the very intricate and complex problem of idolatry, and the various forms of iconoclasm that have developed as a critical response to it. We will emphasise that the target of iconoclastic critique is idolatrous practice, and that, even when idolatry is a ‘conceptual’ problem, as it is considered in the philosophical tradition, this problem cannot be divorced from the lifeworld practices in which the problem is situated.

Not only is idolatry a major religious, social, or philosophical problem, but it also appears that the conception of idolatry (and the practice of iconoclasm that accompanies it) is a problem that needs to be investigated. One of the most problematic conceptions of idolatry can be seen in the way it is often described in terms of a certain metaphysical picture of ‘representation,’ as somehow opposed to ‘reality’ (usually understood in rather idealistic terms). This is an issue that we will explore more thoroughly in Chapter 2. The conception of idolatry as a problem of the ‘graven image’ can be found throughout history, although we will emphasise that there is an important difference between the biblical idea of the grave sin of idolatry, and the idea that idolatry is a problem that revolves around the production (or use) of graven signs. This obsession with the ‘sign’, or with the ‘image’ (seen as somehow opposed to ‘reality’) is to some extent a problem of translation: the English word “idol” stems from the Greek eidōlon (meaning ‘illusion’, although it can be extended to include the word ‘image’), while “iconoclasm”, from the Greek eikonoklasmus, means, literally, ‘image-breaking’. Despite this apparent link to the image, however, iconoclasm is probably best understood as a form of critical practice directed against idols, while idolatry is probably best understood as a wrong or sinful practice, that might or might not have anything to do with images at all. Although it would perhaps be worthwhile to coin a term that could be used to describe the destruction of idols – a word, for example, such as “idoloclasm” – because we are interested in exploring the ways in which the problem of the ‘idol’ has become entangled with a certain conception of the ‘image’, it seems that it might be advantageous to maintain the use of the word ‘iconoclasm’, which encapsulates this connection.

Nevertheless, this conception of idolatry as a problem of the ‘image’, as somehow opposed to ‘reality’ (however this is conceived) is very troublesome, and it will be discussed at various points through the course of this thesis. The use – or misuse – of words, will also be a major theme in the chapters that follow. It seems that a number of major problems and deep-seated illusions have arisen from the mishandling of words and
concepts, and it will require a great deal of time and energy to disentangle some of the snarled semantic webs that have been woven around the issue of idolatry, as well as around other concepts (including ‘representation’, ‘objectification’, and ‘alienation’), and practices (such as writing, and the type of philosophy that has been called metaphysics).

One of the words that will crop up time and again in this thesis is the word ‘reality’, although it will become apparent that this word means different things depending on who is using it, and for what purposes. As we will see, ‘reality’ is often not intended in a neutral ontological sense (that is, as a description of the “state of things as they actually exist”), but in a more valutative sense, as the naming of what is ‘really real’, or ‘most important’. While the former use of ‘reality’ usually results in a battle against illusions, the latter leads to a war against idols that need to be destroyed through critical work.

A problem emerges, however, when, instead of illusions or idols, it is ‘images’ or ‘representations’ that are seen as somehow opposed to ‘reality’. This leads to a judgement against a variety of forms of inscription, including the practice of writing, which has been described by a number of philosophers and theorists throughout the Western tradition as a malign sort of activity, and has in fact led to its iconoclastic treatment since at least the time of Plato (who actually describes writing as an eidōlon). This iconoclastic approach to writing seldom refers to any actual writing practices, however, and it seems that ‘writing’ is pictured rather curiously, and forced to fit into a rather strange mould, in order to be punished for crimes that have apparently been committed in its name. Rather than researching the history and diversity of writing practices, we are left with a rather strange picture of, not only writing, but also the ‘reality’ it is supposed to be ‘representing’ in an illusionary (or even ‘idolatrous’) way. Jacques Derrida, whose work we examine in Chapter 3, challenges the rather misguided iconoclastic critique of writing, which he feels is itself based on a metaphysical picture of ‘reality’. For Derrida, it is not writing that needs to be approached iconoclastically, but the belief in an unmediated, ideal reality or truth, and in relation to which writing is seen as a perversion or a deviation, that needs to be critically deconstructed. It is this belief in our ability to know or experience the ‘full presence’ of an ideal reality that Derrida calls the “metaphysics of presence”. This sort of idealistic metaphysics has been approached iconoclastically by a number of philosophers and

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9 Compact Oxford English Dictionary of Current English (Oxford University Press, 2005) The entry for “reality” reads: “reality • noun (pl. realities) 1. the state of things as they actually exist, as opposed to an idealistic or notional idea of them. 2. a thing that is actually experienced or seen. 3 the quality of being lifelike. 4 the state or quality of having existence or substance.”
theologians other than Derrida, all of whom see certain metaphysical pictures of reality as, not only illusory, but also as idolatrous, in that more value is attributed to certain abstract philosophical constructs than they deserve. This is precisely the sort of illusory metaphysical picture that Derrida sets out to deconstruct. The problem, as we will see, is that Derrida himself does not provide an account of ‘things as they actually are’ in contrast to the idealistic descriptions of reality (and writing) he has discovered; instead, he offers a rather metaphysical description of reality itself as something resembling a “text”.

Catherine Pickstock is a Christian theologian who believes that Derrida’s ‘textual’ reality is as metaphysical as those theories he sets out to deconstruct, and it is her critique of Derrida that we will examine in Chapter 4. Nevertheless, it seems that Pickstock also provides a rather troublesome picture of the ‘actual reality’ of human life and activity, which is something she conceives in terms of a model of Christian liturgy. The problem with Pickstock’s iconoclastic alternative to metaphysics, is that she seems to confuse the problem of metaphysics as an illusory account of reality, with metaphysics as an idolatrous practice that results in the attribution of value to the wrong things. Before we can criticise metaphysics as an ‘idolatrous’ practice (and perhaps, if we were so inclined, appeal to the Christian liturgy as a better practice in which to engage), we need to first challenge the illusory account of reality that metaphysics provides. The problem with metaphysics, we argue, is not its failure to embrace Christianity, but its failure to account for the ‘practical actuality’ of human existence.

It is the ‘practical actuality’ of our human reality that we turn to in Chapter 5. We come to this conclusion after examining the work of Jean-Luc Marion, who, in a way similar to Pickstock, thinks that we can only challenge metaphysics by turning to the Christian God, the “unthinkable” that exceeds human comprehension. Marion also seems to confuse metaphysics as a problem of illusion, with metaphysics as a problem of idolatry, and he therefore ends up describing ‘what actually is’ in a rather metaphysical way. Before we can make a judgement against metaphysics as an ‘idolatrous practice’, we attempt to provide a non-metaphysical description of the ‘state of things as they actually exist.’ In order to do this, we turn to a number of thinkers who have made a move against metaphysical idealism through an emphasis on the practical actuality of human existence. This move has fore-runners such as Marx, although it has also found its way into a number of fields and intellectual traditions (including phenomenology, ordinary language philosophy, anthropology, and social theory, amongst others), in order to become what has been
called the ‘practice turn’ in contemporary theory. It is this move towards a praxeological approach that is most helpful in counteracting some rather specious idealistic accounts of ‘reality’ that can be found throughout the Western metaphysical tradition. In turning to a praxeological account of things, we hope to overcome the illusory pictures of reality created by metaphysics, while at the same time pointing out that metaphysics is itself one human practice amongst others. As a practice, metaphysical philosophy has fulfilled certain functions, and it is not these functions we are challenging, so much as the way it fulfills these functions. We are proposing a better way, which is the praxeological.

It is from a praxeological perspective – that is, from a perspective that takes into account the practical nature of human life and experience – that we can make judgements against those practices that might be described as ‘idolatrous’. In Chapter 6, we look at the practice of writing in a way that avoids some of the rather metaphysical descriptions we have examined in preceding chapters. We will challenge the idea that writing is a ‘representation’ of ‘reality’, and we will also see that writing is a skill that is practised in a variety of ways, in a variety of different situations, and for a variety of purposes (very few of which could be judged as ‘idolatrous’). In Chapter 7, we look at the issue of ‘idolatry’ from a pragmatic, rather than a metaphysical perspective. All iconoclastic judgements, we argue – whether explicitly religious or not – are made from a faith-based perspective, although this faith is not necessarily of the dogmatic variety; it is more of a practical faith we have in a certain ‘way of doing things’, or a certain form of life. Our beliefs and our decisions can only ultimately be justified through an appeal to our faith in a certain way of doing things that is, for us, the ‘right way’, and this ‘right way’ is informed by our practical involvement in a world that is social and historical, amongst other things. This ‘world’ is complex and diverse, and we can only make decisions and judgements from where we stand as fundamentally embodied and situated human beings.

It is the articulation of ‘where we stand’, that is one of the functions of the praxeological approach. Because this situation is complex and multivariously, we cannot hope to offer a ‘totalising’ picture of reality, as is often provided by metaphysics. In fact, it is the family of pictures provided by more metaphysical approaches that we will problematise in this thesis, and it is from a praxeological perspective that we will navigate our way through an intricate network of problems, and find our way through a complex territory concerning the ‘reality’ of things such as writing, representation, and even idolatry. These are not terms (or practices) that can be understood in a metaphysical way;
they can only be understood in the context of certain forms of life. In fact, it is precisely this practical human element that many metaphysical approaches seem to have overlooked in relation to some of the problems philosophers set out to investigate, and this has led to some very strange pictures of things and practices that are not particularly mysterious or enigmatic to understand in the context of our everyday lives. Nevertheless, it is also apparent that many metaphysical pictures have seeped into our everyday understanding of the world around us, and these need to be rooted out in order to clarify our thinking. As Wittgenstein has said: “A picture held us captive. And we could not get outside it, for it lay in our language and language seemed to repeat it to us inexorably.”

Not only is this picture repeated in our language, or in our thought, but it is also something that we live out through our daily practices, and it is from this very practice-based captivity that we must attempt to free ourselves. It seems that, although we are somehow predisposed to creating illusions and idols (this is an interesting issue in itself), we are also quite skilled at developing the tools to destroy them, as the need arises. This does not mean that we will ever be totally free of illusions and idols (as Wittgenstein has said, this would be another sort of illusion), but it does mean that we should be vigilant to the possibility of idolatry, and that we should be aware of our responsibility to offer an appropriate iconoclastic critique, as may be required of us.

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FROM MOSES TO MARION:
INTERROGATING SOME HEIRS OF THE ICONOCLASTIC TRADITION

Figure 1.¹¹

When smashing monuments, save the pedestals – they always come in handy.¹²

A major theme in contemporary philosophy and theology is the problem of ‘metaphysics’, understood, in a pejorative sense, as an appeal to an (arguably illusory) transcendent structure or organising principle that is used to provide a totalising account of ‘reality’. Metaphysics, as we will discuss in more detail below, has been described as a form of

'idolatry' by a number of thinkers including Feuerbach, Marx, Nietzsche, as well as by a number of 'postmodern' thinkers, and even contemporary theologians such as Jean-Luc Marion, who have accused metaphysical philosophers of generating (or venerating) abstract principles, or even divinities, that could be ultimately exposed as imaginative human constructions. A good introduction to the problem is provided by Jürgen Habermas, who describes metaphysical thinking as involving an appeal to something transcendent or ideal in order to explain or describe the meaning of existence. This idealism, says Habermas, can be seen in the notion of an “infinite, which stands over and against the world of the finite and forms its basis,” although this ‘infinite’ can be conceived as, either, a “world-transcendent creator-God, as the essential ground of nature or, lastly and more abstractly, as being.” According to Habermas, this sort of metaphysical idealism goes back to Plato and extends to many contemporary anti-metaphysical counter-movements, which he feels have been ultimately unsuccessful, in that they “remain within the horizons of possible thought set by metaphysics itself.”

This is a claim that could be made against the philosopher and theologian Jean-Luc Marion, who seems to have a rather ‘metaphysical’ conception of the problem of idolatry (and hence, ironically, the problem of ‘metaphysical idolatry’) itself. Before examining Marion’s rather dubious challenge to (and conception of) metaphysics, it is important to see how we can place his work within an iconoclastic tradition that has encouraged the critique of idolatry – identified in a variety of forms and practices – since biblical times, as we find, for example, in Moses’ violent reaction to the worship of the Golden Calf in the Book of Exodus. Although we are ultimately critical of Marion’s rather misguided approach to ‘metaphysical idolatry’, it will nevertheless be helpful to understand his work in relation to a number of iconoclastic ancestors, who have ‘set out the stall’, as it were, for the problems that iconoclastic thinkers are trying to tackle through their critical work.

As we will discuss in this chapter, the concept of ‘idolatry’ has acquired a number of different meanings and uses since the first articulation of this problem in the Hebrew scriptures, and for this reason it is almost impossible to articulate its meaning in any definitive sense. The only approach one can have when dealing with the problem of idolatry, say Halbertal and Margalit, is “not to try to formulate one definition of idolatry that will capture its essence, but to show how diverse and problematic the concept itself

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14 Ibid., p. 29.
This is what we will try to do in this thesis. 'Idolatry', as we will see, can take a number of different forms, depending on the concerns of the iconoclast, and these concerns are themselves dependent on a range of factors. 'Idolatry' is also inextricably bound up with the critical practice of 'iconoclasm', which is the word we must use, despite its limitations, to describe the critique or destruction of idols. Iconoclasm is a form of critique that has been appropriated by non-religious traditions – such as philosophy – although there are a number of similarities between non-religious forms of iconoclasm and its religious or theological counterparts. For one thing, all iconoclasts are concerned to defend what they consider to be the 'truth', or 'reality', against what they see as the illusions or idols of other thinkers or cultures. In all cases of iconoclasm, there is an appeal to a right way of seeing things, or doing things, and in this sense, 'idolatry' is dependent on how much it diverges from this 'right way,' however this might be conceived. As we will see throughout this thesis, the appeal to something as more 'real' than the 'idols' of others, is intended, not only as a realism-judgement (in the sense of 'what actually is'), but also, and perhaps more importantly, as a value-judgement (in the sense of 'what is of most value', or 'what is really important').

Halbertal and Margalit explain that one of the features of the more extensive use of the category of 'idolatry', is the idea that it involves the inappropriate attribution of ultimate value to things that are unworthy of this value. These 'things' might include wealth, certain people, institutions, particular ideologies, or even things such as a football team. In this sense, they say, "any nonabsolute value that is made absolute and demands to be the center of dedicated life is idolatry." Idolatry is then, perhaps, in a very general sense, the leading of a life dedicated to someone or something considered undeserving of this devotion. The danger with iconoclastic practice, as we will see, is that every 'icon' that is valued in place of an 'idol', could become a potential 'idol' in the eyes of another iconoclast. If iconoclasm is to avoid relying on its own delusional assumptions, then it needs to be aware of itself as a critical practice, and of the targets of its critique as problems with practice-based origins and implications. In this thesis, we are not interested in proposing some 'icon' to be valued over all other 'idols'; rather, we are interested in understanding the dynamic between iconoclasm and idolatry as something that finds many forms throughout the history of religion, theology and philosophy.

15 Idolatry, p. 241.
16 Ibid., p. 246.
Of course, we can only scratch the surface of this history in this study. However, we will point out time and again that, unless the target of iconoclasm – idolatry – is conceived in praxeological terms; that is, as a wrong or sinful practice, or way of doing things, and not as some sort of ‘metaphysical’ or abstract problem, then we are misrecognising the nature of the problem, and possibly our iconoclastic response to it. It is the conception of idolatry as a ‘metaphysical’ problem, that has led to the production of some rather strange ‘metaphysical’ iconoclastic solutions, and we will explore some of these in this thesis. To begin with, in this chapter, we will look at the ways in which idolatry is conceived according to the Hebrew scriptures, which, it is hoped, will not only help us to better understand the sorts of things that religious iconoclasts have tried, and are trying to, achieve through their critical work, but which might also offer an interesting perspective on the ways in which ‘iconoclasm’, as a form of critique, has been appropriated by a number of critics in a range of different traditions throughout history. By the time we discuss Marion’s approach to ‘metaphysical idolatry’ in this chapter, it should be clear how easy it is to confuse or conflate a number of iconoclastic traditions, which might give rise to a number of problems or inconsistencies in an iconoclastic thinker’s work. We should hopefully gain a clearer idea about, not only the limits and possibilities of using ‘idolatry’ as a category of critique in a range of different fields, but also, the form that our own critical response to a number of misguided iconoclastic attempts, should take.

1.1. Idolatry and iconoclasm as religious issues

1.1.1. A question of practice: Idolatry and worship in the Hebrew Bible

Moshe Halbertal and Avishai Margalit discuss certain ‘models’ that they identify as being used to understand the problem of ‘idolatry’, and they identify a major shift in the Middle Ages from a model of idolatry understood as a practical problem (as it was understood, for example, by the prophets of the Hebrew Bible), to a model of idolatry revolving around the idea of ‘conceptual error’; that is, an understanding of idolatry as a problem relating to the picture of God held ‘in the mind’ of the worshipper. Although medieval scholars such as R. Judah Halevi continued to emphasise the practical implications of idolatry, Halbertal and Margalit seem to think that there is a great deal of tension between the understanding of
idolatry as a ‘conceptual’ sin, on the one hand, and as a ‘practical’ sin, on the other.\textsuperscript{17} We will argue in this thesis, however, that ‘conceptual idolatry’ is no less a practical matter than is the critique of certain worship and lifestyle choices. The judgement against ‘idolatry’ – whether or not this idolatry is described as ‘conceptual’ – is, in other words, always a critique of a certain sort of erroneous or wayward practice, as emphasised by writers such as the twelfth century. To accuse someone of ‘idolatry’ is often an attempt to mark out or defend one’s position against a group or person who are seen as engaging in alien religious or philosophical practices, and iconoclasts see it as their task to critique, or even destroy, the beliefs and practices of idolatrous ‘others’. Iconoclasm can take a number of forms, from the actual destruction of physical artefacts and practices, to the problematisation of philosophical or theological arguments through critical engagement.

The supposed shift to more ‘conceptual’ concerns will be examined in the section that follows; for now, we will examine what Halbertal and Margalit describe as the biblical conception of idolatry, and the acts of iconoclasm that accompanied this judgement, which was based on a model that understood idolatry as a sin of disloyalty or even adultery. It is clear, however, that this understanding of the sin was always directed against the practices of pagan groups; idolatry, as described throughout the Hebrew Bible, as Halbertal and Margalit note, is a judgement against a group of people considered to be engaging in an alien or perverse way of life, a way of life that could be described, in most general terms, as apparently non-Judaic. For the biblical iconoclasts, according to Halbertal and Margalit, idolatry is the mark of wrong worship practice, or of a lifestyle that is considered ‘sinful’ or ‘unfaithful.’ As they point out:

\textsuperscript{17} Halbertal and Margalit discuss four ‘models’ employed for understanding idolatry: other than the ‘biblical’ and ‘conceptual’ models, which we will discuss below, they also identify two other models, the third of which is based on the dangers of conceiving the divine in a polytheistic way, and although this is also a ‘conceptual’ problem, they admit that this involves “something other than an issue of metaphysical worldview and error,” and can be seen as a “shift from the concept of idolatry as a mistake to the problem of its being a form of worship, that is, a shift from metaphysics to ritual” (p. 240). A similar link between ‘conceptual’ and ‘practical’ idolatry can be found in their identification of a fourth approach to idolatry, which is evident in the work of certain scholars who focus on the rabbinic term for idolatry, avodah zarah, which means “strange worship”, or “alien worship”, and refers to both the object, and the ritual of worship itself. Although they identify scholars such as Halevi as propounding this view, it seems to us that this is the most obvious way to understand idolatry, in that the object of worship, and the practice of that worship are two sides of the same coin that cannot be easily separated. It therefore seems strange that Halbertal and Margalit refer to the more practical approach to idolatry as reflecting a “totally different understanding of idolatry and the gravity of the sin involved” (p. 180). Even Maimonides, as we will discuss below, is not unaware of the ‘practical’ implications of his ‘conceptual’ work. Furthermore, Halbertal and Margalit’s own approach involves the study of words concepts as they are used within certain historical and lifeworld contexts: concepts such as ‘idolatry’ and ‘iconoclasm’, in other words, are only meaningful for Halbertal and Margalit in the context of the historical and practical situations in which they are employed. We will not, therefore, focus too much on Halbertal and Margalit’s distinction between ‘conceptual’ and ‘practical’ models of idolatry, and we will instead make use of their extremely rich and complex study of the history of the problem of idolatry and its iconoclastic response: a history that is both practical and conceptual, as are the lives of human beings who have attempted to deal with this problem.
The prohibition against idolatry is the thick wall that separates the nonpagans from pagans. It is supposed to be the wall that constitutes the city of God, leaving the strange gods outside and marking the community of the faithful... [It seems, however, that] the location of that dividing wall is not fixed, and that opposing conceptions of idolatry define the outskirts of the city of God differently. Some leave out, as belonging to the pagan camp, some quarters that others consider part of the city. It is essential for the self-definition of nonpagans to share the general concept of idolatry, but they do not share a specific definition of what is idolatry and what is wrong with it. Changing conceptions of God create different ideas about what is idolatry. The converse holds too: the notion of the alien, or false, god shapes the concept of God.18

According to the biblical scholar Nathan MacDonald, the Hebrew Bible provides frequent case studies on idolatry that highlight different aspects of the sin, although the connection that is most often made is that between idolatry and adultery, which was seen as an integral part of the worship at Ba’al Peor.19 The idea of idolatry as 'sexual immorality', is one that is highlighted by Halbertal and Margalit, who note that the understanding of idolatry as a form of betrayal is a direct consequence of the biblical depiction of God’s exclusive covenant with the Israelites.20 It is through the root metaphor of marriage, say Halbertal and Margalit, that God’s relationship to Israel is construed by the prophets as an exclusive one. According to this metaphor, God is the jealous and betrayed husband, Israel is the unfaithful wife, and the third parties in the triangle – the lovers – are the other gods, as well as the people who worship these other gods. Idolatry is like the wife’s betrayal of the husband with strangers, “with lovers who have no shared biography with Israel, the other gods whom Israel never knew.”21 This biblical conception of idolatry relies on a very anthropomorphic conception of God as ‘husband’ or ‘lover’, and in this sense, idolatry is a sin analogous to those people commit with respect to other people (in biblical times, the sin of adultery was one of the most severe, punishable, as we know, by death). As Halbertal and Margalit point out, the verb zanu, translated here as ‘lust after’, literally means ‘to have sinful sexual relations,’ and it is this description of idolatry as a sexual sin that is most consistently developed by the Prophets throughout the Hebrew scriptures. We read in Exodus 34: 15-16, for example: “You must make a covenant with the inhabitants of the land, for they will lust after other gods and invite you, and you will eat of their

18 Ibid., p. 236.
21 Idolatry, p. 237.
sacrifices. And when you take wives from among their daughters for your sons, their daughters will lust after their gods and will cause your sons to lust after their gods.\(^{22}\)

Idolatry, understood as a ‘sexual’ sin, is a wrong way of living, or a wrong way of worshipping God, and it is this way of doing things that is the target of iconoclastic critique. The critique of idolatry – iconoclasm – is therefore not necessarily the ‘smashing of images,’ as the English word conveys, but the critique of certain lifestyle or worship practices, especially if these practices involve the attribution of ultimate value to something or someone other than God. It is not insignificant, Halbertal and Margalit note, that the tractate *Avodah Zarah* (“Idolatry”) in the Talmud, is a formulation of the types of contact between Jews and pagans, and that the category of idolatry is not so concerned about the objects or ‘idols’ that are being worshipped, as it is with the worship practice itself as indicative of an alien culture which is non-Judaic. The rabbinic term *avodah zarah* literally means “false worship”, or “strange worship”; with ‘strange’ referring to both the object of worship, and to the strangeness of the method of worship – that is, the ritual itself (although it is important to note that the one usually implies the other; that is, the notion of a ‘strange god’ cannot be thought apart from the ways in which this ‘god’ is worshipped). The commandment “Thou shalt not follow their practices,” they note, meant as a rejection of the practices of an idolatrous culture, reflects a complex weave of lifestyle, ritual, and faith, and this is all evident in the biblical conception of the sin. Even idolatrous ‘beliefs’, they note, cannot be seen outside the context of the practices of which they are a part.\(^{23}\) The paucity of any distinction between ‘conceptual’ and ‘practical’ idolatry will become more evident throughout the rest of this chapter, and beyond. We turn now to the connection between idolatry, as a wrong or sinful type of practice (that is also always ‘conceptual’), and the biblical prohibition against ‘graven images.’

### 1.1.2. Image to imagination? The biblical prohibition against graven images

It is in this sense of ‘idolatry’ as a sinful worship or lifestyle practice, that a number of the Hebrew prophets regarded the religious use of images as a negative sign of assimilation.

\(^{22}\) Ibid., p. 12 (see also Hosea 1:2, 2:9-15; Ezekial 16:1-34; and Jeremiah 2:2-20).

\(^{23}\) Ibid., p. 116.
into the practices of the surrounding pagan cultures of the time.\textsuperscript{24} This is nowhere clearer than in the inaugural act of idolatry in the Hebrew scriptures: the worship of the Golden Calf, as described in Exodus 32 (which, as Nathan McDonald argues, is intertextually embedded within the Pentateuch and the rest of the Hebrew Bible). It is clear that a number of verses in the Hebrew Bible refer to prohibitions against the creation of various forms of images, invariably linked directly with idolatry, the most obvious reference being the Second Commandment (Exodus 20: 4): "You shall not make yourself a carved image or any likeness of anything in heaven above or on earth beneath or in the waters under the earth."\textsuperscript{25} It should be noted, however, that in the Hebrew scriptures ‘idolatry’ occurs when images are worshipped, so that the question of whether or not an image can be described as ‘idolatrous’, is dependent on the way the image is valued, and the way that its use reflects this valuation. Furthermore, images that are considered ‘idols’ do not ‘resemble’ God in any way; rather, they are those things that are worshipped, or valued, in place of God, as we see, for instance, in the prohibition in Leviticus 26:1 ("Therefore, do not make yourselves false gods. Do not raise up a stone idol or a sacred pillar for yourselves. Do not place a kneeling stone in your land so that you can prostrate yourselves on it. I am God your Lord"), or as we can see in similar injunctions found in Numbers 33:52, Deuteronomy 4:16, and 27:15 (it is clear in these passages, that it is not ‘images’ that are forbidden, but the worship of objects such as the moon and the stars). Even when it is images that are forbidden, this is due to a fear of ‘substitutive error,’ in which the idol ceases to be the representation or symbol of God and comes to be seen as God himself or part of him.\textsuperscript{26} In such a case, say Halbertal and Margalit, “the idol is regarded as a fetish that slowly and gradually acquires the traits of the thing it is representing.”\textsuperscript{27} On top of this, the "Israelite's sin in making and worshipping the golden calf was in making a type of picture that was forbidden to them in ascribing divine power

\textsuperscript{25} This is the New Jerusalem translation. Note that the NSRV translation of the Second Commandment reads: "You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth" (emphasis mine). Note that the prohibition, in this translation, is not against ‘images’, but against ‘idols’.
\textsuperscript{26} Idolatry, p. 41.
\textsuperscript{27} Ibid. A fetish, Halbertal and Margalit explain, "is an object to which people attribute powers that it does not have... Although such errors occur all the time, we can call an object a fetish only if the error gives the object some control over its worshippers... The mechanism of such an error involves forgetting that it is a representation and seeing it as something autonomous." (Idolatry, p. 42. Also, see note 82, below).
to something they made by themselves of their own will." There are a host of complex reasons why certain ‘graven images’ might be considered ‘idolatrous’, and this judgement against images was made in relation to how an image was used in a certain situation. It is this use that would indicate whether or not it was fulfilling an idolatrous function.

Halbertal and Margalit are concerned to point out that the Second Commandment’s prohibition against ‘graven images’, should be read as directly following the First Commandment (“You shall have no other gods besides me”), because the sin of idolatry is not so much a problem of representation, as it is a problem of worshipping something, or someone, other than God. The judgement against ‘idolatry’, whether or not focused on the worship of images, is concerned first and foremost with the actual worship practice itself, and only with the ‘image’ insofar as it is involved in this misguided practice. It is important to note, furthermore, that there is not only one word for ‘idol’ in the books of the Hebrew scriptures, and that neither is the word ‘idol’ synonymous with the word ‘image’; rather, there are a number of descriptions spread through different books, written in different historical eras, and in response to different issues. Idols were either designated in Hebrew by a term of general significance, or named according to their material or the manner in which they were made, where they were placed, or how they were used. We read about how idols were placed upon pedestals, and fastened with chains of silver or nails of iron lest they should fall over or be carried off (Isa. 40:19, 41:7; Jer. 10:14; Wisdom 13:15), or that they were clothed and coloured (Jer. 10:6-10; Ezek. 16:16-19; Wisdom 15: 3-6).

The Bible has many terms for idols, and the sin of idolatry in general, including those that have been translated as "non-God” (Deut. 32:17; Jer. 2:11), “things of naught” (Lev. 19:4), “vanity” (Deut. 32:21), “iniquity” (1 Sam. 15:23), “wind and confusion” (Isa. 41:29), “the dead” (Ps. 106:28), “carcasses” (Lev. 26:30; Jer. 16:18), or even “fraud” (Isa. 44:20). It is perhaps more helpful to think of ‘idols’ only in connection to the sin of idolatry, as this shifts the emphasis from ‘objects’ or ‘images’, to the sinful practices involved in the worship of idols. Even if ‘images’ are involved, then, it is not the mere fact that there are images that is the reason for a judgement of ‘idolatry’ to be made.

It is by thinking of idolatry – whether or not it has to do with images – as a matter of sinful worship practice, that we also avoid many of the problems associated with trying to identify certain images or representations as ‘idols’. Of course, the destruction of images

28 Ibid., p. 187.
or physical artefacts that have been identified as ‘idols’ has had a long and controversial history in all of the three Abrahamic faiths; but it should be emphasised that the problem of ‘idolatry’ is seldom about the ‘image’ per se, but about the ‘idolatrous’ form of life, or worship practice, that is associated with this image (that is, if or when there is an image involved). As the picture included at the start of this chapter shows, for example, the rage of the Protestant mob destroying the statue of the Virgin Mary seems far removed from any theological discussion about the Second Commandment; rather, statues such as this have often become the target for rage directed towards ‘idolatrous others’, and not towards the ‘graven image’ per se. The religious Reformation in the Netherlands was based around a struggle for power (spiritual, moral, and political), as played out between Catholics and Protestants in sixteenth century Europe.

As David Freedberg notes in his book, The Power of Images, there were plenty of factors other than the many theoretical and dogmatic ones usually considered by theologians or even art historians (no one could pretend, for example, that Henry VIII’s dissolution of the monasteries and his stripping of their wealth between 1536 and 1540 was rooted in theological unease – or even dismay – about the use of images). The Byzantine iconoclastic controversy too, although cloaked in a Christological issue, was clearly more a political issue than a theological one, and similar power struggles can be seen at play during the iconoclastic episodes that litter the history of the three major monotheistic faiths. The iconoclastic destruction of images by religious groups is very much a question of identity and allegiance, and has more to do with a need to erect a “thick wall that separates the nonpagans from pagans,” or the critique of a different (usually described as wrong or sinful) way of doing things, than it does with the intrinsic

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31 Christ’s incarnation, according to the iconodules, meant that the Second Commandment should be considered ‘revised’, while, according to the iconoclasts, incarnation meant that Christ – and thus the Eucharist – should be considered the only true ‘icons’ of God. However, although the Byzantine controversy centred on questions of Christology and idolatry, it was also very much part and parcel of a struggle for power in the Middle Ages. The dispute was triggered by Emperor Leo III’s decision in 726 CE that all ‘idols’ should be removed from churches; a decision that sparked a furious reaction from the Church, for reasons both political and religious. The (second) Seventh Ecumenical Council, held in Nicea in 787, reversed the iconoclastic current for a short while, although iconoclasm was revived during the reign of Leo V (813-820), and it was not until 843, during a council convened by empress Theodora, that icon veneration was formally restored for good. It seems that one of the major issues in the controversy was the question of power: who had it, the Emperor, or the Church? As Nick Tratakis argues, it was the attempt to put caesaropapism into practice that provides the background to Leo III’s comment to pope Gregory II (715-731), ‘I am King and priest as well,’ and to Theosterticus’ observation, in his Life of St Nicetas of Medikion, that iconoclasm differed from all earlier heresies in that it originated, not from the bishops and lower clergy, but from the rulers themselves. (See Tratakis, “What was the iconoclastic controversy about?” in Theandros: An Online Journal of Orthodox Christian Theology and Philosophy, (Vol. 2, no. 2, Winter 2004/5). http://www.theandros.com/ iconoclast.html)
nature of the ‘image’ per se. This will be explored more thoroughly in Chapter 7 below, where we examine a number of cases involving the religious-based destruction of images, and the critique of ‘idolatry’ more generally, as a way of affirming one’s own identity, and discrediting the identity of others. The art historian David Morgan points out that a religious group’s identity has often been configured through its attitudes towards images, pivoting on our images as opposed to theirs, or our ‘icons’ and their ‘idols.’ Iconoclasm, he says, is usually part of a larger task of discrediting the culture or practices of a rival group, while images “readily become the site of conflicting ideologies or identities.”

It seems, however, as we will discuss in forthcoming chapters, that the idea that idolatry is a problem that revolves around the ‘image’, is a conception of the sin that is more particular to the Greco-Christian philosophical and theological traditions. The English word ‘idolatry’, from the Greek eidōlon (‘image’) and latreia (‘worship’) has a very different etymology to the Hebraic notion of avodah zarah, or even to the Islamic concept of shirk, which, rather like the Judaic conception of idolatry, is the sin of worshipping something or someone other than the One God. It is the Greco-Christian conception of idolatry as a problem related to ‘representation’, or to the ‘image’, that we will examine in more detail in the chapters that follow. We will see how troublesome it is to think of ‘images’, or ‘representations’ as things somehow existing in opposition to ‘reality’. It is nevertheless amazing how far this incredibly problematic picture of the ‘image’ seems to have been extended. For one thing, the idea of idolatry as a problem of the ‘image’, has led to the idea that the ‘imagination’ is a human faculty that needs to be chained, or at least severely disciplined, if it is to avoid producing ‘idols’. This rather troublesome picture of the ‘imagination’ as a certain sort of ‘mental faculty’ has led to a great deal of discussion around the problem of what has been identified as ‘conceptual idolatry.’

The American theologian Bruce Ellis Benson, for example, defines ‘conceptual idolatry’ as “the creation or the adoption of a concept or idea that we take to be equivalent to God and thus worship as God,” and he justifies his study of this problem by noting

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32 The Sacred Gaze, p. 71.
33 ‘Shirk’ means, literally, “association”. For Muslims, it is the fundamental error at the root of all sin or transgression, that results from the ‘association’ of something with God, other than God Himself. Shirk is the sin of forgetting that God is the Absolute, as according to the principle of Tawhid. The New Encyclopedia of Islam also states that: “The sin of shirk (‘association’) is a name for paganism; pagans are called ‘the associators’ (mushrikūn). But shirk is the fundamental state of being in revolt against God, irrespective of any professed beliefs in other gods. It is also atheism, or the putting of nothingness in the place of God. Shirk is opposite of surrender to God, which is acceptance of His Reality: knowledge, or Islam.” (Cyril Glassé, Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press, 2001, p. 428.)
that the word *eidōlon*, as found in the New Testament, is a word that can denote both ‘image’ and ‘concept.’ Benson points out that *eidō* (the Greek root which is connected to ‘sight’), is the root of *eidōlon*, which therefore denotes something that can be seen. But in what way are concepts like images? And even if this were the case, would the sin of idolatry exist in the production of the ‘conceptual image’, or in the worship of this image? It is in the *worship practice*, we will insist throughout this thesis, and not in the image itself – whether conceptual or not – that the sin of idolatry exists. It is also important to note that, although we find the word *eidōlon* in the Septuagint version of the Hebrew Bible, by the time this Greek term is used in the Christian New Testament, it already carries the baggage of at least five hundred years of philosophical history, as it is a term that plays an important part in the work of philosophers such as Plato. The ‘idol’, with its Greek etymological heritage, is linked to the ‘imagination’, which is conceived by philosophers such as Plato in deprecatory terms as the producer of shadows and illusions. A problem emerges, however, when the ‘image’ is seen as opposed to ‘reality’, which means that images in general are judged as an ‘idolatrous’ or ‘illusory’. No one is perhaps more guilty of inspiring this conflation between ‘image’ and ‘illusion’ than Plato, whose attitude to the *eidōlon* we will examine more thoroughly in the chapter that follows. We will see how Plato’s conception of the *eidōlon*, as a ‘representation’ that is somehow opposed to ‘reality’, can be challenged from a praxeological perspective. It is from this perspective that we must begin if we wish to make a judgement against particular representational practices that we might feel need to be challenged.

Despite the problems associated with thinking about idolatry as a problem revolving around the ‘image’ (as something opposed to ‘reality’), this is precisely how the theologian and philosopher Jean-Luc Marion approaches the issue. Marion explains that the idol “consigns the divine to the measure of a human gaze,”\(^{35}\) in order to offer a mirror image of the “gaze gazing at itself.”\(^{36}\) When we are considering the dangers of the idol, says Marion, we should realise that, “by definition it is seen – *eidōlon*, that which is seen (*eido*, *video*).”\(^{37}\) Another problem emerges from Marion’s work on idolatry, however, in that he seems to understand ‘conceptual idolatry’ as something that is different to idolatry of the more ‘practical’ (or what he calls ‘cultural’) variety. Although Marion is mostly interested in

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\(^{36}\) Ibid., p. 26.

\(^{37}\) Ibid., p. 9.
idolatry of the ‘conceptual’ kind, he argues that it is “not without a certain violence that we transpose the problem of the ‘idol’ from “the properly cultural domain into the conceptual domain.” According to Marion: “if we lack the aesthetic means to grasp the idol, others remain or even open up for us. Thus the concept. When a philosophical thought expresses a concept of what it then names ‘God’, this concept functions exactly as an idol.” But what is the difference between the ‘properly cultural’ and the ‘conceptual’ domains? It is unclear as to why so many iconoclasts are so concerned with the concept (conceived as a sort of ‘thing’, such as a ‘mental image’ that exists ‘in the head’ of the idolater), when it is the sin of idolatry that should be the focus of their critique. It is this problem of ‘conceptual idolatry’ that we will discuss in the section that follows. As we will see, the conception of conception itself as something that happens ‘in the head’, or as something that can be described as the production of ‘representations’ or ‘images’, leads to a completely delusional understanding of the target of iconoclastic critique.

1.1.3. Conceptual idolatry: From practice to theory?

Every concept formed in order to reach and encompass the divine nature succeeds only in fashioning an idol of God and not at all in making him known.

Halbertal and Margalit feel that the concern with ‘conceptual idolatry’ is something that developed in the work of the medieval Jewish philosopher and theologian Maimonides, whose Guide of the Perplexed is devoted almost entirely to liberating the ‘perplexed’ person from the difficulties of language and concepts used with respect to God. According to Halbertal and Margalit, the religious enlightenment, in which Maimonides played a pivotal role, resulted in the location of the “wall of idolatry” on the border between abstract nonanthropomorphic views of God and the other gods, including among them the very anthropomorphism that made sense of idolatry within the biblical tradition. For Maimonides, they claim, the problem lay in the literal interpretation of metaphors, which resulted in the idolatry of conceiving God in our own image. According to Halbertal

39 God Without Being, p. 16.
40 Gregory of Nyssa, quoted in Marion, The Idol and Distance (found on the unnumbered page before the table of contents).
41 See Idolatry, pp. 53-55.
and Margalit, the category of ‘idolatry’ was used by Maimonides to describe, not the religion of the other nations, nor the idolatry of the Israelites who worship in the temple of the Ba'αl, but the religion of the masses whose conception of God was determined by the pictures in their imaginations. Unlike the view of idolatry in the Hebrew scriptures (where idolatry was, “not the metaphysical picture of the world in itself, but the method of relating to it, the method of worship”), Halbertal and Margalit feel that Maimonides criticised the imagination, in order to “eradicat[e] its role in the formation of the metaphysical picture of the world.” 42

It was Maimonides’ emphasis on reason over the imagination, they argue, that opened the door to the enlightenment’s suspicion of the entire project of religion.

The problem with Halbertal and Margalit’s discussion of this shift to what they see as more ‘conceptual’ concerns, however, is that they feel that this also involved a shift in concern away from the concerns of a practical, lived faith. While, for the biblical iconoclasts, they feel, monotheistic ideas “were crystallized in the course of a political struggle against [idolatrous] beliefs,” and that the struggle “was not conducted on a metaphysical basis but by virtue of the fact that other religions and other sources of authority were involved,” 43 they see a suspension of this understanding of idolatry as a ‘political’ concern, when the issue apparently became a ‘conceptual’ problem. In Maimonides’ thought, they argue, there was a change that can be characterised as an “internalization” of the problem. This “internalization”, they explain:

occurs in two ways: socially and mentally... social internalization within the community is made possible by the mental internalization whose essence is the shift from external worship to internal belief... The focus of the concept of idolatry was thus transferred from the performing of alien rituals to the harboring of alien beliefs. The worship of idols... is a sin derived from the belief it expresses and not primarily from the act itself. 44

But can we really make a distinction between ‘internal belief’ and ‘external worship’? This is something that we hope to challenge in this thesis. What we hope to show is that ‘conception’ is something that is always part and parcel of our everyday life. ‘Conceptualisation’, or ‘thinking’ in general, cannot be understood as distinct from ‘practice.’ As Halbertal and Margalit have themselves pointed out, the rabbinical notion of “false worship” (avodah zarah) refers to both the strangeness of the worship, and the

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42 Ibid.
43 Ibid., p. 163.
44 Ibid., p. 109.
strangeness of the object of that worship, which would clearly involve a conceptual element. These are issues which will crop up time and again in this thesis.

Conception, then, is always a practical concern, and this is something that can even be seen in the work of Maimonides, whom Halbertal and Margalit have identified as the instigator of the shift towards more ‘metaphysical’ concerns. As Daniel H. Frank comments in his introduction to a recent edition of The Guide of the Perplexed, it is clear that Maimonides wrote in order to show the ‘perplexed’ how to live their lives, as lives defined by traditional religious norms. It is the focus on particular ‘theoretical’ points in “semantic theory, epistemology, cosmology, prophetology, legal theory, and so forth,” says Frank, that “tends to obscure the overall nontheoretical telos of the treatise.” Contrary to all those scholars who see Maimonides as a theoretical ‘rationalist’ of the highest order, says Frank, we must “accept the work in the spirit in which it was written;” that is, “as a work in practical philosophy which moves one toward the human good by clarifying it.” This is not to deny that Maimonides’ work is philosophical; it is simply to say that everything in the Guide is intended to show the addressee that, “properly understood, his religion – his traditional way of life, one circumscribed by halakhic (legal) norms – is philosophically defensible” (and, we might add to this, norms that are not always expressed ‘legally’). This point, says Frank, “is not a theoretical one, offered for its own sake, but manifestly a moral and even political one.” It is this concern with ‘moral’ and ‘political’ issues, as practical issues, that has fuelled many attempts to tackle the problem of ‘idolatry’. As will hopefully become apparent in forthcoming chapters, it is only from a practice-based approach that we can make any judgements against idolatry as a sinful or problematic way of doing things. ‘Conception’ is not the domain of philosophy alone, and philosophy itself is not something that happens solely ‘in the head’, as it were. It is to the philosophical critique of ‘idolatry’ that we now turn.

47 Ibid.
1.2. The ‘iconoclastic chain’ in philosophy: from Plato to post-metaphysics

1.2.1. Plato’s prescription: the ‘image’ as ‘illusion’?

What is common to many iconoclastic traditions, is that one generation of iconoclasts is often succeeded by another, who find their predecessors guilty of some other sort of ‘idolatry.’ According to Halbertal and Margalit, the criticism of idolatry by the monotheistic religions, the criticism of folk religion by the early modern religious Enlightenment, and the criticism of religion in general by the secular Enlightenment, can all be understood as the links in a chain in which the same intellectual moves were made; the fundamental move being that, at every link of the chain, on the one hand the earlier criticism is adopted, and on the other hand it is turned upon the earlier critic himself, as one whose criticism applies to himself as well and not only to the objects of his criticism. Halbertal and Margalit name philosophers such as Bacon, Feuerbach, Marx, and Nietzsche as ‘links’ in this ‘iconoclastic chain’, which they see as resulting in the critique of religion itself as an ‘idolatrous’ enterprise. David Morgan also points out that, “although the concepts of idolatry and its extirpation are rooted in the history of religion, they nevertheless extend beyond strictly sectarian experience.” It is very interesting, says Morgan, that, even in the modern West, which is “often characterized as a secular culture, as the offspring of the Enlightenment’s quest for liberation from oppressive institutions such as the church, idolatry and iconoclasm have nevertheless remained vital categories of cultural criticism."

The philosophical approach to the ‘idol’ can be traced back at least to Plato, who, as we have already mentioned, was concerned with the problem of the eidόlon. For Plato, the world in which we find ourselves is itself an eidόlon: an ‘image’ or ‘appearance’ of the ‘real’ world, that actually exists in an imperceptible and ideal realm of universal Forms. Plato’s ‘theory’ of the Forms, postulates the existence of unique entities which are ideal exemplars of items familiar to us in this world, including such things as: the Perfect Circle, the Just Society, the Ideal Table, Absolute Beauty, and so forth. In the Republic, Plato uses a number of metaphors to explain his metaphysical views, including the well-known allegory of the cave, which explains how the world as we know it is like the shadows cast on the wall of a cave; shadows by which we are enchanted because our backs are turned to the

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48 Ibid., p. 112.
49 The Sacred Gaze, p. 130.
50 Ibid.
light of the sun. According to Plato, we are lost in a world of practical knowledge, tradition, and opinion (doxa), which prevents us from experiencing the truth of the Forms (such as Goodness, Beauty, or Justice), which can only be comprehended through a life of contemplation, or theoria. For Plato, the Forms, as the only truly real ‘things’ that exist beyond any particular spatio-temporal boundaries, are comprehensible by the use of the intellect, and it is the task of the philosopher to transcend the world of immediate experience in order to reach an understanding of the truth that transcends the contingent reality of everyday life.\textsuperscript{51} It should be clear here that there is a fine line between the use of the word ‘reality’ in an ontological or descriptive sense, on the one hand, and in a more value-laden sense, on the other. For Plato, the ideal Forms are the ‘really real’; they are more ‘real’ than the apparent ‘reality’ of the world around us, which is seen as an illusion.

This comparison of ‘idols’ or illusions to something considered ‘really real’, is something that can be found throughout the history of Western philosophy. It is not always clear as to whether ‘idol’ or ‘illusion’ would be a better term, as in many cases illusions are judged from a value-based perspective. For those philosophers interested in exposing the ‘idols’ of thought, their iconoclasm includes a defence of something believed to be more ‘real’ than the apparent ‘reality’ of their opponents. This can be seen, for example, in the work of Francis Bacon, who is usually seen as responsible for ‘secularising’ the notion of ‘idolatry’. For Bacon, the only ‘reality’ with which philosophy should be concerned is that of nature, because the “subtlety of nature far surpasses the subtlety of sense and intellect, so that men’s fine meditations, speculations, and endless discussions are quite insane, except that there is no one who notices.”\textsuperscript{52} Bacon describes as ‘idols’ those “illusions and false notions which have got a hold on men’s intellects in the past and now are firmly rooted in them;”\textsuperscript{53} and he distinguishes between four such categories of these ‘idols’: Idols of the tribe (that is, those ‘illusions’ believed by a whole community), idols of the cave (which are "the illusions of individual man"), and idols of the marketplace (which refers to the way men conduct transactions through discourse, which nevertheless involves a “poor and unskilful code of words” which "do violence to the understanding, and

\textsuperscript{51} We find an extended meditation on the Forms in the \textit{Phaedo}, for example, where they are described variously as: Unchangeable (78c10-d9), Eternal (79d2), Intelligible, not perceptible (79a1-5), Divine (80a3, b1), or the "one over the many" (100c). \textit{Phaedo} 80b provides a good summary, listing all the attributes of Forms that souls also have: “divine, deathless, intelligible, uniform, indissoluble, always the same as itself.”


\textsuperscript{53} Ibid, XXXVII, p. 40.
confuse everything, and betray men into countless empty disputes and fictions”).

Finally, there are the idols of the theatre, which are the “illusions which have made their homes in men’s minds from the various dogmas of different philosophies;” those “philosophies which men have learned or devised” which can be shown to be “so many plays produced and performed which have created false and fictitious worlds.”

Bacon’s criticism of the ‘idolatrous’ illusions that impede our knowledge of ‘reality’, is carried further through the work of many philosophers after him; including such luminaries as Feuerbach, Marx, and Nietzsche. As we will see, however, the difficulty of establishing what ‘reality’ is, in contrast to the ‘unreal idols’ of the tribe, cave, marketplace, or theatre, is a difficult task that risks bringing into question the very ‘reality’ of the supposed iconoclastic alternative. This can be seen, for example, in the subsequent critique of Plato’s ideal ‘reality’ (which is seen by many as a severe form of ‘unreality’), as well as in many contemporary attempts to ‘overcome’ metaphysics altogether. It will become apparent, however, that the ‘reality’ that is defended against the ‘illusions’ of an opponent, is different depending on the concerns and the position of the iconoclast. ‘Reality’ is a very tricky word to define, let alone defend, and it is something that is often conceived in a very metaphysical way, making it the target of the next generation of iconoclasts. We will explore the risky business of philosophical iconoclasm in the sections that follow.

1.2.2. Idolatry and ‘Alienation’: from self-delusion to enlightenment?

1.2.2.a. German Idealism: Alienation as idolatry?

Idolatry has often been described as living in a state of alienation; that is, as a state of separation from God, or from a form of life or worship practices that are deemed righteous or holy. The word ‘alienation’, like ‘idolatry’, however, is also one with a great deal of conceptual baggage, and it is important to understand what we mean when we employ this word, which has had a substantial role to play in the work of philosophers such as Fichte and Hegel, as well as in the work of Marx, and a number of significant post-Marxist thinkers. As István Mészáros has argued, the first aspect we have to consider in the history of the concept of ‘alienation’, is “the lament about being ‘alienated from God’ (or having ‘fallen from Grace’) which belongs to the common heritage of Judeo-Christian

54 Ibid., XLI-XLIII, p. 41.
55 Ibid., XLIV, p. 42.
mythology. The divine order, it is said, has been violated; man has alienated himself from 'the ways of God', whether simply by 'the fall of man' or later by 'the dark idolatries of alienated Judah'.”57 The "messianic mission" of the monotheistic faiths, says Mészáros, consists precisely in the attempt to rescue man from this state of self-alienation which he had brought upon himself. It is significant, however, that Mészáros declares that this sense of alienation is as far as the similarities go in the Judeo-Christian problematics, because, he argues, "far-reaching differences prevail in other respects."58

These 'far-reaching differences', according to Mészáros, can be summarised as follows: while, in the Judeo-Christian tradition, the word 'alienation' is used to describe a state (or feeling) of 'separation' or 'isolation' from someone or something (such as God, or one's community), in the German Idealist tradition, 'alienation' refers to the 'self-alienation', or 'self-expression' of man (or Spirit) through the creation of objective things and structures. Nicholas Lobkowicz explains that 'alienation' in modern philosophy is used in the sense of 'positing', 'selling', or 'externalising' a part of oneself.59 Lobkowicz is talking specifically about the German 'Entäußerung' – which means literally 'making outer', or 'externalization' – and which retains, even in some contemporary German usage, the legal connotation of 'renunciation' or 'abdication' that can be found in the use of the Latin word 'alienato'. It is probably this sense of 'alienation' that is intended in many English translations of the work of philosophers such as Fichte and Hegel.

But what is the link, then, between 'alienation' (in this German Idealist sense of 'self-alienation'), and idolatry, given that 'far-reaching differences' can be found between these two concepts. The similarity can be explained as follows: Both 'idolatry', and 'alienation' (in the German Idealist sense), involve the veneration, or attribution of value to, an object (or an objective world in general), that can be exposed as nothing more than a human creation. For German Idealists, for example, alienation occurs when we are deluded into thinking that the objective world is something other than it is; and what this objective world really is, according to many Idealist philosophers, is an 'externalisation', or 'self-alienation' of ourselves. The sense of alienation experienced in the face of the 'otherness' of the objective world, then, can be exposed as a form of self-delusion, caused by a 'forgetting' of the fact that objectivity is really a form of self-alienation. It is only through

57 Ibid, p. 28.
58 Ibid.
realising that ‘alienation’ is ‘self-alienation’, that we reach philosophical enlightenment. Self-alienation is thus considered by German Idealist philosophers as a necessary condition for the evolution of consciousness, which is characterised as an ongoing process of ‘self-delusion’ (or illusion), and ‘enlightenment’, respectively.

Lobkowicz explains the development of this notion of ‘self-alienation’, starting with the philosophy of Fichte, for whom the concept of ‘Entäusserung’ was directly related to the problem of ‘objective reality’. For Fichte, the task at hand was to justify individual self-definition without recourse to ‘man-independent things’. As Lobkowicz quotes him: “The ego which the idealist owns and which interests him abolishes all faith in things; the idealist takes a fancy to his independence and embraces it out of emotion. His faith in himself is not a mediated one.” This achievement of individual ‘freedom’ is accomplished by man’s realisation that all necessity allegedly imposed from the outside is in fact a series of laws imposed by the ego upon itself in its free, creative activity, although this activity preceded consciousness. It is a necessity of the development of self-consciousness, according to Fichte, that man be confronted with the products of his ‘freedom’, although he does not know that these products actually originated with himself. It is in this context, says Lobkowicz, that Fichte uses the expression ‘entäussern’ in order to describe the ego’s positing of objects, or ‘externalizing’ of itself. This use of the expression ‘entäussern’ connotes ‘externalization’ as well as ‘renunciation’ and ‘abdication’, says Lobkowicz, which links it to the use of the word in the German vernacular. The task of Fichte’s Wissenschaftslehre, is intended to be nothing less than the restoration of these ‘lost products of freedom’ by reconstructing the preconscious ‘life story of consciousness.’

From Fichte, through Schelling’s insistence on the importance of history in this process of overcoming self-alienation (which he calls Selbst-Entfremdung), we finally reach Hegel, for whom, says Lobkowicz, “to be a thing or an object amounts to being an ‘externalization’ of the Mind.” Gajo Petrovic explains that, although the idea of alienation appears in Hegel’s early writings, its explicit elaboration begins in the Phenomenology of Mind, and is extended in his later works, where it could be seen as a foundational concept.

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60 Quoted in Theory and Practice, p. 300. [from Fichte, Werke, III, p. 18].
61 This can be found, says Lobkowicz, in the first version of Fichte’s Wissenschaftslehre, published in 1794, as well as in the Wissenschaftslehre of 1801, here he uses the phrase ‘entäusserte Vernunft’ (‘externalised reason’) in a way that anticipates the use of the word Vernunft in Hegel. See Theory and Practice, p. 301.
62 Ibid., p. 301.
63 Lobkowicz notes that ‘Entfremdung’ implies what we would translate as ‘estrangement’, and that Hegel therefore preferred Fichte’s use of the word ‘Entäusserung’, with its connotation of ‘externalisation’ or ‘abdication.’ We will see how Marx reclaims the use of the former term below.
64 Ibid., p. 304.
of his philosophical system as a whole. Hegel’s conception of alienation revolves around his understanding of reality as Spirit’s development towards self-fulfilment or self-consciousness. According to Hegel, Spirit produces a world that appears as external, or alien to it, and it is only gradually, through the course of history, that Spirit comes to realise that this world is really its own self-alienation. Spirit comes to this realisation through the Finite Mind of man, which exists in a state of alienation from Spirit. It is the task of the Finite Mind to realise that it is actually self-alienated Spirit, however, and it does this by performing an analogous type of ‘self-alienation’, in order to externalize itself into various forms and objects that stand outside of it or opposed to it. In the *Phenomenology*, Hegel attacks the view that the world consists of objects independent of man’s consciousness, in order to argue that the supposed objectivity of the world of nature is in fact an alienation, and man’s task is to discover, behind these appearances, his own essential life and finally to view everything as a facet of his own self-consciousness.

It is through recognizing itself in these objects, that the Finite Mind realises that it is at one and the same time mind and other-than-mind. Eventually, the Finite Mind realises that, just as external objects are not ‘external’ at all, but products of its own self-alienation, so it begins to understand that it is also a self-alienation of Spirit. In the final moment, when all the alienations have been ‘recapitulated’, at the moment of Absolute Knowledge, the rational Mind realises that it is Spirit thinking itself. Like Fichte, then, for Hegel, ‘alienation’ (*Entäusserung*) is necessary for the evolution of consciousness. Man is confronted by ‘objects’ of his own making, although he is not initially aware of this, and they therefore appear more ‘alien’ than they really are. It is, for Hegel, the failure to realise that alienation is really self-alienation, that impedes men from becoming fully self-conscious and understanding their environment and their culture to be emanations of Spirit. Freedom, which is the aim of history, consists in becoming ‘enlightened’ to this fact of ‘reality’. The rational, self-conscious whole is not a thing or being that lies outside of other existing things or minds. Rather, it comes to completion only in the philosophical comprehension that brings this developmental process to an understanding of itself.

‘Self-alienation’ in this sense, like some instances of idolatry, involves a form of self-delusion; although it seems that the new level of awareness that emerges from the process of enlightenment (through the use of Reason), far outweighs the negativity of this

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alienation. Consciousness, for Hegel, is thus equipped with the tools of both self-delusion and enlightenment, and each stage at which this process occurs is one step closer to an awareness of Spirit. Hopefully the link between this idea of alienation as a form of self-delusion, and idolatry, which often involves the mistaken evaluation of objects and other phenomena, is becoming clearer. We will see in the sections that follow how this idea is developed further by German philosophers such as Feuerbach and Marx, who are also interested in the problem of ‘self-delusion’, and both of whom often employ explicitly iconoclastic jargon in order to describe this problem of ‘alienation’.

1.2.2.b. Feuerbach’s iconoclastic materialism

But every religion, while designating older religions as idolatrous, looks upon itself as exempted from their fate.66

Feuerbach, who we could perhaps describe as the next link in this modern German philosophical ‘iconoclastic chain’, has been accused of appropriating Hegel’s own conception of ‘alienation’ in order to use it against him. Feuerbach believed that, rather than considering the natural world (including man as a natural, material being) as a ‘self-alienation’ of Absolute Spirit, the positing of an “Absolute Spirit” should itself be considered the ultimate self-alienation of man from himself. Feuerbach’s critique of Hegel’s idealistic philosophy was based on what he saw as speculative reification that could be exposed as nothing more than a form of self-delusion. Feuerbach’s work has been described as an attempt to ‘turn Hegel on his head’, and he does this by arguing that Hegel’s philosophy of the ‘Absolute Idea’ that ‘objectifies’ itself into material reality is in fact a reversal of the truth, which is that ‘ideas’ emerge out of material reality, and not vice versa. This notion of ‘objectification’ in Feuerbach is what we would identify as ‘reification’ in the work of Marx, as well as in a number of contemporary philosophical critiques of speculative ‘fallacies’ of speculative philosophy, or what we might call ‘metaphysics’.

The problem with Hegel, according to Feuerbach, is that he ‘objectifies’ (or ‘reifies’) abstract predicates such as ‘Mind’ or ‘Reason’, which he then treats as autonomous agents. This speculative ‘ideal’, according to Feuerbach, is “nothing but pure intellect which has been systematically unfolded, which strips all things of their sensuousness turning them

into pure entities of intellect and thought, and which, unhampered by anything alien, is occupied with itself alone as the essence of all essences." Feuerbach identifies the birth of this speculative ‘alienation’ in the philosophy of Descartes: “The beginning of Cartesian philosophy — namely, the abstraction from sensuousness and matter — is also the beginning of modern speculative philosophy.” “Absolute Philosophy,” as found in the work of Hegel, says Feuerbach, “externalises and alienates from man his own being and his own activity,” and we can see the “violence and torture that it inflicts on our mind.” This ‘torturous’ alienation is, for Feuerbach, a feature not just of Idealistic metaphysical philosophy, but also of the religious concept of God itself.

According to Feuerbach, the Christian concept of ‘God,’ like Hegel’s ‘Absolute Spirit’, is an abstract concept that can be shown as nothing more than the ‘self-alienation’ of essentially human qualities. Abstract concepts, such as ‘Spirit’ or ‘God,’ have, according to Feuerbach, become ‘hypostatised’, in that they are considered to be real, objective, or autonomous things, and it is this ‘objectification’ that he feels has prevented man from coming to know his true nature. The ascription of human attributes to God, according to Feuerbach, results in man’s alienation from himself, and the fear of a ‘spiritual being’ who is really nothing more than a projection of himself. For Feuerbach, the “mystery of religion” is that man "objectifies his being and then again makes himself an object to the objectivized image of himself thus converted into a subject.”

This idea was elaborated in Feuerbach’s best known book The Essence of Christianity, published in 1841. In contrast to the ‘alienation’ of religion, Feuerbach emphasises the priority of the natural, materially-situated human being, which, he says, is the most real ‘reality’ that can be described philosophically.

Religion is the dream of the human mind. But even in dreams we do not find ourselves in emptiness or in heaven, but on earth, in the realm of reality; we only see real things in the entrancing splendour of imagination and caprice, instead of in the simple daylight of reality and necessity. Hence I do nothing more to religion — and to speculative philosophy and theology also — than to open its eyes, or rather to turn its gaze from the internal towards the external, i.e., I change the object as it is in the imagination into the object as it is in reality.

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68 Ibid., §10
69 Ibid., §23.
70 Essence of Christianity, p. 29.
71 Ibid., p. xix.
Hence we see how Feuerbach is also concerned with the question of ‘reality’. Against what he considered the overly ‘speculative metaphysics’ found in the work of Descartes and Hegel, Feuerbach felt that this ‘reality’ should be described in ‘materialist’ terms (although, whether or not Feuerbach completely overcame the tendency to ‘metaphysical speculation’, is an issue that was later taken up by Marx). It is simply impossible for man to get beyond the “true horizon of his being,” says Feuerbach, and this is why the “essential determinations he attributes to those other individuals must always be determinations emanating from his own being — determinations in which he in truth only projects himself, which only represent his self-objectifications.”

Although Feuerbach was critical of religion, however, it should be clear that, as an iconoclast, Feuerbach is appropriating a category of critique that has distinctly religious origins. Like all iconoclasts, furthermore, Feuerbach is defending the ‘righteousness’ of his own position, against the perverted evaluative practices of others (even though, as a philosopher, these practices are what might be described as ‘conceptual’). Although he is critical of religious thought, then, it should be noted that the critical potential of the category of ‘idolatry’, is one that links Feuerbach to the religious systems he has made the target of his iconoclastic critique. Feuerbach himself seems to be aware of the irony of the fact that he is using religious rhetoric to criticise religion. He explains how it should happen that every generation finds new idols, in order to come to a clearer understanding of the ‘essence of Man’:

> From the standpoint of a later religion, the earlier religion turns out to be idolatry: Man is seen to have worshipped his own essence. Man has objectified himself, but he has not yet recognised the object as his own essential being — a step taken by later religion. Every progress in religion means therefore, a deepening of man’s knowledge of himself.\(^73\)

Yet does Feuerbach himself escape being the next target in this ‘iconoclastic chain’? Critics such as Max Stirner felt that he did not. Stirner was particularly concerned with Feuerbach’s ‘idolisation’ of the ‘essence of Man’, which he felt relied on a very metaphysical picture of the human being itself. Feuerbach in fact later conceded that he was "still haunted by the abstract Rational Being... as distinct from the actual sensuous being of nature and humanity.”\(^74\) The difficulty with iconoclasm, as we have seen, is that

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\(^72\) Ibid.

\(^73\) Ibid., p. 13. Emphasis mine.

the iconoclasts’ appeal to something more ‘real’ than the ‘reality’ of a rival, does not always lead to the positing of a less ‘idolatrous’ alternative.

Although Feuerbach himself points this out, it seems that he does not ultimately avoid being the next ‘link’ in this iconoclastic chain. We should make a distinction, however, between two iconoclastic ‘projects’ here, both of which are connected to the ‘idolatry’ of metaphysical thinking. One of the functions of philosophy is to describe ‘reality’ as it ‘actually is’ (against the ‘illusions’ of other philosophers), and it is in this sense that Feuerbach appeals to the ‘material’ nature of existence. There is another function of philosophy, however, in that this description of ‘reality’ is often an announcement of what is ‘really real’, or to be valued, over and above the ‘idols’ of other philosophers. It seems that the critique of Feuerbach’s materialism falls into both these camps. In this thesis, we are interested in defending a materialist approach as a way of opposing the ‘illusions’ of idolatrous thinking, although this does not mean that we are defending material practices as things to be revered over all other ideals. Furthermore, although we are concerned to emphasise the importance of the ‘material’ aspects of our life and practices, we are not thinking of ‘materiality’ as some sort of metaphysical substance, or as a metaphysical ground that can provide a totalising explanation of ‘reality’ or ‘existence.’ It is this tendency that Marx criticised in Feuerbach’s work: that is, his use of ‘materiality’ in a rather metaphysical way. It is to Marx’s iconoclastic alternative – that is, his approach to, and study of, ‘practical actuality’ – that we now turn.

1.2.2.c. Praxeology and praxis: Marx’s two-tiered response to modern ‘idolatry’

The young Marx was also interested in the problem (or concept) of ‘alienation’, and it is an issue he wrote about at length in the 1844 *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*, although we also find it discussed in his later critique of political economy, *Das Kapital*. Marx’s conception of ‘alienation’ was greatly influenced by Feuerbach’s materialism, although Marx felt that Feuerbach did not go far enough in overcoming the dualism implied by idealism, on the one hand, and materialism, on the other. Marx’s response to Hegel and

the ‘Young Hegelians’ – including Feuerbach – can be seen as a form of iconoclasm that works on two levels: on the one hand, he is interested in a philosophical alternative to both Hegel’s idealism and Feuerbach’s materialism, while on the other hand, he is interested in a practice-based solution to the alienation that he felt characterised modern society. These two concerns are inextricably connected in Marx’s work, because he sees the former (philosophical) problem, as a result of the latter (social) problem. We will first deal with Marx’s philosophical solution, which might be called his praxeological approach.

Marx’s ‘praxeology’ marks a pivotal move against both the materialism and idealism of his predecessors, and is a way out of the dualism that plagues both of these approaches. Marx’s praxeological alternative is nowhere clearer than in his response to Feuerbach and the ‘Young Hegelians’ in the German Ideology, for example, where he criticises modern speculative metaphysics, which includes both idealism, and what he sees as the rather metaphysical attempts to overcome it. Marx is very concerned to point out the ‘phantomic’ character of the theories of the Young Hegelians, which he considers to be as metaphysical as the idealism they are supposed to be criticising. What both idealism and materialism have forgotten, according to Marx, is that they are both, as philosophical approaches, are therefore also material human practices. Marx’s ‘iconoclastic’ solution is to point out the ‘practical actuality’ of human activity, including the practices of the philosopher himself, who is an active, material, human being. It has not occurred to German philosophers, says Marx, “to inquire into the connection of German philosophy with German reality, the relation of their criticism to their own material surroundings,” which would lead them to see that the “production of ideas, of conceptions, of consciousness, is at first directly interwoven with the material activity and the material intercourse of men, the language of real life. Conceiving, thinking, the mental intercourse of men, appear at this stage as the direct efflux of their material behaviour.”

In direct contrast to German philosophy which “descends from heaven to earth,” Marx claims that his philosophy will “ascend from earth to heaven,” so that:

> We set out from real, active men, and on the basis of their real life-process we demonstrate the development of the ideological reflexes and echoes of this life-process. The phantoms formed in the human brain are also, necessarily, sublimes of their material life-process, which is empirically verifiable and bound to material premises. Morality, religion, metaphysics, all the rest of ideology and their corresponding forms of consciousness, thus no longer retain the semblance of independence. They have no history, no development; but men, developing their material

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76 Ibid., p.30.
production and their material intercourse, alter, along with this their real existence, their thinking and the products of their thinking. Life is not determined by consciousness, but consciousness by life.\textsuperscript{77}

It is from this starting point of ‘real, active men,’ that Marx transforms the German Idealist notion of \textit{Entäusserung}, which, as we saw, means ‘self-alienation’ in the idealist tradition. Although Marx is often seen as appropriating Hegel’s notion of ‘self-alienation’, he actually makes a very important distinction between his own, and Hegel’s, use of the concept. Firstly, like Feuerbach, he criticises the fact that, for Hegel, ‘self-alienation’ is ultimately seen as an expression of Absolute Spirit, and not as an expression of the material human being. Marx agrees with Feuerbach’s critique of Hegel’s idealism; although he feels that Feuerbach does not go far enough in his critique, in that, although he turns Hegel ‘on his head’, he nevertheless does not really move beyond the idealism/materialism dualism that has plagued much modern thought (since at least Descartes). It is for this reason that Marx appeals to an examination, not only of the material conditions of life, but of the fact that human beings \textit{actively} structure their material surroundings through their labour practices. Marx’s praxeological description of \textit{Entäusserung} is also written as ‘\textit{Vergegenständlichung}’, which is usually translated into English as ‘objectification.’

One of the difficulties in trying to comprehend the revolutionary nature of Marx’s philosophy, however, is that it is often couched in terms that belong to a philosophical tradition he is trying to ‘break out of’, as it were. Especially in his earlier work, Marx is exploring, opening up, and trying to chart new philosophical territory, and it often seems that he is struggling to use familiar words in new and challenging ways. In his \textit{Comments on James Mill}, for example, Marx defines ‘objectification’ (\textit{Vergegenständlichung}) as the creative, external, expression of men who are working as free human beings: If I had “carried out production as a human being,” says Marx, “in my production I would have objectified my individuality, its specific character, and therefore enjoyed not only an individual \textit{manifestation of my life} during the activity, but also when looking at the object I would have the individual pleasure of knowing my personality to be \textit{objective, visible to the senses} and hence a power \textit{beyond all doubt}.”\textsuperscript{78} Marx believes that it is in this experience of ‘objectification’ that, “Our products would be so many mirrors in which we saw reflected our essential nature.”\textsuperscript{79} If we did not realise that Marx was using this word in

\textsuperscript{77} Ibid., p. 36.
\textsuperscript{79} Ibid., p. 228.
a different way to his predecessors, it would be difficult to see why his philosophy was so novel.

A similar observation can be made about Marx’s description of the ‘essential nature’ of man. A number of critics have argued that that Marx’s conception of man’s ‘essential nature’ puts him into the same camp as Feuerbach, who was accused of idolising an ‘abstract being.’ It seems, however, that, once again, Marx is battling the language of his time. For Marx, man’s ‘essential nature’ is to express himself creatively, through his material practices, and it is when this creative expression is impeded, he feels, that we become ‘alienated’ from ourselves, from our labour, from the products we make, and from other people. Marx holds a very strong idea about the ways in which the labour practices in which people are immersed can become perverted or ‘alienated,’ and the fact that this alienation needs to be criticised in both theory and practice. His notion of man’s ‘essential nature’ is, however, connected to an understanding of human dignity, and it is against the “violation of human dignity”80 that Marx rails. Marx’s ‘essential nature’ involves an idea about the capacity of human beings to create things and to exchange them with other people as they might need them, and it is when this creativity is stunted – by, say, unethical modes of production, instituted through human greed – that we can be said to be living in an ‘alienated’ society.

It is when “the objective world becomes everywhere for man in society the world of man’s essential powers – human reality, and for that reason the reality of his own essential powers,” says Marx, that “all objects become for him the objectification of himself, become objects which confirm and realise his individuality, become his objects: that is, man himself becomes the object.”81 This involves a completely different conception of ‘objectification’ and ‘essential nature’ to Feuerbach or Hegel. For Marx, the ‘essential nature’ of man is perverted when he is prevented from ‘objectifying’ himself creatively through his material practices. This perversion occurs in a society based on the division of labour, that is, in a capitalist society, where the worker’s products are taken away from him and evaluated according to a system of exchange that appears powerful, alien, and overwhelming. It is here that ‘objectification’ becomes ‘alienation.’

It is here, too, that we can see the differences between the iconoclastic responses to ‘illusions’, and ‘idols’, if this is a distinction we can make. Whereas Marx’s ‘praxeological’

80 Ibid., p. 227.
approach is an attempt to see actual 'reality' in a better way than the German Idealists (and the Young Hegelians), Marx's critique of alienation is a reaction against the 'idols' that are wrongly attributed value in a capitalist society. Marx felt that alienation/estrangement resulted from the 'alienation' of man's "essential nature" (understood as the capacity for creative expression through labour), to someone or something other than himself. Some other entity had obtained what was proper to man, depending on the different forms of alienation: in religion it is God, in politics the State, in economics the market process and cash nexus. Marx notes that, it is in "tearing away the object of his production from man, therefore, estranged labour tears away from him his species-life, his true species-objectivity, and transforms his advantage over animals into the disadvantage that his inorganic body, nature, is taken away from him." To say that "man is estranged from himself," says Marx, is the same thing as saying that "his activity therefore appears to him as a torment, his own creation as an alien power... his power over an object as the power of the object over him, and he himself, the lord of his creation, as the servant of this creation." It is this estrangement, this Entfremdung, that is usually translated as 'alienation' in the work of Marx, and it should be clear as to how different it is to his notion of 'objectification' as 'creative expression' (as a mark of the 'essential nature' of man).

The second transformation of the Hegelian Entäusserung, then, can be seen in the distinction that Marx makes between 'alienation' and 'objectification,' which are connected to his critique of 'idolatry,' and philosophical 'illusions,' respectively. Marx is critical of both Hegel and Feuerbach for thinking that all cases of 'self-externalisation' (Entäusserung) – or all cases of what Marx describes as Vergegenständlichung – are considered a form of estrangement (whether or not this is ultimately positive or necessary), when for Marx, it is clear that alienation occurs in very special circumstances. As Georg Lukács notes: "it is in Hegel that we first encounter alienation as the fundamental problem of the place of man in the world and vis-à-vis the world," although, says Lukács, "in the term alienation he includes every type of objectification." Marx therefore splits the Hegelian Entäusserung into two concepts: Entäusserung (or, rather, Vergegenständlichung) and Entfremdung, which are usually translated as 'objectification' and 'alienation' respectively (although, as

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82 Ibid.
we will see in the chapter that follows, these terms are often conflated or confused in English translations, leading to some very problematic arguments and theories).

The link between ‘alienation’ – that is, the idea of man becoming ‘estranged from himself’, and becoming the ‘servant of his creation’ – and the religious problem of *idolatry*, should hopefully be clear. It is, in fact, this understanding of ‘alienation’ that forms the basis of Marx’s later theory of ‘commodity fetishism’, as well as his understanding of ‘ideology,’ which could both be understood in terms of ‘idolatry’, as we have examined the history of the term in this chapter. It is important to emphasise that this distinction between *Vergegenständlichung* (as ‘practical externalisation’), and *Entfremdung* (as ‘alienation’ in a critical or negative sense), is not merely a side-issue, but a fundamental distinction in Marx’s work, for the simple reason that, for Marx, if alienation was identical with objectification, it would mean that all human production would immediately be a stand over against us and overwhelm us, like the religious ‘idols’ of all ages.

The theme of idolatry should be abundantly clear even in these few examples from Marx’s early work, well before the theme of ‘commodity fetishism’ is articulated in *Das Kapital* which also involves a critique of perverted relations with objects. The attribution of an inappropriate kind (or amount) of value to an object, so that this object becomes an autonomous agent with spiritual powers, is described as fetishism, or *reification* (translated from the German *Verdinglichung* – i.e. literally ‘thingifying’, to make up an English equivalent).85 Fetishism, for Marx, involves the belief that inanimate things (commodities) have powers (or values) that govern the activities of human beings. As Marx explains in *Das Kapital*: “There is a definite social relation between men, that assumes, in their eyes, the fantastic form of a relation between things... This I call the Fetishism which attaches itself to the products of labour, so soon as they are produced as commodities, and which is therefore inseparable from the production of commodities.”86

The idea of fetishism, which Marx sees as evident in a commodity-based system of exchange, could be linked to the problem of reification in general, in that reification also involves the attribution of an inappropriate Kind (or amount) of value to a manufactured object.87 For Marx, this fetishism and reification is a result of the alienation that

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86 “Capital” (I, section 4) MECW, Vol. 35., p. 82.
characterises the modern capitalist world. Lukács explains that reification is the “the central structural problem of capitalist society,” and that the problem with modern capitalism is that the relations between people have been objectified and gained a “phantom objectivity;” but an autonomy that nevertheless “seems so strictly rational and all-embracing as to conceal every trace of its fundamental nature: the relation between people.” Marx feels that alienation results in suffering, although Marx is insistent that, “in those cases where worker and capitalist equally suffer, the worker suffers in his very existence, the capitalist in the profit on his dead mammon.”

Exchange-value, for example, is the abstract system of calculation according to which a wide range of products are ‘evaluated’, and it is something that is ‘reified’ in money, and commodities (which are seen as ‘embodiments’ of exchange-value). Marx agrees with Shakespeare that money has become “the visible divinity — the transformation of all human and natural properties into their contraries, the universal confounding and distorting of things: impossibilities are soldered together by it,” and that “the divine power of money — lies in its character as men’s estranged, alienating and self-disposing species-nature. Money is the alienated ability of mankind.” It is clear, he says, “that this mediator now becomes a real God, for the mediator is the real power over what it mediates to me. Its cult becomes an end in itself. Objects separated from this mediator have lost their value. Hence the objects only have value insofar as they represent the mediator, whereas originally it seemed that the mediator had value only insofar as it

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Marxism, positivist sociology, psychoanalysis and the clinical psychiatry of sexual deviance, modernist aesthetics and Continental philosophy, the major theme with which they are all concerned is the “problem of the social and personal value of material objects.” (Res, Vol. 13 p. 35) Pietz is keen to emphasise the importance of Marx’s notion of fetishism as a problem of material practice. Fetishism, says Pietz, “was a radically novel category: it offered an atheological explanation of the origin of religion, one that accounted equally well for theistic beliefs and nontheistic superstitions; it identified religious superstition with false causal reasoning about physical nature... fetishism was the definitive mistake of the pre-enlightened mind: it superstitiously attributed intentional purpose and desire to material entities of the natural world, while allowing social action to be determined by the (clerically interpreted) wills of contingently personified things, which were, in truth, merely the externalized material sites fixing people’s own capricious libidinal imaginings.” (Pietz, “Fetishism and Materialism: The limits of theory in Marx” in Fetishism as Cultural Discourse Ed. Emily Apter and William Pietz (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993), p. 139.

88 History and Class Consciousness, p. 83.
89 Ibid.
90 “Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts,” p. 306.
91 Ibid, p. 323. Marx quotes Timon of Athens here:

....Thou visible God!
That solder’st close impossibilities,
And makest them kiss! That speak’st with every tongue,
To every purpose! O thou touch of hearts!
Think, thy slave man rebels, and by thy virtue
Set them into confounding odds, that beasts
May have the world in empire!

92 Ibid., p. 324.
represented them. This reversal of the original relationship is inevitable."\textsuperscript{93} As Marx explains: "In capital-profit... we have the complete mystification of the capitalist mode of production, the reification of social relations and immediate coalescence of the material production relations with their historical and social determination. It is an enchanted, perverted, topsy-turvy world, in which Monsieur le Capital and Madame la Terre do their ghost-walking as social characters and at the same time directly as things."\textsuperscript{94}

For Marx, economists are guilty, not just of constructing speculative fantasies, or 'reifications', but of taking the 'objective reality' of capitalism at face value. The mistakes of philosophy and economics are seen as a direct result of the 'unreal reality' of the world in which modern people live, and this means that, in order to find the sources of speculative illusions, we need to expose, not only the illusions of speculative thought, but the reified structure of contemporary society itself, which is evident in the 'alienated' practices (economic, religious, intellectual, etc.) of this society. As Marx says in the \textit{Grundrisse}: "The crude materialism of the economists who regard as the \textit{natural properties} of things what are social relations of production among people, and qualities which things obtain because they are subsumed under these relations, is at the same time just as crude an idealism, even fetishism, since it imputes social relations to things as inherent characteristics, and thus mystifies them."\textsuperscript{95} More than the economic and capitalist 'reifications' caused by the alienated state of society, however, it is clear for Marx that the problematic way of thinking described in the \textit{German Ideology} is itself something that can be traced to the practices of the philosopher who exists in a state of alienation. Marx is concerned to point out that these philosophers have produced 'self-alienated' \textit{phantoms of thought}, because they are living in a state of alienation, in the sense of \textit{Entfremdung}. in the \textit{1844 Manuscripts}, for example, Marx claims that the problem of speculation arises when the \textit{philosopher}, who is an "estranged man – takes himself as the \textit{criterion} of the estranged world. The whole \textit{history of the alienation process} and the whole \textit{process of the retraction} of the alienation is therefore nothing but the \textit{history of the production} of abstract (i.e., absolute) thought – of logical, speculative thought."\textsuperscript{96}

It is for this reason that the solution to modern alienation, for Marx, is not something that can be solved in theoretical practice alone (that is, through the pointing out of

\textsuperscript{93} "Comments on James Mill," p. 212.
\textsuperscript{94} "Capital, III", in \textit{MECW} (Vol. 37), Ch. 48 pp. 801-817.
\textsuperscript{95} Quoted in Petrovic, entry for "Reification" in the \textit{Dictionary of Marxist Thought}, op. cit.
\textsuperscript{96} Marx, "Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts," p. 331.
philosophical ‘illusions’), but that, more than a theoretical move, we need to make a practical one, in order to oppose the ‘idolatrous’ nature of a modern alienated society. This ‘practical’ move is not a shift to a praxeological perspective, but the need for thoughtful critical action, or praxis. As Marx writes in the Eleventh of his “Theses on Feuerbach,” overcoming ‘alienation’ does not require that we interpret the world differently, but that we change it; because the problem stems, not only from our interpretation of things, but from the alienated state of society in which we live. Similarly, in the German Ideology, Marx quips that the idea that philosophy alone can solve ‘practical’ problems is like someone thinking that he will not drown if he does not believe in gravity: “If they were to knock this notion out of their heads, say by stating it to be a superstition, a religious concept, they would be sublimely proof against any danger from water.” As Marx comments as early as the Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts: “The extent to which the solution of theoretical riddles is the task of practice and effected through practice, the extent to which true practice is the condition of a real and positive theory, is shown, for example, in fetishism. The sensuous consciousness of the fetish-worshipper is different from that of the Greek, because his sensuous existence is different.”

As we saw above, the rabbinic notion of avodah zarah is one that understands idolatry as strange worship practice: that is, it understands idolatry to be a sinful perversion of the form of life advocated according to the Israelites’ Covenant with God. In what is hopefully not too far-fetched an application, this might perhaps be a helpful way of understanding Marx’s own critique of the perversions of modern capitalist society. Of course, it will be objected that this is an impossible undertaking due to the rather important fact that Marx was critical of religion, the “opium of the people.” In fact, it seems that Marx understands religion, not only as a form of ‘reification’ similar to ideology and commodity fetishism, but as the model on which we might better understand these perverted human production. In a section on ‘Estranged Labour’ in the 1844 Manuscripts, for example, Marx explains that: “Just as in religion the spontaneous activity of the human imagination, the human brain, and the human heart, detaches itself from the individual and reappears as the alien activity of a god or of a devil, so the activity of the worker is

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100 “A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right,” MECW (Vol. 3), p. 175.
not his own spontaneous activity. It belongs to another, it is a loss of his self.” Marx seems to be far more benevolent to religion than Feuerbach. Marx is critical, not of religion per se, but of the suffering that has led to the need for religious ‘illusions.’ As Marx states, “Religious suffering is, at one and the same time, the expression of real suffering and a protest against real suffering. Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless conditions.” Marx was mainly critical of the type of religion designed to perpetuate false consciousness about the situation human beings are in, and in this sense his critique of modern alienation has in many ways a number of similarities to the religious critique of idolatrous practice. We cannot forget, too, that Marx is employing explicitly iconoclastic rhetoric, which is something that can be traced to the religious defence of God, against the worship of idolatrous impostors.

Halbertal and Margalit note that “iconoclasm in Marx’s case will be the act in which man regains his own alienated essence from the idols that robbed him of it: the alien gods are alienated men. The worship of the golden calf is the diminution of the human essence and its subservience to a foreign entity that gains control over man’s life.” Marx’s translation of the problem of idolatry, they feel, “is not connected to the epistemological sphere. It is connected rather to the religious terminology of right worship and wrong worship, and the right worship of God is replaced by the unalienated production of man.” Leonora Batnitzky, in her study of the twentieth-century Jewish philosopher (or religious thinker) Franz Rosenzweig, goes so far as to compare Marx’s conception of idolatry with that of the Jewish philosopher: “Marx argues that we worship the alien god of money and do not recognize that we have created our own gods and endowed them with meaning.” According to Batnitzky, idolatry, for Rosenzweig, “stems not from how we think about God but from how we worship God,” and this practice-based approach to the problem of idolatry is something that she feels is comparable to Marx’s attempt to understand the problem of modern alienation. This comparison of Marx’s ‘iconoclasm’ with one of the most important Jewish thinkers of the twentieth century, contributes to the defence of Marx’s complex idea of what is to be ‘essentially human’ – an idea that Marx

102 “A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right,” p. 175.
103 Idolatry, p. 243.
104 Ibid.
105 Batnitzky, Leora. Idolatry and Representation: The Philosophy of Franz Rosenzweig Reconsidered (Princeton university Press, 2000). Rosenzweig’s argument about the root of idolatry has “a significant affinity with Marx’s,” says Batnitzky, in that, like Marx, ”Rosenzweig argues that the root of idolatry is a misunderstanding about the ways in which meaning is created and human identity is constituted.”
106 Ibid., p. 4.
feels we are obliged to defend, against the perversions of modern alienation. Because ‘idolatry’ is a practice-based problem for Marx, this means that its solution must also be practice-based. As Marx argues: “In order to abolish the idea of private property, the idea of communism is quite sufficient. It takes actual communist action to abolish actual private property. History will lead to it; and this movement, which in theory we already know to be a self-transcending movement, will constitute in actual fact a very rough and protracted process.” Marx’s iconoclastic solution to the ‘idolatries’ of modernity is not ‘merely’ philosophical; it is the revolution that will result in a Communist society.

1.2.4. Philosophsing with a hammer: The ‘idolatry’ of metaphysics?

There are more idols than realities in the world... regarding the sounding out of idols, this time they are not just idols of the age, but eternal idols, which are here touched with a hammer as with a tuning fork: there are no idols that are older, more assured, more puffed-up — and none more hollow. That does not prevent them from being those in which people have the most faith.

We have seen how Plato criticises the ‘unreality’ of the sensible world against the ‘reality’ of the Forms, while Feuerbach criticises the ‘unreality’ of speculative ideas, including (or most especially) ideas such as Plato’s Forms. Habermas fears that many attempts to “detranscendentalize” metaphysical concepts, nevertheless somehow “continue to get entangled in the prior conceptual decisions of transcendental philosophy, decisions in which they remain trapped.” Thus, he notes, just as “the Young Hegelians ran the risk in turn of hypostatizing the prius of nature, society and history into something in-itself, and of thereby slipping back unacknowledged to the level of precritical thinking,” so even more recent movements (such as structuralism and post-structuralism), he says, get “caught in the snare of abstract fallacies.”

Andrew Rawnsley also offers a helpful description of metaphysics, which he, like Habermas, feels can be challenged from a ‘praxeological perspective.’ According to Rawnsley, there is one factor that is consistent in all the metaphysical stories that have been told in the Western tradition:

107 “Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts,” p. 313
109 Post-Metaphysical Thinking, p. 43.
110 Ibid., pp. 39 & 47.
111 Rawnsley, Andrew. Roots to Rites: Practice Logics and the Heir to Metaphysics (PhD Thesis, University of St Andrews, 2006). For a more extended discussion of the benefits of the ‘praxeological’ approach, see Chapter 5, below. This is, basically, the thrust of our own argument in this thesis: it is
This factor is the tendency to posit a singular or closed structure or principle upon which various elements are organized or to which such elements are referred. Whether this structure is considered to be a logical structure of relationships which persists regardless of the elements that are structured, a structure which is indifferent to the materials so structured, and which is understood by formal permutation of the structure without consideration of the qualities and character of the elements involved; or alternatively the contentless a priori formal structures of consciousness, the transcendental combinatorial of Kant’s transcendental subject; or even Marion’s ‘givenness’, these are variants on the same theme.\footnote{Ibid., p. 190.}

We will see in the section that follows, and in Chapter 5 below, the ways in which Marion’s idea of ‘givenness’, an attempt to ‘overcome’ metaphysics, nevertheless ends up being as metaphysical as the philosophical pictures provided by his predecessors.

The call for the end of metaphysics can be found throughout the history of modern philosophy, as we have already seen in the work of Feuerbach and Marx. It is, however, probably best summed up in David Hume’s famous injunction:

\textit{If we take in our hand any volume of divinity or school metaphysics, for instance; let us ask, Does it contain any abstract reasoning concerning quantity or number? No. Does it contain any experimental reasoning concerning matter of fact and existence? No. Commit it then to the flames: for it can contain nothing but sophistry and illusion.}\footnote{From Enquiries Concerning the Human Understanding and Concerning the Principles of Morals, Ed. L. Selby-Bigge (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1902), Part III, p. 165.}

Despite criticisms of metaphysics such as this found throughout modern philosophy, however, the description of metaphysics as a type of ‘idolatry’ is probably most evident in the work of Nietzsche, who, in his famous \textit{Twilight of the Idols}, rails against the ‘idols’ of philosophy that need to be ‘sounded out’ with a philosophical ‘hammer.’ Nietzsche highly valued life, creativity, health, and the realities of the world we live in, along with a number of other values, over and above any so-called ‘realities’ situated in a world beyond. It is for this reason that he is critical of both the ‘metaphysical’ idea of God, and the philosophical idealism that he sees as closely connected to it. He chides philosophers for the way that they “think they are doing a thing honour when they dehistoricize it, sub specie aeterni – when they make a mummy of it. All that philosophers have handled for millennia has been conceptual mummies; nothing actual has escaped from their hands alive.”\footnote{Twilight of the Idols, p. 45.}
honouring the things they are investigating, says Nietzsche, these “conceptual idolaters” become “a mortal danger to everything when they worship.”\(^\text{115}\)

Nietzsche sees that what most philosophers are concerned with is the ‘real’ world, although this has led many thinkers to decry all the ‘really real’ things in our lives, such as “death, change, age, as well as procreation and growth.”\(^\text{116}\) The result of this flight from ‘reality’, says Nietzsche, is that the ‘real world’ itself has become a fiction: “The grounds upon which ‘this’ world has been designated as apparent establish rather its reality - another kind of reality is absolutely undemonstrable,” which means that “the ‘real world’ has been constructed out of the contradiction to the actual world: an apparent world indeed, in so far as it is no more than a moral-optical illusion,” that is nothing other than a form of self-sabotage, because “we revenge ourselves on life by means of the phantasmagoria of ‘another’, a ‘better’ life.”\(^\text{117}\) Instead, we need to realise that, “The ‘apparent’ world is the only one: the ‘real’ world has only been lyingly added.”\(^\text{118}\) (It should be clear that, here, Nietzsche is using the term ‘reality’, both in the sense of ‘actuality’, and in a more value-laden sense, as appealing to that which is ‘most important’).

The person whom Nietzsche finds most guilty of ‘lying’ and of making ‘reality’ apparent, is, not surprisingly, Plato:

> Ultimately my mistrust of Plato extends to the very bottom of him: I find him... so morally infected, so much an antecedent Christian – he already has the concept ‘good’ as the supreme concept – that I should prefer to describe the entire phenomenon ‘Plato’ by the harsh term ‘higher swindle’ or, if you prefer, ‘idealism’, than by any other.\(^\text{119}\)

For reasons similar to Feuerbach, Nietzsche finds the Christian God to be a metaphysical ‘idol’ of our own minds. The “inner world,” says Nietzsche, is “full of phantoms and false lights.”\(^\text{120}\) Like Feuerbach, who understands that the “essence of speculative philosophy is nothing other than the rationalised, realised, actualised essence of God. The speculative philosophy is the true, consistent, rational theology,”\(^\text{121}\) so Nietzsche sets out to show that ‘God’ as causa sui, or ens realissimum, is in fact nothing but the result of the way in which we seem to be very adept at “mistaking the last for the first”:

\(^{115}\) Ibid.
\(^{116}\) Ibid., p. 45.
\(^{117}\) Ibid., p. 48.
\(^{118}\) Ibid., p. 56.
\(^{119}\) Ibid., p. 117.
\(^{120}\) Ibid., p. 60.
\(^{121}\) “Principles of the Philosophy of the Future,” §5.
They put that which comes at the end – unfortunately! for it ought not to come at all! – the ‘highest concepts’, that is to say the most general, the emptiest concepts, the last fumes of evaporating reality, at the beginning as the beginning... Moral: everything of the first rank must be causa sui... all the supreme concepts – that which is, the unconditioned, the good, the true, the perfect - all that cannot have become, *must* therefore be causa sui. But neither can these supreme concepts be incommensurate with one another, be incompatible with one another... Thus they acquired their stupendous concept ‘God’... The last, thinnest, emptiest is placed as the first, as cause in itself, as *ens realissimum*... That mankind should have taken seriously the brain-sick fancies of morbid cobweb-spinners! - And it has paid dearly for doing so!\(^{122}\)

It is this error, says Nietzsche, that is “among the most ancient and most recent habits of mankind,” even though it is “sanctified among us,” and bears the name of “religion.”\(^{123}\)

Nietzsche is of course well known for his announcement that “God is Dead”, which appears in an earlier work, *The Gay Science*. The ‘Death of God’ is announced by a madman, who is described as running through a marketplace shouting, “God is dead! God remains dead!” although no one takes him seriously. Frustrated, the madman cries out that he has come too soon: people cannot yet see that they have killed God:

> God is dead. God remains dead. And we have killed him. How shall we, murderers of all murderers, console ourselves? That which was the holiest and mightiest of all that the world has yet possessed has bled to death under our knives. Who will wipe this blood off us? With what water could we purify ourselves? What festivals of atonement, what sacred games shall we need to invent? Is not the greatness of this deed too great for us? Must we not ourselves become gods simply to be worthy of it?\(^{124}\)

Although he felt that the realisation of the “Death of God” would initially lead to nihilism, Nietzsche believed there could be positive possibilities for humans without God, in that relinquishing this belief would open the way for human’s creative abilities to fully develop. The Christian God, with his arbitrary commands and prohibitions, would no longer stand in the way of human beings doing what they had the possibility to do, especially if they stopped turning their eyes toward a supernatural realm and began to acknowledge the value of *this* world. The recognition that “God is dead”, according to Nietzsche, would give us the freedom to become something new, different, creative — a freedom to be something without being forced to accept the baggage of the past. Nietzsche thought that this nihilism could be overcome by re-evaluating the foundations of human values.

This re-evaluation is a necessary expression of what Nietzsche calls the “will to power”; that is, the fundamental life-affirming principle of all life. Anything which is a

\(^{122}\) *Twilight of the Idols*, p. 47.


“living and not a dying body,” says Nietzsche, “will have to be an incarnate will to power, it will strive to grow, spread, seize, become predominant - not from any morality or immorality but because it is living and because life simply is will to power.”\(^{125}\) It is this ‘will to power’ that "belongs to the essence of what lives, as a basic organic function; it is a consequence of the will to power, which is after all the will to life."\(^{126}\) The ‘will to power’ is the idea that "every specific body strives to become master over all space and to extend its force (– its will to power:) and to thrust back all that resists its extension."\(^{127}\) The people who eventually learn to create their lives anew, to claim their ‘will to power’, in other words, will represent a new stage in human existence, the Übemensch. For Nietzsche, the goal of mankind is to produce a being who can take absolute responsibility for himself, and this can only be achieved by affirming life and transcending nihilism, represented most prominently by Christian and Platonic ideals.

For Nietzsche, then, what is ‘most real’, is not some metaphysical principle or deity to be valued above others: it is the human ability to evaluate things, as an affirmation of its will to power, that is the only ‘true’ reality. This evaluative power is itself valued over all other things by Nietzsche; however, it is clear why a number of critics, including Heidegger, have seen this ‘will to power’ as resembling yet another over-arching metaphysical principle, that is not only an illusion, but an idolatrous illusion at that. Nevertheless, although Heidegger feels that Nietzsche’s ‘will to power’ is as idolatrous as the metaphysical ‘idols’ he is supposed to have overcome, Heidegger’s critique of the ‘onto-theological constitution of metaphysics’ is similar to Nietzsche’s critique of the metaphysical illusions of Platonism and the God of Christian theology (which Nietzsche, as we have seen, considers as versions of each other). What does Heidegger mean by the ‘onto-theological constitution of metaphysics’? This is an important issue, as it has formed the basis for a critique of metaphysical ‘idolatry’ in the work of a number of prominent contemporary philosophers and theologians. For Heidegger, philosophy has been ‘onto-theological’, ”since the beginning with the Greeks."\(^{128}\) Heidegger’s critique of metaphysics as ‘onto-theology’, although not always formulated in these terms, is something that can be found throughout his oeuvre, and revolves around what he characterises as the ‘forgetting of Being’ in the Western philosophical tradition. Heidegger feels that, although

\(^{125}\) Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1990), § 259.
\(^{126}\) Ibid.
most philosophers throughout the history of the Western tradition have said something about ‘Being’, they have not asked the question of the difference between Being, and particular beings, and that these are usually taken as two separate sorts of entities. To this extent then, Being is reduced to a certain type of ‘being’, rather than a mystery towards which we should always be open, as the condition for asking existential questions at all.

The "ontological difference," the distinction between Being (das Sein) and beings (das Seiende), is fundamental for Heidegger. As Joan Stambaugh notes in her introduction to Identity and Difference, the "oblivion of Being is not something omitted in the history of philosophy, something left out. Metaphysics has asked the question of Being, but only to bring Being into a relationship with beings as their ground." Being, in other words, is wrongly conceived when it is understood as a transcendent ‘being’, a ground, substance, or entity, that explains, or even causes the existence of all other beings. This can be especially seen in the positing of an ultimate being, which is usually named as ‘God’. As Heidegger states: "Metaphysics is theology, a statement about God, because the deity enters into philosophy." Heidegger is as critical of the theology that thinks of God as a certain sort of ‘being’ or entity, as he is of the philosophy that thinks of Being as a certain sort of ‘being’ such as God. Thus, the problem of ‘onto-theology’ is a problem for both philosophy and theology: "Metaphysics is theology in that it thinks Being as the highest ground above all beings, ultimately as the ground of itself, causa sui, which is the metaphysical concept of God. Metaphysics is thus in its very nature onto-theo-logic."

Heidegger feels that onto-theological metaphysics has forgotten the mystery and fullness of Being; that is, the sense of wonder and awe that we experience in the face of the ultimately incomprehensible nature of our existence. It is this sense of wonder that gave birth to philosophy itself, although it has been forgotten through the development of Western metaphysics, which seems all too keen to eliminate any sense of amazement, or even bewilderment, in the face of some major existential questions. This ‘reminding’ the philosopher of the ultimately incomprehensible mystery of Being is Heidegger’s way of challenging the totalising accounts of reality provided by onto-theological metaphysics. It should also be clear that this insistence on the mystery and fullness of Being is part of Heidegger’s more valuative critique of metaphysics: what is ‘really real’ is not some onto-theological principle (or onto-theological God), but the mystery of our existence.

129 Stambaugh’s “Introduction”, p. 7.
130 Identity and Difference, p. 55.
131 Ibid., p. 15.
It should hopefully be clear why a number of theologians and philosophers have appropriated Heidegger’s critique of metaphysics, which is described by a number of them as a form of ‘idolatry’. Philosophers seem to have been all too comfortable to venerate their own metaphysical explanations and speculative constructs, rather than the mystery of Being in which they should stand in awe. More than ‘reminding’ us about the mystery of Being, however, Heidegger offers another challenge to metaphysics, especially in his earlier work, through his appeal to a phenomenological analysis of the being for whom Being matters: that is, the human being, or what he calls Dasein. (This could be seen as Heidegger’s critique of the metaphysical description of ‘reality’ as ‘what actually is’; it is far less ‘value-intensive’ than his insistence on the mystery of Being). The question of Being is meaningful for Dasein, and hence it is an issue that cannot be divorced from the life of the always worldly-situated, and practically involved, human being. Influenced by Husserl, whose phenomenology was intended to be a description of the way that phenomena appear to us within the horizon of human experience (hence the phenomenological slogan, “to the things themselves”), Heidegger is interested in the way phenomena appear to us within the horizon of our being-in-the-world. For Heidegger, our enquiry into the mystery of Being cannot begin from anywhere other than from where we stand, as human beings who are situated in a world that is, amongst other things, historical and material.

Dasein, as the site ("Da") for the disclosure of Being ("Sein"), is fundamentally situated in-the-world, and it is fundamentally related to the world. Yet Dasein, as we have said, is not simply one entity amongst others; it is the being for whom the mystery of Being matters. In his magnum opus, Being and Time, Heidegger discusses, amongst other things, Dasein’s ‘average everydayness’, which is its ordinary, prereflective activity when caught up in the midst of practical affairs. It is only from this starting point, that we can ask the question: in what ways does Dasein understand the being of other entities? Heidegger is keen to show that when we say that something ‘is’, this does not mean that ‘being’ is something that inheres in these beings like an essence, and nor is it a particular being, such as a table, a desk, or a chair. To say that something ‘is’, means that we take it as something; for Heidegger, the ‘is’ exists in the ‘taking as’ (this is referred to as the “Als-Struktur” of experience). While other philosophers have tried to define a ‘table’, for

\[132\] In ordinary German the word “Dasein” means ‘life’ or ‘existence’, while it is often used by German philosophers to denote the existence of any entity. Heidegger, however, breaks the word down to its components “Da” and “Sein,” and gives to it a special meaning which is related to his answer to the question of who the human being is. Dasein refers to both the concrete ‘human being’, and, more abstractly, to the type of being that humans have.
example, through an appeal to the apparent ‘essential features’ of tables, Heidegger wishes to point out that Dasein, in everyday life, is not concerned with some abstract idea of ‘tableness’, but with particular concrete tables, such as the table in this room, that is used for writing on, or for eating at. Unlike those philosophical descriptions of things as though they are objectively ‘present to hand’ (vorhanden); Heidegger reminds us that the entities we encounter constitute a realm of ‘significance’ most obviously and easily if they are objects of use, as ‘ready to hand’ (zuhanden).

This ‘practical’ engagement with the world is evident in Dasein's employment of the tools and equipment that it uses for its daily needs, the tools that themselves are always embedded, for example, in the context of a practice such as the making of something particular, and a place such as a workshop. Dasein is a being whose way of being is grounded in a pre-reflective relational and situated engagement with the world. Understanding what a tool is, and what a world is in which tools lie, is a part of Dasein’s essential understanding of being without which it would not be Dasein. Dasein’s approach to the things around it is a practical one of circumspect concern rather than disinterested contemplation. For Heidegger, philosophical activity itself – as one capacity of Dasein – grows out of Dasein’s ‘average everydayness’, and it would be a serious error to describe Dasein as though it were unremittingly engaged in the very particular activity of philosophical reflection. It is the ‘average everyday’ character of Dasein that provides the situation that is crucial for the coming-about or event (Ereignis) of Being. It is ‘where we stand’, as it were, and it is important to acknowledge this, as it is the only perspective that we have. As Heidegger states: Man’s “distinctive feature lies in this, that he, as the being who thinks, is open to Being, face to face with Being; thus man remains referred to Being and so answers to it. Man is essentially this relationship of responding to Being, and he only this... Man and Being are appropriated to each other. They belong to each other.”133

Thus we see how Heidegger’s critique of the ‘idols’ and the ‘illusions’ of metaphysical descriptions of ‘reality’, come together. It is only thinking this fundamental relation between man and Being, that we can make a ‘step back’ out of metaphysics and encounter Being as the mystery, the source of all thought and wonder, as encountered by pre-Socratic philosophers. As Heidegger says, “This step back allows Being as difference to come before thinking without being its object,”134 and gives us an intimation of “what

133 Identity and Difference, p. 31.
134 Ibid., p. 47.
constitutes the source of this entire thinking."
Therefore, while the “difference between Being and beings is the area within which metaphysics, Western thinking in its entire nature, can be what it is,” the ‘step back’ thus "moves out of metaphysics into the essential nature of metaphysics." For Heidegger, onto-theological metaphysics results from the forgetting of Being, and it is this ‘forgetting of Being’ that Heidegger defines as nihilism. Against Nietzsche, who sees ‘nihilism’ as the appeal to some ‘unreal reality’, Heidegger sees the "will to power" itself as the feature of all onto-theological metaphysics; that is, the feature of the 'forgetting of Being' that leads to the illusion that human beings are subject to nothing but their own will and evaluative power. In this sense, Nietzsche is as much a metaphysician, as Plato. Against this unfettered assertion of the 'will to power' that has led, according to Heidegger, to, amongst other things, modern technology and calculative reasoning, Heidegger prescribes an 'openness to Being' that will let things ‘be what they are.’ It is only through this openness to Being that we could be cast out of any habitual ground, and experience the mystery of existence.

As the 'chain of iconoclasm' works, however, Heidegger himself is not safe from an accusation of 'idolatry'. According to thinkers such as Levinas (and, as we will see, Jacques Derrida and Jean-Luc Marion), Heidegger does not allow enough space for ‘alterity’ in his philosophy, and Levinas therefore appeals to an awareness of an ‘other’ that consistently refuses to be controlled, remaining always transcendent and beyond our grasp. This Other, for Levinas, cannot be taken as such by us, because this implies that we have grasped the Other on our own terms, which would, it could be said, be considered a form of idolatry. Another critique of Heidegger’s ‘idolatry’ is taken up by Derrida, who also nevertheless appropriates, to a large extent, Heidegger’s critique of onto-theology, although Derrida usually uses the terms 'metaphysics of presence' or 'logocentrism'. Although his famous notion of deconstruction is derived from Heidegger’s notion of Destruktion, Derrida nevertheless states that: "despite this debt to Heidegger's thought, or rather because of it, I attempt to locate in Heidegger's text... the signs of belonging to metaphysics, or to what he calls onto-theology." Derrida explains that, although his work is influenced by both Heidegger and Nietzsche, he nevertheless feels that neither of them escapes the

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135 Ibid., p. 50.
136 Ibid., p. 51.
138 See a more extended account of Levinas’ reaction to Heidegger, in terms of the problem of ‘idolatry’, in Benson, Graven Ideologies, Chapter 4 (“Derrida and Levinas,” pp. 110-124.)
‘metaphysics’ they seek to ‘deconstruct’. This is something that we will discuss further in Chapter 3, below. We will see that, for Derrida, because all conceptualisation is metaphysical, this means that we can never escape metaphysics through any sort of conceptual work. As he explains: "all these destructive discourses and all their analogues are trapped in a sort of circle. This circle is unique. It describes the form of the relationship between the history of metaphysics and the destruction of the history of metaphysics. There is no sense in doing without the concepts of metaphysics in order to attack metaphysics. We have no language – no syntax and no lexicon – which is alien to this history; we cannot utter a single destructive proposition which has not already slipped into the form, the logic, and the implicit postulations of precisely what it seeks to contest."[140]

We need to realise, he says, that “these concepts are not elements or atoms and since they are taken from a syntax and a system, every particular borrowing drags along with it the whole of metaphysics.” This is, he claims, “what allows these destroyers to destroy each other reciprocally – for example, Heidegger considering Nietzsche, with as much lucidity and rigor as bad faith and misconstruction, as the last metaphysician, the last ‘Platonist.’ One could do the same for Heidegger himself.”[141] Could Derrida’s work not also fit into this category, however, and hence be criticised from a similar perspective? This we will discuss in more detail below; at this point we will return to the work of Jean-Luc Marion, one of Derrida’s students, and a thinker concerned with the question of ‘idolatry’ in both his theological and philosophical projects. The extent to which these projects can be said to ‘inform’ each other, has formed the basis of some important contemporary discussions revolving around the problem of ‘idolatry’.

1.3. Onto-theological idolatry: Splitting heirs?

He who pretends to go beyond all metaphysics most often risks taking up again, without being conscious of it, its basic characteristics.[142]

There is a debate in contemporary theological and philosophical circles regarding the best way of ‘overcoming’ the ‘idolatry’ of metaphysics (which is usually conceived in the Heideggerian sense of ‘onto-theology’). While many philosophers turn to Nietzsche, Heidegger, or postmodern thinkers such as Derrida, in order to problematise metaphysical

thinking, a number of theologians have appropriated Heidegger’s critique of ‘onto-theology’, in order to expose the ‘idolatry’ at work within theological work itself. There are a number of ‘post-metaphysical’ iconoclasts who feel that the only way to overcome ‘metaphysical idolatry’, is through a turn to theology, which they feel has the ability to ‘overcome’, not only metaphysics, but ‘philosophy’ itself. This is a position held, for example, by theologians of the ‘Radical Orthodoxy’ movement, the adherents of which believe that “only theology can truly occupy the postmodern condition.”\(^{143}\) It is here that we need to tread very carefully, however, because it is clear that we are dealing with more than one iconoclastic tradition. We need to ask, for example: even though philosophers such as Nietzsche use iconoclastic rhetoric, does this mean that their work can be described as ‘theological’? This is a question that we certainly need to keep an eye on.

As we will discuss throughout this thesis, there is a way in which the question of whether ‘metaphysics’ is better overcome through theology or philosophy, is a question that is largely simplified if we consider ‘metaphysics’, not in terms of the content of certain metaphysical theories, but as a way, or style of thinking that can be regarded as problematic. It is only through thinking of metaphysics as a certain thinking practice, with the aim of fulfilling certain functions more or less successfully, that this becomes a problem not exclusive to either theology or philosophy. Jean-Luc Marion is one contemporary thinker who acknowledges that ‘metaphysical idolatry’ is a problem for both theology and philosophy; however, because Marion is concerned with the content of certain metaphysical theories (which he nevertheless identifies with ‘metaphysics’ in general), it seems that his iconoclastic approach to the problem is ultimately unsuccessful.

Marion’s work has been seen as part of the ‘theological turn’ in contemporary Continental philosophy, which has been described as “the opening to the invisible, to the Other, to a pure givenness, or to an ‘archi-revelation.’”\(^{144}\) At the same time, however, he could be seen as part of what might be described as the ‘phenomenological turn’ in contemporary theology, which involves an interest in the theological implications of the critique of metaphysics, and especially Heidegger’s critique of onto-theology (seen, not as a problem, but as a great liberating insight for theological reflection). In his earlier theological work, however, it is not always clear whether Marion is judging metaphysics (or

\(^{143}\) Ward, “Introduction,” The Postmodern God: A Theological Reader (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997), p. xxxix (This is a view held by a number of theologians, despite the idea that pluralism and fragmentation are two of the defining features of the ‘postmodern condition’).

the critique of metaphysics provided by Nietzsche, Heidegger, Derrida, and others) as ‘idolatrous’ because it is atheistic, or simply because it is metaphysical. According to Marion, Nietzsche, for example, is guilty of idolatry, both because his “will to power” seems like a metaphysical principle, and because it seems to be taking the place of the divinity that is the only power that should be ascribed the ability to do the things that Nietzsche’s Übermensch claims. Nietzsche’s work is ‘idolatrous’, Marion claims, because “he remains a metaphysician: the ‘death of God’, experienced and brilliantly deconstructed, announces the death of the metaphysical God (the ‘moral God’). But, as the onto-theological structure of metaphysics remains (will to power/Eternal Return), the divinity, an other divinity, reappears under a form that is still metaphysical.”

Marion explains how, in Nietzsche’s work, God is “degraded to his status as – symptomatic – epiphenomenon of the will to power,” which means that Nietzsche “supports the idol-factory.”

In Nietzsche’s work, he says, “the very situation of the thinker becomes divine, since he gathers in himself the estimation of the world,” and it is for this reason that “metaphysical idolatry is not yet surpassed with atheism – which is still pegged to the warning of idols.” But is Nietzsche ‘idolatrous’ because he has not yet overcome metaphysics, or because his critique of metaphysics is undertaken from an atheistic perspective? This is not always clear in Marion’s iconoclastic work.

It is his critique of metaphysics, as based on the pointing out of a philosopher’s atheism, amongst other things, that has led to the charge that Marion’s iconoclasm is ultimately undertaken from a dogmatic Christian perspective. Marion is adamant, however, that his theological and philosophical (or phenomenological) projects are to be distinguished. As he explains, “Even if it had the power to do so (and clearly, such never was the case), phenomenology would not have the power to turn to theology.”

Although, as Thomas Carlson claims, Marion’s theology and phenomenology might “inform one another more or otherwise than Marion himself might allow,” it also seems that Marion’s work perhaps suffers from the confusion and even conflation of at least two iconoclastic traditions. By appropriating Nietzsche’s philosophical critique of metaphysical ‘idols’, for example, and turning this critique against him from a theological perspective, Marion seems to have his iconoclastic wires crossed. More than being confused about the

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145 The Idol and Distance, p. 73.
146 Ibid., p. 32.
147 Ibid., p. 43 & 36.
148 Quoted in Carlson, “Introduction” to Idol and Distance, p. xiv.
149 Ibid., pp. xi and xv.
relation between theological and philosophical iconoclasm, Marion also seems to have a very strange picture of idolatry itself, which he seems to think of in a very ‘metaphysical’ way. Marion, as we will see, thinks of ‘idols’ in a very Platonic sense: that is, as ‘images’, or ‘representations’ of ‘reality’ (and this is a ‘reality’ he thinks of in a very idealistic, or metaphysical way). As we will see in forthcoming chapters, a great deal of confusion has been caused through thinking of idolatry in terms of a certain dualistic model of representation (as somehow opposed to ‘reality’), as this leads to the justification of an iconoclastic approach to a number of forms of ‘representation’, including, as we will see, even the written word. We will examine this rather ‘metaphysical’ critique of the written word, and the ways in which it has, rather ironically, become entangled with the problem of ‘metaphysical idolatry’, in the chapters that follow.

One of the arguments in this thesis is that iconoclasm is most helpfully conceived as a critique of wrong or sinful practices. It is only from a praxeological perspective, we argue, that we can properly understand the targets of our critique. It is by thinking of idolatry in terms of practice – whether or not this idolatry is ‘conceptual’ – that we find a link between contemporary iconoclastic practices, and the iconoclasm practised by the Hebrew prophets. It is only through this conception of idolatry, that we find a link between Moses and Marion. The appeal to the biblical conception of ‘idolatry’, it should be emphasised, is not an appeal to religion, or even theology, over and above more ‘secular’ philosophical approaches. We are simply interested in the benefits of conceiving of idolatry – and the iconoclastic response to it – in praxeological terms, and it seems that, by reminding ourselves of the original conception and response to idolatry as a ‘sinful practice’, we might come a little closer to avoiding the problems that have emerged out of a rather ‘metaphysical’ approach to the problem. The advantages of a more praxeological approach should become clearer in the chapters that follow.
Jean-Luc Marion, whose work was introduced in the preceding chapter, is interested in ‘metaphysical idolatry’ as both a philosophical and theological problem. The French title of Marion’s *God Without Being* – “*Dieu sans l’être*” – is meant to be a play on words that could be read as “*Dieu sans lettre*”, or, in English, “God without writing.” As we will see in this, and forthcoming chapters, Marion, like a number of other theorists and philosophers, seems to conceive of both metaphysics, and writing, in terms of a certain dualistic distinction between ‘representation’ and ‘reality’. This ‘reality’ is something that is usually conceived in rather idealistic metaphysical terms: as we will discuss in Chapter 5 below, for example, ‘reality’, for Marion, is the “unthinkable God” (or the “unthinkable Gift” in his philosophical work), which cannot be ‘represented’ by any human means. For Marion, the attempt to ‘represent’ God through metaphysical concepts, or through language (the “text” in general), is considered to be a form of idolatry. Marion feels that the only way to ‘overcome’ the idolatry of metaphysics (and of ‘writing’), is to think “outside metaphysics”, or “outside the text” (hence the full title of Marion’s book: “*Dieu sans l’être: Hors-Texte*”).

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150 Gray, John. *Straw Dogs: Thoughts on Humans and Other Animals* (London: Granta, 2003), p. 58. Gray is the Professor of European Thought at the London School of Economics. In *Straw Dogs*, he claims that the Western philosophical tradition has been responsible for producing some extremely arrogant and erroneous beliefs about human beings and their place in the world. The idea that human beings are a species whose destiny it is to transcend natural limits and conquer the Earth, through philosophy or technology, he argues, is an illusion that needs to be exposed and challenged. What is disturbing, however, is that, like a number of authors whose work we will examine in this chapter, Gray sees the ‘idolatries’ of modern society as linked to a certain model of representation; hence his judgement against the ‘murderous capacity’ of the written word.
But is idolatry really something that can be understood in terms of a dualistic distinction between ‘reality’ and its supposed ‘representation’? In this chapter, we argue that this is a rather metaphysical conception of idolatry itself (and one that makes it, ironically, difficult to criticise the ‘metaphysics’ as a form of ‘idolatry’). Yet there seem to be a number of thinkers, across a range of different disciplines, who hold this rather peculiar idea that iconoclasm is a judgement made against ‘representations’, or ‘images’, compared to something defended as more ‘real’ than these representations. What is important to note about this dualistic picture is that the term ‘reality’ is being used, not in the sense of a description of what ‘actually is’, but in the sense of a judgement about what is ‘really real’, or ‘most important’. Anything that is considered less valuable, or less ‘really real’ than that which is appealed to as ‘reality’ by a certain philosopher or theorist, is often lumped into a category of ‘unreality’ that is populated by a family of concepts, including concepts such as ‘illusion’, ‘image’, ‘copy’, ‘representation’, ‘mediation’, ‘simulation’, or ‘perversion’.

In the chapter that follows, we will see how Derrida describes this defence of ‘reality’ (as opposed to its distorted ‘representations’) as a form of “logocentrism”, or what he calls the “metaphysics of presence.” A number of philosophers throughout the tradition, according to Derrida, have defended a ‘reality’ conceived in very idealistic terms, usually as a time or place of “full presence”, in relation to which something else is understood as a deviation from this ‘presence’. It is in light of this understanding, says Derrida, that writing has been described as a form of ‘re-presentation’, as opposed to the supposed ‘reality’ of thought or speech. It is this critical description of the written sign as a ‘perversion’ or ‘corruption’ of “full presence” that has led to its iconoclastic treatment by a number of philosophers and scholars throughout history. As Derrida explains: “absence and the sign always seem to make an apparent, provisional, and derivative notch in the system of first and last presence. The sign is always a sign of the Fall. Absence always relates to distancing from God.” For Derrida, however, it is this belief in a “full presence” unmediated by signs that is itself the metaphysical illusion that needs to be exposed and challenged. We will examine Derrida’s deconstruction of the “metaphysics of presence” in the chapter that follows.

In *this* chapter, we will examine some critical approaches to writing (and, by association, to metaphysics), which seem to be based on a belief in a 'reality' that is apparently corrupted by its mediation through writing. The iconoclastic approach to writing can be traced from Plato’s consideration of the dangers of the written *eidōlon*, to Baudrillard’s consideration of writing as a form of *‘simulation.’* It is through our investigation of the iconoclastic approach to writing that we will see why the statement referenced above, from John Gray’s book *Straw Dogs*, despite its apparent hyperbole, is for some reason not a particularly controversial statement to make about the apparent dangers of the written alphabet. In order to expose how delusional this conception of writing is, however, we will need to disentangle a web of words and meanings that have been woven around this particularly misconceived practice. As we will see, writing seems to have become a *scapegoat* for the *real* targets of the iconoclast’s wrath, which include problems such as the exploitation of other human beings, social alienation, and metaphysical reification.

Regarding concerns such as alienation and reification, for example, it is clear that a number of critics have misunderstood Marx’s critical philosophy in a number of crucial respects, to the extent that they feel justified in saying that they are offering a ‘Marxist’ critique of writing. This sort of statement can only be made, however, because of a confusion of a number of crucial Marxist concepts, especially concepts such as ‘objectification’, ‘alienation’, and ‘reification’, amongst others. It seems that these concepts are all used in their critical or negative senses, even though terms such as ‘objectification’, are used by Marx (and a number of other thinkers) in a far more neutral descriptive sense. It is this sort of confusion of different concepts and terms, coupled with a certain dualistic metaphysical picture of reality, that has led to the iconoclastic critique of writing. As we will argue, however, not only does this confusion lead to a misconception of writing, but it also points to a misconception of the *real* ‘idolatrous’ practices that are deserving of critical judgement. If we can expose writing as a ‘straw idol’, why should we believe that any ‘idols’ are deserving of iconoclastic judgement? This is precisely the reason why we need to perform this rather complex sort of disentanglement and deconstruction: that is, in order to make room for the critique of those things deserving of it.
2.1. Writing as *eidōlon*? Plato’s problematic prescription

In an interview given in 1988, Judith Williamson posed the following question to the French media and cultural theorist, Jean Baudrillard:

> You characterise systems of signification in our culture as circuits of signifiers with no referent… But do you believe that holds true for all forms of signification, including writing, and in that case how do you see the function of writing?

To which Baudrillard replied:

> Yes, it is also true for a system of writing, a theoretical system. All signs enter into such circuits, none escape – even theory itself becomes on some level a flow of signifiers with no referent... [It] then speaks as simulation but also offers itself as a system of simulation...Which means that it becomes its own reference. It becomes a kind of pure object or pure event, something like an act. And I don’t just mean the workings of language, there is something more in the fact of writing: there is no difference today between the state of things and the state of theory. There is a kind of short-circuit, an implosion between the two.\(^{153}\)

Without examining his work in depth, I think that it is possible to see in Baudrillard’s understanding of ‘writing’ – which he sees, like other forms of signification, as a form of ‘simulation’ – an understanding of the dangers of the written word that can be found throughout the history of Western thought. Baudrillard places writing – and, significantly, also theory – in the order of the ‘simulacrum’; that is, the order of signs that apparently have no reference to reality. Although Baudrillard’s understanding that ‘reality’ itself no longer exists except through its ‘simulations’, is perhaps a more contemporary post-structuralist picture of things, the description of writing as a ‘simulation’, or a ‘copy’ of reality (however this ‘reality’ is conceived), is hardly new. In fact, the word *simulacrum*, one of Baudrillard’s most well-known concepts, is the Latin (and English) translation of the Greek *eidōlon*, which played a prominent role in the philosophy of Plato.

Writing, for Plato, is considered a dangerous ‘simulation’, a ‘mediation’ of the truth, or a ‘copy’ of reality; and this danger can be found in both the form and the content of the written word. Plato’s most famous description of the dangers of writing can be found in the “Phaedrus,” an early to middle dialogue in which the eponymous Phaedrus and Socrates discuss, amongst other things, the differences between oral and written discourse. After

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\(^{153}\) Ibid., p. 307.

the work of Jacques Derrida and subsequent commentaries and investigations, the
discussion in the *Phaedrus* is familiar to many of us; however, it might be worthwhile to
retrace the lineaments of this dialogue, as it plays an important part in our investigation
into the ‘iconoclastic’ critique of writing.

Earlier on in the discussion, it seems that the problem is not the written medium per
se, but rather the ways in which the Greek sophists, rhetoricians, and poets use writing to
convey their rather specious philosophical arguments. “The disgrace begins,” says
Socrates, “when a man writes not well, but badly.”\(^{155}\) It is in this spirit of doing things
‘well’, that Plato feels that certain forms of art (or ‘artifice’) might be tolerated, that is, in
those cases where the artist portrays, not the ‘appearances’ of things, but their ‘reality’. As
he says in the *Republic*: "The real artist, who knew what he was imitating, would be
interested in realities and not in imitations."\(^{156}\) In his conversation with Phaedrus, Socrates
comes to a similar conclusion about the nature and possibility of this ‘real’ artist: he "who
being ignorant of the truth aims at appearances, will only attain an art of rhetoric which is
ridiculous and is not an art at all."\(^{157}\) The “true and only way in which any subject can be
set forth or treated by rules of art, whether in speaking or writing,” says Socrates, is if the
speaker or writer learns the nature of reality, and not its appearances.\(^{158}\) It is in this sense
of the ‘true and only way in which any subject can be set forth or treated by rules of art’
that Socrates approves of the ‘true art’ of writing, which can be found as “intelligent word
graven in the soul of the learner, which can defend itself, and knows when to speak and
when to be silent.”\(^{159}\)

It soon becomes obvious, however, that Socrates’ approval of this “intelligent word
graven on the soul” is nothing more than a metaphor, because, directly after giving this
exception, when Phaedrus asks: “You mean the living word of knowledge which has a soul,
and of which the written word is properly no more than an image?” Socrates replies, rather
impatiently: “Yes, of course that is what I mean.”\(^{160}\) It seems then, that although Plato to
some extent approves of a ‘true art’ based on a ‘knowledge of reality’ that is ‘written in the
soul’; the written word itself, for Plato, can only ever be ‘properly no more than an image’
of the ‘living word of knowledge.’ Writing as an ‘art’ in itself is always (no matter what is

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\(^{155}\) Ibid., p. 301.


\(^{157}\) “Phaedrus,” p. 300.

\(^{158}\) Ibid., p. 318.

\(^{159}\) Ibid., p. 324.

\(^{160}\) Ibid.
written) part of the world of ‘appearance’, and not ‘reality’. This can be seen in the main
discussion of writing in the *Phaedrus*, found towards the end of the dialogue, where
Socrates relates to Phaedrus the myth of the Egyptian King Thamus who was introduced to
the art of writing by the god Theuth, the inventor of other ‘arts’ such as arithmetic,
calculation, geometry, astronomy and dice (although, says Socrates, “his great discovery
was the use of letters”). Theuth brings his ‘arts’ to the king, who judges them and decides
which he will and will not select for the Egyptians:

[When] they came to letters, This, said Theuth, will make the
Egyptians wiser and give them better memories; it is a specific
both for the memory and for the wit. Thamus replied: O most
ingenious Theuth, the parent or inventor of an art is not always
the best judge of the utility or inutility of his own inventions to
the users of them... this discovery of yours will create
forgetfulness in the learners’ souls, because they will not use
their memories; they will trust to the *external written characters*
and not remember of themselves. The specific which you have
discovered is an aid not to memory, but to reminiscence, and you
give your disciples not truth, but only the *semblance of truth*;
they will be hearers of many things and will have learned
nothing; they will appear to be omniscient and will generally
know nothing; they will be tiresome company, having the show of
wisdom without the reality.\(^{161}\)

It appears that Socrates (or Plato), through the mouth of the Egyptian king, criticises
writing for being a ‘semblance’ of truth rather than a medium through which wisdom might
be conveyed. The idea of writing as a ‘semblance’ (or ‘simulation’) of truth is one that Plato
finds problematic about all the ‘imitative’ arts, as most famously articulated in the
*Republic*. Writing, like other ‘imitative’ arts such as painting, is an *eidōlon* – a copy of
reality – that distances the writer or the reader from the truth of what *really* is.\(^{162}\) As
Socrates explains to Phaedrus: “writing is unfortunately like painting; for the creations of
the painter have the attitude of life, and yet if you ask them a question they preserve a
solemn silence.”\(^{163}\)

It is for this reason that, in the *Phaedrus*, although Socrates is initially more
concerned to point out Lysias’ ‘sophistry’, he soon attributes Lysias’ lack of understanding
about the nature of reality to the fact that he is a *writer*: "That whether Lysias or any other
writer that ever was or will be, whether private man or statesman, proposes laws and so
becomes the author of a political treatise, fancying that there is any great certainty and

\(^{161}\) Ibid, p. 322. Emphasis mine.
\(^{162}\) As the conversation goes in the “Republic,” Book X: “Now let me ask you another question: Which
is the art of painting designed to be – an imitation of things as they are, or as they appear – of
appearance or of reality? Of appearance. Then the imitator, I said, is a long way off the truth, and can
do all things because he lightly touches on a small part of them, and that part an image.” (p. 311).
\(^{163}\) “Phaedrus”, p. 324.
clearness in his performance, the fact of his so writing is only a disgrace to him, whatever men may say. For not to know the nature of justice and injustice, and good and evil, and not to be able to distinguish the dream from the reality, cannot in truth be otherwise than disgraceful to him, even though he have the applause of the whole world.  " The problem, in other words, is not only that Lysias does not know the nature of 'justice and injustice, good and evil,' but also that, as a writer, he is unable to distinguish 'the dream from the reality.' He would be "a very simple person," says Socrates, "who should leave in writing or receive in writing any art under the idea that the written word would be intelligible or certain; or who deemed that writing was at all better than knowledge and recollection of the same matters."  

In contrast to the 'writer' Lysias, Socrates commends the person "who thinks that in the written word there is necessarily much which is not serious," and "who thinks that even the best of writings are but a reminiscence of what we know, and that only in principles of justice and goodness and nobility taught and communicated orally for the sake of instruction and graven in the soul, which is the true way of writing, is there clearness and perfection and seriousness, and that such principles are a man's own and his legitimate offspring; being, in the first place, the words which he finds in his own bosom; secondly, the brethren and descendents and relations of his others; – and who cares for them and no others – this is the right sort of man; and you and I, Phaedrus, would pray that we may become like him."  

Thus it is clear that, for Plato, 'principles of justice and goodness and nobility' can only be 'taught and communicated orally for the sake of instruction,' although there is some irony in his suggestion that this is the way that wisdom will be "graven in the soul."  

To all writers we must pose the following challenge, says Socrates: "if their compositions are based on knowledge of the truth, and they can defend or prove them, when they are put to the test, by spoken arguments, which leave their writings poor in comparison of them, then they are... worthy of a higher name, befitting the serious pursuit of their life."  

Writing, for Plato, because it is apparently a form of re-presentation, is also seen as a form of 'unreality.' Hence a dualistic distinction is made between 'reality' (conceived in a
very idealistic way), and its 'representations', against which a negative judgement in made. For Plato, an 'image' is the same as an 'illusion', and this is why he feels that all 'image-makers' – or 'artificers' – should be banned from the Republic. The apparent inability of any 'writer' to distinguish 'the dream from the reality' sounds remarkably similar to Baudrillard’s conception of writing expressed above. For Baudrillard, however, there is nothing 'real' outside the "circuit of signifiers" (not even a real "God", as we will see later), because 'reality' itself, has, for Baudrillard, become nothing more than a product of 'simulation'. In fact, not only has 'reality' become a simulation, for Baudrillard, but so has the 'representation' of reality. But what does Baudrillard mean by this?

The problem with Baudrillard’s notion of 'simulation' is that, rather than challenging the distinction between reality/representation by pointing out that this distinction is itself a rather metaphysical one, Baudrillard seems to appeal to an even more metaphysical understanding of 'simulation' as the dominating principle (or underlying structure) of contemporary society. Simulation is different to representation, says Baudrillard, in that simulation produces an illusion that there is something called 'reality', and, by extension, an illusion that there could ever be a 'representation' of this 'reality'. According to Baudrillard, we are living in a world where, "Simulation is no longer that of a territory, a referential being or a substance. It is the generation by models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal." Although "present-day simulators try to make the real, all the real, coincide with their simulation models,” says Baudrillard, this is impossible, as there is no longer any 'real' to compare the 'simulation' to. “This representational imaginary,” says Baudrillard, “disappears with simulation,” and with it, he says, “goes all of metaphysics” (although this is rather ironic, given that Baudrillard seems to hold a rather metaphysical conception of the principle of simulation itself, as something preceding both 'reality' and its 'representation'). Simulation, says Baudrillard, involves the “passage to a space whose curvature is no longer that of the real, nor of truth, the age of simulation thus begins with a liquidation of all referentials.” It is no longer a question of imitation, nor of reduplication, nor even of parody, says Baudrillard:

170 Ibid., p. 167.
171 Ibid.
short-circuits all its vicissitudes. Never again will the real have to be produced... A hyperreal henceforth sheltered from the imaginary, and from any distinction between the real and the imaginary.\textsuperscript{172}

In this and the chapters that follow, it should become clearer that the distinction between ‘reality’ and ‘representation’ is one that can be challenged through an appeal to the material and practical ‘actuality’ of human life, and not to some other metaphysical principle, such as ‘simulation’ (or, as we will see in the chapter that follows, a metaphysical principle such as Derrida’s \textit{diff\'erance}). Another important thing that will hopefully become apparent is that the metaphysical distinction between ‘reality’ and its supposed ‘representations’ is not only a false picture of the way things are, but it also prevents us from claiming words such as ‘illusion’ or even ‘idolatry’ in a critical sense. When the word ‘representation’, or even ‘simulation’ is used, for example, in a pejorative sense, as somehow opposed to ‘reality’, then it seems that, when this distinction is itself exposed as problematic, we are left with a dearth of \textit{critical} terms. Baudrillard, for example, not only feels that ‘simulation’ disrupts the relation between ‘reality’ and ‘representations’ (which are both simulated illusions), but, because he sees ‘reality’ and ‘representation’ in an evaluative sense, this means that ‘simulation’ apparently affects our ability to make critical judgements. Simulation, says Baudrillard, “threatens the difference between ‘true’ and ‘false’, between ‘real’ and ‘imaginary’. It is no longer a question of a false representation of reality (ideology), but of concealing the fact that the real is no longer real, and thus of saving the reality principle.” There is no longer ‘reality’, says Baudrillard, but only a \textit{nostalgia} for reality, and hence a “proliferation of myths of origin and signs of reality; of second-hand truth, objectivity and authenticity... a panic-stricken production of the real and the referential.”\textsuperscript{173}

As we will see below, Baudrillard also applies his ‘principle of simulation’ to a reading of Marx. Baudrillard feels that Marx’s iconoclasm is based on a critique of ‘representations’ as opposed to ‘reality’, although Baudrillard, as could be expected, feels that this critique of the ‘representations’ can be problematised by pointing out that there is no ‘reality’, or ‘representation’, for that matter, \textit{outside} of the principle of ‘simulation’. As we will see, however, this is a misinterpretation of Marx’s iconoclasm, which is not a critique of representations, but of the alienation and suffering that Marx feels characterises the

\textsuperscript{172} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{173} Ibid., p. 172.
modern capitalist world. It is really important to understand how problematic this misreading of Marx is. If Marx is read as defending ‘reality’ against its supposed ‘representations’, then it means that Marx’s iconoclasm is essentially flawed. In fact, it would mean that all iconoclasm is flawed, simply because it is interpreted in this way. We argue that Marx’s iconoclasm bears some resemblance to the biblical critique of idolatrous practices, and that, rather than Marx performing a misguided iconoclastic critique, it is those critics of Marx, such as Baudrillard, and other post-structuralist theorists, who have based their arguments on rather shaky grounds. We will explore this issue in Section 1.3, below.

In the meantime, we turn to some more troublesome condemnations of writing, based, not around a binary distinction between ‘reality’ and ‘representation’, but around the confusion of concepts such as ‘objectification’ and ‘alienation.’ Although the confusion between these two concepts does not rest on a binary distinction, as in the work of Plato, a similar mistake has been made, in that “alienation” and “objectification”, as more neutral descriptive (or even ontological) terms, are mistaken for their use in a more critical or pejorative sense. This can be seen in the (mis)appropriation of Hegel’s use of the word “alienation” (which he used in the sense of ‘self-expression’), and Marx’s use of the term “objectification” (similar in many ways to Hegel’s notion of ‘alienation’, although it is more praxeologically conceived, as we discussed in the preceding chapter). Like the terms ‘reality’ and ‘representation’, then, rather than using these terms in more neutral or descriptive ways, they are employed to articulate certain value judgements about things. It is not their ‘negative’ usage that is a problem per se, although becomes a problem when description is immediately transformed into criticism.

2.2. Writing, alienation, and objectification: A robe of speculative cobwebs

2.2.1. Hegel as the ‘first philosopher of writing’?

It appears that there could be no one with a more ‘Platonic’ conception of writing than the Jesuit scholar, Walter Ong. In a number of books published over the past few decades,
Ong has expressed his belief that the *Logos* – the ‘truth,’ or the Word of God – is best (or only) expressed through *speech.* “All reductions of the spoken word to non-auditory media, however necessary they may be, attenuate and debase it, as Plato so intensely felt.”¹⁷⁵ Ong believes that, “The word in its purest form, in its most human and most divine form, in its holiest form, the word which passes orally from man to man to deepen human relations, [is] the word in a world of sounds,” and he feels that, “*Sound is more real or existential than other sense objects, despite the fact that it is also more evanescent.* Sound itself is related to present actuality rather than to past or future. It must emanate from a source here and now discernibly active, with the result that involvement with sound is involvement with the present, with here-and-now existence and activity.”¹⁷⁶ *Voice,* according to Ong, “conveys presence as nothing else does,”¹⁷⁷ while “the contact of an oral culture with truth,” he says, “retains a reality which literate cultures achieve only reflexively and by dint of great conscious effort.”¹⁷⁸ Because “in its physical constitution as sound, the spoken word proceeds from the human interior and manifests human beings to one another as conscious interiors,” he argues, “as persons, the spoken word forms human beings into close-knit groups.”¹⁷⁹ Ong feels that, because of its ability to establish “personal presence,” the spoken word has “immediate religious significance, particularly in the Hebrew and Christian tradition.”¹⁸⁰

It is not a solely ‘Platonic’ picture of writing that Ong adheres to, however. Despite his mournful descriptions of a state of ‘orality’ that has long since passed away (in Western culture at least), Ong nevertheless believes that: “Alienation from a natural milieu can be good for us and indeed is in many ways essential for full human life. To live and to understand fully, we need not only proximity but also distance. Thus writing provides for consciousness as nothing else does.”¹⁸¹ Ong feels that, “To say writing is artificial is not to condemn it but to praise it. Like other artificial creations and indeed more than any other, it is utterly invaluable and indeed essential for the realization of fuller, interior, human potentials. Technologies are not mere exterior aids but also interior transformations of consciousness, and never more than when they affect the word. Such transformations can

¹⁷⁶ Ibid., pp. 92 & 111.
¹⁷⁷ Ibid., p. 114.
¹⁷⁸ Ibid., p. 33.
¹⁸⁰ Ibid., p. 113.
¹⁸¹ Ibid.
be uplifting. Writing heightens consciousness.”¹⁸² This obviously seems to be a very Hegelian standpoint, and indeed, Ong mentions that:

Since at least the time of Hegel, awareness has been growing that human consciousness evolves… Writing introduces division and alienation, but a higher unity as well. It intensifies the sense of self and fosters more conscious interaction between persons. Writing is consciousness-raising… Orality-literacy dynamics enter integrally into the modern evolution of consciousness toward both greater interiorization and greater openness.¹⁸³

Without writing, says Ong, “human consciousness cannot achieve its fuller potentials, cannot produce other beautiful and powerful creations,” and in this sense, he says, “orality needs to produce and is destined to produce writing.”¹⁸⁴ The idea of a ‘division and alienation, but a higher unity as well’ is, as seen in the preceding chapter, an idea that can be found in full force in the work of some of the German philosophers of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the most famous of which is Hegel.

Significantly, Hegel has applied the dialectical process of ‘alienation’ and ‘de-alienation’ (or what he terms Entäusserung and Aufhebung) to his theory of alphabetic writing, which he sees as the most ‘alienated’ form of language (that is, as opposed to speech, or hieroglyphic script, for example). In Part III of the Encyclopaedia of the Philosophical Sciences,¹⁸⁵ Hegel explains how language emerges from the attempt of the inner ‘dark pit’ of intelligence (Intelligenz) to find an appropriate outward expression for its conceptions: “The path of intelligence in representations is to render the immediacy inward, to invest itself with intuitive action in itself, and at the same time to get rid of the subjectivity of the inwardness, and inwardly divest itself of it; so as to be in itself in an externality of its own.”¹⁸⁶ This merging of intelligent intuition with the image that ‘expresses’ it is the job of the imagination (Phantasie): “Productive imagination is the centre in which the universal and being, one’s own and what is picked up, internal and external, are completely welded into one… it is not till creative imagination that intelligence ceases to be the vague mine and the universal, and becomes an individuality, a concrete subjectivity, in which the self-reference is defined both to being and to universality.”¹⁸⁷ Nevertheless, the images ‘welded’ to intuitions through the imagination, although

¹⁸² Ibid.
¹⁸³ Ibid., p. 178.
¹⁸⁴ Ibid., 14.
¹⁸⁶ Ibid., § 451
¹⁸⁷ Ibid., §457.
providing the intelligence with some form of external expression, are still fleeting, which is why a more ‘externalised’ form of expression is sought in the symbol (Symbol) and later the sign (Zeichen). The latter – the sign – is considered the most effective form of expression for Hegel, because of its wholly conventional – and therefore, if we take the dialectic described above into consideration, more ‘alienated’ – character, which Hegel describes as like a pyramid containing an ‘alien’ soul. Hegel is not critical of the ‘alienated’ nature of the written sign; in fact, he finds it praiseworthy (for Hegel, as we explored in the previous chapter, the more self-alienated the Finite Mind, the better chance it has of reaching self-consciousness):

The progress of the vocal language depends most closely on the habit of alphabetical writing; by means of which only does vocal language acquire the precision and purity of its articulation... Alphabetic writing is on all accounts the more intelligent: in it the word – the mode, peculiar to the intellect, of uttering its ideas most worthily – is brought to consciousness and made an object of reflection... What has been said shows the inestimable and not sufficiently appreciated educational value of learning to read and write an alphabetic character. It leads the mind from the sensibly concrete image to attend to the more formal structure of the vocal word and its abstract elements, and contributes much to give stability and independence to the inward realm of mental life.

It should be clear then, as to what Ong means when he says that writing introduces ‘division and alienation, but a higher unity as well’, and how this relates to Hegel’s conception of the necessity of alienation in his philosophical system as a whole (which, for Hegel, of course, is not simply a philosophical, but an ontological dialectic towards self-consciousness).

However, there is a difference between Ong’s and Hegel’s conceptions of writing, in that, whereas Hegel understands all signification in terms of ‘alienation’, for Ong it is only writing that has this characteristic. Furthermore, whereas Hegel uses the word “alienation” in a more descriptive sense, Ong uses it to make a negative judgement about writing, which he sees as somehow opposed to ‘reality’. As Ong explains: “The spoken word is primary... and yet from the start it was destined – or, in another way, doomed – to be supplemented with all the devices and even gadgetry which have reduced it more and

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188 Ibid., §458. As Hegel continues: “The sign is some immediate intuition, representing a totally different import from what naturally belongs to it; it is the pyramid into which an alien soul [eine fremde Seele] has been conveyed, and where it is conserved... Intelligence therefore gives proof of wider choice and ampler authority in the use of intuitions when it treats them as designatory (significative) rather than as symbolical.”

189 Ibid., §459.
more to space."\textsuperscript{190} For Ong, not only is speech a more ‘real’ form of communication (in the valuative sense of ‘more authentic’), but it is also more holy and more connected to the internal ‘truth’ of consciousness. Ong therefore sees the written word in contrast to a realm of ‘inner purity’ – a realm that he sees as immediately and fully present through the voice, the medium of the logos – against which writing is an ‘alienated’ form of distraction, derivation, deviation, and even corruption. Ong actually believes that, “Thought is nested in speech,”\textsuperscript{191} and that, in an oral community, “pure interiors (persons) communicate with one another largely by voice.”\textsuperscript{192}

Writing, for Ong, is one of the ‘devices’ that has ‘reduced the spoken word to space.’ Therefore, although he considers that the alienation induced by writing might ultimately have positive effects, he nevertheless believes that speech is a far more desirable medium. For Hegel, however, ‘alienation’ is a feature of all human expression, including speech, and he therefore thinks that there is no reason why writing, in particular, should be judged negatively. Although Hegel notes that the “institution of the natural is the vocal note,”\textsuperscript{193} he also refers to speech as a type of Entäusserung (it is for this reason, as we will understand in the chapter that follows, why Derrida refers to him as the “first philosopher of writing.”\textsuperscript{194}) We also know, however, that Marx was critical of Hegel’s understanding of Entäusserung as an expression of Spirit, and that he transformed Hegel’s notion of ‘externalisation’ praxeologically. We now turn to Marx’s praxeological ontology, which has been appropriated, not altogether faithfully, by a number of critics of writing.

\textbf{2.2.2. Writing and Reification: A Marxist critique of literacy?}

As the objectification of social labour, all commodities are crystallisations of the same substance... [Money] is a crystallisation of the exchange-value of commodities and is formed in the exchange process.\textsuperscript{195}

What is distinctively human is not the capacity for language. It is the crystallisation of language in writing.\textsuperscript{196}

\textsuperscript{190} Presence of the Word, p. 320.
\textsuperscript{191} Ibid., p. 138.
\textsuperscript{192} Ibid., p. 127.
\textsuperscript{193} Hegel, § 459
\textsuperscript{194} Of Grammatology, p. 35.
\textsuperscript{195} Marx, "Critique of Political Economy," MECW, p. 271ff
\textsuperscript{196} Straw Dogs, p. 56.
As we saw in the previous chapter, the differences between Marx’s and Hegel’s notions of ‘alienation’ are not altogether obvious on first appearance, simply because Marx to a large extent appropriates Hegel’s notion of Entäusserung, which he does not see as ‘alienation’ in a critical sense, but as a feature of all human activity. But whereas Marx would acknowledge that Entäusserung (or the more praxeologically conceived Vergegenständlichung) is a feature of all human activity, Entfremdung is something totally different altogether. Entfremdung is a critical description of the state of a society in which men are dominated by forces of their own creation; that is, when man’s manufactured things confront him as alien powers. The attribution of power or spiritual value to things that are really only manufactured objects, is usually described as Verdinglichung, or ‘reification’.

The problem with the ‘reification’ of exchange-value, for Marx, for example, is that people (or their labour) become calculated and quantified according to this exchange-value, which means that they become the slaves of their own creation. This notion of reification has played an important role in the work of post-Marxists such as Max Weber, and the writers of the Frankfurt School, who are concerned to point out the dangers of the ‘reification’ (and accompanying ‘rationalization’) of society. It should be clear, however, that the phenomena characterised by these critical concepts: alienation, reification, and rationalization, are not the same thing as the ‘objectification’ (or Vergegenständlichung) that characterises all human labour and expression. ‘Alienation’, as we saw in the previous chapter, is a critical description of a wrong sort of practice, and it is in this sense that we can see the similarities between Marx’s critical work, and other more ‘religious’ approaches to ‘idolatry’. There is a problem, however, in that the word “objectification” is the usual English translation of both Vergegenständlichung and Entfremdung as found in the work of Marx, and this leads to some very problematic arguments and ideas regarding the nature of human practices. The critique of metaphysics, for example, as an ‘objectifying’ attitude to the world (that is, treating the world as an ‘object’), is very different to the idea of objectification as ‘externalised expression’, in a more neutral descriptive sense.

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197 This notion of the ‘calculability’ and ‘quantification’ of everything in modern society has formed an important part of Max Weber’s work, and he describes the modern world as dominated by the “impersonal and economically rationalized (and therefore ethically irrational) character of purely economic relationships.”

198 “Objectification” is the English translation for, amongst other things, Hegel’s Entäusserung, Feuerbach’s notion of ‘psychological projection’, Marx’s notion of ‘expressive practice’, as well as Marx’s (or Lukacs’) notion of ‘reification.’ ‘Objectification’ has also come to be used in a sense similar
The conflation of the cluster of concepts that are often translated as ‘objectification’ can be seen in relation to the critique of writing as a form of ‘objectification.’ Yet although Marx might agree that writing is a form of ‘external expression’, what would he think of the description of writing as a form of alienation, or even a form of reification? For Marx, this would be totally ludicrous. Nevertheless, this is precisely the argument that a number of critics of writing have used. Once again, this has led to some very strange ideas, not only of writing, but of ‘reification’, or even ‘alienation’, as things that need to be criticised. Nevertheless, it seems that this conflation is more widespread than would be imagined. In this section, we will examine a few cases of this misconception of both writing, and the real problems of ‘reification’ and ‘alienation.’ We will not be offering any extended critique of these misconceptions. It is hoped that, by simply ‘listing’ a series of misguided critiques and conflated concepts, the problems involved will simply ‘speak for themselves.’

Jacques Derrida, as we will see in Chapter 3 below, shows how what he sees as a ‘Marxist’ critique of writing, can often be shown as nothing more than a form of ‘logocentrism.’ This ‘Marxist’ critique of writing can be seen in the work of the theologian Catherine Pickstock, who actually believes that writing is “structurally parallel to capital,” because it involves the “standardization of exchange,” and the “homogenization and rationalization of human interaction, promoting transactions employed for purposes of a surfeit of advantages, preservation, and accumulation.”199 Like capital, says Pickstock, writing can be “kept as an investment for the future.”200 The main thing to note is that Pickstock (whose work will be discussed in Chapter 4, below) believes that writing is ‘structurally similar’ to capital, because it is an ‘objectified’ medium of exchange. Derrida himself identifies a ‘logocentric’ Marxism in the work of the anthropologist Levi-Strauss, who, according to Derrida, is offering more of a Platonic (or Rousseauist) critique of writing than a Marxist one. Although Levi-Strauss himself does not offer a sustained examination to Weber’s ‘rationalization’ of society, where people are treated as objects, rather than as human beings. This conception of the ‘objectification’ of people has formed an important part of the work of Michel Foucault, who has documented the various ways in which people have been ‘objectified’ throughout history. Foucault examines how people are ‘objectified’ through social division and surveillance (cf. Discipline and Punish: the Birth of the Prison), through discursive classification (cf. Archaeology of Knowledge, and Madness and Civilisation), and through self-discipline (‘self-objectification’) (cf. The History of Sexuality). The word ‘objectification’ has also come to play an important role in the social theory of Pierre Bourdieu, as we will examine in Chapter 5, below. For a helpful discussion of the various different uses of the word ‘objectification’, see Miller, Daniel. Material Culture and Mass Consumption (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1987) (Note, however, that Miller is more interested in understanding ‘objectification’ as a feature of all material culture, that is, as a form of ‘externalised expression’, and he therefore does not examine its use in a critical sense).

200 Ibid., p. 9.
of the effects of literacy on a society, it is a theme that is touched upon throughout his oeuvre. In his essay, “A Writing Lesson,” in *Tristes Tropiques*, for example, Levi-Strauss describes an episode in which the chief of the Nambikwara pretended to be able to write while the anthropologist was exchanging goods with the tribe. As Levi-Strauss comments, “the same individual is often both scribe and money-lender; not just because he needs to be able to read and write to carry on his business, but because he thus happens to be, on two different accounts, someone who has a hold over others.” Writing, says Levi-Strauss, “seems to have favoured the exploitation of human beings rather than their enlightenment,” and it is this exploitation, he says, that “has made it possible to assemble thousands of workers and force them to carry out exhausting tasks.” He even goes so far as to suggest that the primary function of written communication is to “facilitate slavery.”

Jack Goody considers himself the ‘intellectual heir’ of Claude Lévi-Strauss, and the title of his famous *Domestication of the Savage Mind* is based on the French structuralist’s most well-known work (“If we wish to speak of the ‘savage mind’,” says Goody, then we have to consider thatwriting was one of “the instruments of its domestication.”) Although the conflation of Marxist concepts such as ‘objectification’ and ‘alienation’ is implicit in Levi-Strauss’s work, Goody and Watt explicitly describe writing as a form of ‘objectification.’ They claim that “the process of decontextualisation” is “intrinsic to writing, not merely as an external activity but as an internal one as well.” Writing, because of its ‘objectified’ (in the sense of ‘externalised’) form, according to Goody and Watt, favours an “increase in scope of critical activity, and hence the rationality, scepticism, and logic,” that apparently characterises the Western world. It is writing, they say, that encourages the “process that enabled man to stand back from his creation and examine it in a more abstract, generalised ‘rational’ way.” The ‘rationalization’ of society, Goody argues, is due to the fact that writing is “‘objective’, ‘neutral’, ‘impersonal’,”

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202 Ibid., p. 369.
203 Ibid.
204 Ibid. Emphasis mine.
206 “Writing, by objectifying words, and by making them and their meaning available for much more prolonged and intensive scrutiny than is possible orally,” says Goody, “encourages private thought.” (*Literacy in Traditional Societies*, p. 62).
207 Ibid., p. 159.
208 Ibid., p. 37.
as far as human relations themselves are concerned,” and that it is for this reason that “there is a direction, especially in the areas of what has been called ‘control over nature’ and ‘the growth of knowledge’, and this movement is related to developments in the technology of the intellect, to changes in the means of communication and, specifically, to the introduction of writing.” Goody and Watt believe that “Max Weber saw as the essential differentiating factor of western civilisation the ‘formal rationality’ of its institutions,” and that “Weber’s differentiation in some respects parallels the differentiation made above between oral and alphabetic culture, and in many places he anticipates part of the argument advanced [here].” In a follow-up book, in which he claims to have tempered some of his more radical ideas about writing, Goody nevertheless continues to state that he believes that the written word leads to a more ‘objective’ frame of mind because it is “external to the actor in a way spoken language is not.” Goody actually goes so far as to say that he thinks literacy “fosters the alienation that has characterised so many writers and philosophers of the West since the last century.”

This idea of an increased sense of ‘objectivity’ or ‘rationality’ that results from the apparently ‘objectified’ nature of writing is something that can be found throughout contemporary literature on the nature and effects of literacy. David Olson sees the ‘objectified’ nature of writing as the prerequisite for the development of modern science, because, with writing, he says, “something was given, invariant, and autonomous about a text and that givenness could be contrasted with the interpretations of a text which were subjective, fallible, and the product of the imagination.” The result, he says, was “modern science, science built on the notion of a discontinuity between observation and inference, facts and theory, claims and evidence. Modern scientific epistemology was a by-product of literacy.” Olson not only sees writing as linked to empiricism, however, but also to modern philosophical rationalism. The ‘hermeneutic logic’ caused by writing, says Olson,
fostered a new sense of “subjectivity,” that provided the basis for "Descartes’ mind-body dualism and the priority of the mental.”

Catherine Pickstock, as we will see in Chapter 4 below, also believes that there is a link between writing and the Cartesian subject, and she sees modern metaphysics as a direct result of the ‘reification’ of metaphysical ideas that writing apparently induces. This is something argued by Walter Ong, who also believes that writing (and print) “effectively reified the word, and, with it, noetic activity.” The French philosopher and social theorist Pierre Bourdieu is also critical of the reification of abstract ideas such as ‘the mind’, or even ‘language’ – which are conceived as ‘substances’ or ‘entities’ floating somewhere in the ether – and he also sees this reification as a consequence of writing. He is particularly critical of the work of the linguist Ferdinand de Saussure, whose idea of langue as the abstract structure of language is something that has led to a number of fallacies in terms of the attempted theories to work out how living people ‘apply’ langue in every instance of speech. For Bourdieu, however, langue itself is a product of writing: “Language as conceived by Saussure,” he says, is “an intellectual instrument and an object of analysis, is indeed a dead, written, foreign language,” in that it is “a self-sufficient system, detached from real usage and totally stripped of its functions.” Bourdieu notes how, when writing is used in theoretical and scientific practices, it allows free reign to “the objective and objectifying observer who, like a stage manager playing at will with all the possibilities offered by the objectifying instruments in order to bring the object closer or to move it further away, to enlarge or reduce it, imposes on the object his own norms of instruction, as if in a dream of power.” The reader, says Bourdieu, “is someone who can do nothing with the language that he or she takes as object, except study it. This is the principle of an altogether general bias… which is part of the so-called ‘theoretical relation to the object.’”

Bourdieu refers to writing as an “instrument of objectification”, and sees it as part of the problematic ‘objectivist’ attitude in the social sciences: “It took me a long time to understand that the logic of practice can only be grasped through constructs which destroy it as such, so long as one fails to consider the nature, or rather the effects, of instruments of objectification such as genealogies, diagrams, synoptic tables, maps, etc., among which,
thanks to the work of Jack Goody (1977), I would now include mere transcription in writing. 220 The “privilege of totalization” that we find in academic work, says Bourdieu, presupposes “recourse to the instruments of eternization – writing and all the other techniques for recording and analysing, theories, methods, diagrams, etc.” 221 Bourdieu explicitly links writing to the differences between apparently more ‘theoretical’ literate people, and their more ‘practical’ oral counterparts. Literate people, says Bourdieu, have “already emerged from the silence of the ritual praxis which does not aim to be interpreted, and they place themselves within a hermeneutic logic.” 222 It is clear that the ‘poet’ in what have been called ‘oral’ societies, says Bourdieu, “cannot objectify his practice or himself, above all because he does not possess the written word and everything that makes the written word possible.” 223 According to Bourdieu, in non-literate societies, “knowledge never has the objectivity it derives from objectification in writing and the consequent freedom with respect to the body.” 224 It could be shown, says Bourdieu, “that the shift from a mode of conserving the tradition based solely on oral discourse to a mode of accumulation based on writing, and, beyond this, the whole process of rationalization that is made possible by (inter alia) objectification in writing, are accompanied by a far-reaching transformation of the whole relationship to the body, or more precisely of the use made of the body in the production and reproduction of cultural artefacts.” 225

Like a number of the other theorists whose work we have examined in this chapter, then, it seems that Bourdieu also believes that the written word is “predisposed by its permanence to become an object of analysis, control, comparison and reflection.” 226 Bourdieu also believes that the ‘objectified’ nature of writing can be associated with Weber’s theory of rationalization, 227 and he goes so far as to describe writing as a form of ‘capital’, which he also defines in terms of ‘objectification.’ Literacy, he argues, enables a society “to accumulate the culture previously conserved in the incorporated state and, by the same token, to perform the primitive accumulation of cultural capital, the total or

220 Ibid., p. 11.
221 Ibid., p. 83.
222 Ibid., p. 99. Note that the so-called ‘father’ of hermeneutics as a branch of study – William Dilthey – refers to the text as an ‘objectification’ of human life and experience (see, for example, Dilthey, “Development of Hermeneutics,” in Selected Writings. Ed. H. P. Rickman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), pp. 149–64) – although it should be clear that this use of ‘objectification’ is in line with the German Idealist notion of Entäusserung, and does not imply the ‘mastery’ or ‘control’ intended by Marx’s theory of alienation or Weber’s theory of rationalization.
223 Ibid., p. 80.
224 Logic of Practice, p. 72 (italics mine)
225 Ibid., p. 73.
226 Ibid., p. 301 (Note 4)
227 Ibid., p. 73.
partial monopolizing of the society’s symbolic resources in religion, philosophy, art and science, through the monopolization of the instruments for appropriation of these resources (writing, reading, and other decoding techniques), henceforward preserved not in memories but in texts." It should be clear, however, that this idea of writing as a form of ‘reification’ (or even ‘rationalization’) is not a position that could be attributed to Marx, for whom capital is not described as a form of ‘objectification’ in the sense of Vergegenständlichung. Although Marx might agree that writing is a form of Vergegenständlichung, he would not conflate this with the conception of ‘objectification’ as ‘reification’, ‘rationalization’, or ‘alienation’, which are pejorative terms, or negative judgements. Alienation, for Marx, is a result of private property and the division of labour, which results in a need for abstract and calculative measures of control and social systematization. It is the treatment of people as though they are the ‘objects’ of this system that leads to the experience of ‘dehumanisation’.

It is this distinction between objectification and alienation that Lukács is concerned to defend. According to Lukács:

objectification is indeed a phenomenon that cannot be eliminated from human life in society. If we bear in mind that every externalisation of an object in practice (and hence, too, in work) is an objectification, and that that every human expression including speech objectifies human thoughts and feelings, then it is clear that we are dealing with a universal mode of commerce between men. And in so far as this is the case, objectification is a natural phenomenon; the true is as much an objectification as the false, liberation as much as enslavement.

Hence Lukács feels that “every human expression including speech objectifies human thoughts and feelings.” It is only when the “objectified forms in society acquire functions that bring the essence of man into conflict with his existence,” says Lukács; “only when man’s nature is subjugated, deformed and crippled can we speak of an objective societal condition of alienation and, as an inexorable consequence, of all the subjective marks of an internal alienation.”

It should be clear that, in this distinction between Vergegenständlichung and Entfremdung, Marx has avoided the absurdity of conflating these two concepts. It is this distinction, that would make it impossible for Marx to ever see capital as ‘structurally similar’ to writing, or any other ‘objectified’ cultural artefact or structure.

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228 Ibid, p. 125.
229 History and Class Consciousness, p. xxiv.
230 Ibid.
2.3. The heirs of Marx? Iconoclasm vs. iconophobia

The term ‘fetishism’ almost has a life of its own. Instead of functioning as a metalanguage for the magical thinking of others, it turns against those who use it, and surreptitiously exposes their own magical thinking.  

For Marx, then, alienation is a problem of alienated, and alienating, practice. One part of Marx’s iconoclasm consists in pointing out that man is dominated by objects, forces, and practices of his own creation. Hence, even when Marx does use iconoclastic rhetoric, it is clear that he is not critical of images, but that he is critical of the self-delusion fostered by alienated practices. It is problematic, then, that a number of avowedly Marxist or post-Marxist thinkers feel justified in offering a critique of images, or ‘representation’ more generally, on ‘Marxist’ grounds. This ‘Marxist’ critique of representation is very closely connected to the conflation of Marxist concepts such as objectification and reification. For Guy Debord, for example, the problem of reification is considered a problem of the distinction between visual ‘representation’ and ‘reality’. It is this argument that we find in his most famous work, *The Society of the Spectacle*. Despite claims that the word ‘spectacle’ is a far more inclusive term than many interpreters realise, it is clear that ‘spectacle’ is linked to the ‘visual’, or at least to the ‘image’. Debord sees both philosophical and economic reification as a problem of the ‘spectacle’: “The spectacle inherits all the weaknesses of the Western philosophical project which undertook to comprehend activity in terms of the categories of seeing; furthermore, it is based on the incessant spread of the precise technical rationality which grew out of this thought. The spectacle does not realize philosophy, it philosophizes reality. The concrete life of everyone has been degraded into a speculative universe.” Despite his claim that, “The spectacle is not a collection of images, but a social relation among people, mediated by images,” there are a number of instances where it is not difficult to see how someone like

233 As Steven Best and Douglas Kellner have explained: “‘Spectacle’ for Debord is a complex term which ‘unifies and explains a great diversity of apparent phenomena.’(§10) In one sense, it refers to a media and consumer society, organized around the consumption of images, commodities, and staged events, but the concept also refers to the vast institutional and technical apparatus of contemporary capitalism, and all the means and methods power employs, outside of direct force, which relegate subjects passive, and obscure the nature and effects of capitalism’s power and deprivations.” (the article referenced here can be found at http://www.uta.edu/huma/illuminations/best6.htm)
234 *Society of the Spectacle*, §19.
235 Ibid., §4.
Baudrillard, inspired by the work of Debord, could describe something like the ‘*simulacrum*’ as an autonomous realm of signs and images unconnected to any ‘real’ products or social relations at all. The spectacle, says Debord, is “capital to such a degree of accumulation that it becomes an image.”²³⁶

Debord sees a capitalist society as one which “reaches its absolute fulfilment in the spectacle, where the tangible world is replaced by a selection of images which exist above it, and which simultaneously impose themselves as the tangible par excellence.”²³⁷ In societies where capitalist conditions of production prevail, says Debord, “all of life presents itself as an immense accumulation of spectacles. Everything that was directly lived has moved away into a representation.”²³⁸ The problem of ‘lived life moving away into representation’ is also something that Debord links to *writing*, which is, of course, a visual medium. According to Debord, the ‘mediation’ of written representation can be counterposed to the ‘unmediated’ perceptions of *oral* dialogue: “The spectacle, as a tendency to make one see the world by means of various specialized mediations (it can no longer be grasped directly), naturally finds vision to be the privileged human sense which the sense of touch was for other epochs; the most abstract, the most mystifiable sense corresponds to the generalized abstraction of present-day society... It is the opposite of dialogue. Wherever there is independent representation, the spectacle reconstitutes itself.”²³⁹ Unlike oral dialogue, which Debord sees as an ‘unmediated’ form of communication, *writing* is conceived as a “mediation between consciousnesses.”²⁴⁰ The idea that there is a link between writing and the ‘society of the spectacle’, or between writing and the development of what has been called a ‘visual society’, will be explored in more detail in Chapter 6, below.

This notion that we are living in a ‘society of the spectacle’ has been linked to the problem of ‘idolatry’, even in the currently popular field of ‘visual culture’ studies. In the introduction to a volume on visual culture, Jessica Evans notes that fear of the image, or the sense of the image as a powerful, potentially destructive thing, is an attitude that can be found in the Bible, where “God forbade the making of graven images of Himself lest the worship of what we would today call His ‘simulacrum’ would substitute for true worship.”²⁴¹

²³⁶ Ibid., §34.
²³⁷ Ibid., §36.
²³⁸ Ibid., §1.
²³⁹ Ibid., §18.
²⁴⁰ Ibid., §131.
This apparent link between idolatry and the dangers of the 'simulacrum' is one that Baudrillard has meditated upon at length. What is interesting is the way that Baudrillard criticises Marx's iconoclasm through his notion of 'simulation'. Marx, according to Baudrillard, is critical of 'images' of reality, although Baudrillard, as we have seen, feels that 'reality' itself is nothing more than its own 'image'. Baudrillard is not the only theorist to have read Marx's iconoclasm in this way. W.J.T Mitchell argues in his essay, "The Rhetoric of Iconoclasm," that Marx's iconoclasm takes the form of a critique of ideological and fetishistic images: "ideology and fetishism are both varieties of idolatry, one mental, the other material, and both emerge from an iconoclastic critique. The difference between the two Marxes, then, may be something as important – or as trivial – as the difference between two sorts of images that attract superstitious devotion, the shadowy optical projections in the camera obscura and the rude 'stocks and stones' worshipped by primitive savages. If we could clarify the relation of these two sorts of idols, we might be in a position to better understand the continuity and development of Marx's thought."\(^2\)

But is Marx's iconoclastic rhetoric really directed against images? And, more than this, is it directed against images, as opposed to the 'reality' they are supposed to portray? This is certainly not the case. Mitchell himself is aware that, for Marx, the "'horror' of fetishism was not just that it involved an illusory, figurative act of treating material objects as if they were people, but that this transfer of consciousness to 'stocks and stones' seemed to drain the humanity of the idolater."\(^3\) Marx is telling the nineteenth-century reader, says Mitchell, that the material basis of modern, civilized, rational political economy is structurally equivalent to that which is most inimical to modern consciousness, and that, while modern capitalism sees itself as 'rational' critique of fetishism and gift exchange in pre-modern societies (and therefore defines itself as an iconoclasm, and sets itself the task of destroying traditional fetishes), it could itself be criticised from an iconoclastic perspective (which, indeed, is Marx's self-appointed task). For Marx, says Mitchell, "commodity fetishism is an iconoclastic monotheism that destroys all other gods."\(^4\) As we have discussed in Chapter 1 above, Marx is concerned with the 'idolatries' of a society characterised by alienation, exploitation, and reification; he is not concerned

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\(^3\) Ibid., p. 187.
\(^4\) Ibid., p. 190.
\(^5\) Ibid., p. 199.
with ‘images’, or any other form of ‘representation,’ conceived as somehow metaphysically opposed to ‘reality’.

Why then, does Mitchell immediately associate ‘idolatry’ with the ‘image’? It seems that he has taken a wrong step in describing Marx’s iconoclastic work in this way, and this is something that needs to be challenged. Mitchell feels, for example, that, although Marx is critical of ‘images’, he nevertheless produces conceptual ‘images’ of his own, that might be approached iconoclastically themselves. As Mitchell notes, “the history of the use of this particular weapon suggests that it comes back to haunt those who forget this history.”

The problem, says Mitchell, is that the iconoclast prefers to think that he worships non-images of any sort, but when pressed, he is generally content with the rather different claim that his images are ‘purer’ or ‘truer’ than those of the idolaters he is criticising. Most have tried to have it both ways, says Mitchell: “repudiating the ‘idols of the mind’ worshipped by some competing model of consciousness, and embracing some new sort of image that contains guarantees against mystification and idolatry,” although it is very difficult, he argues, for this rhetoric “not to consume itself.” Mitchell feels that an iconoclastic approach to the ‘image’, while ignoring the ‘images’ that one defends, forms an ‘iconoclastic chain’ that can be found throughout the history of iconoclasm: “the repudiated image is stigmatized by notions such as artifice, illusion, vulgarity, irrationality; and the new image (which is often declared not to be an image at all) is honoured by the titles of nature, reason, and enlightenment.”

It is the failure to realise that his own ‘images’ can be approached iconoclastically, says Mitchell, that has “crippled Marxist thought.”

The problem with this conception of the “ritual familiarity” of the iconoclastic ‘chain’, however, is that ‘idolatry’ (or even ‘fetishism’, for that matter), is not necessarily (or ever) a problem that revolves around the ‘image’, especially if this ‘image’ is conceived as somehow metaphysically distinct from the ‘reality’ it is supposed to represent. Marx’s critique of ‘idolatry’, if we can describe his iconoclastic targets in these terms, involves the critique of an alienated society that has led to the exploitation and suffering of people. His iconoclasm is based, not on a critique of ‘representation’, but on a belief in what it is to be ‘essentially human’, and his awareness that contemporary practices are a perversion of

246 Ibid., p. 205.
247 Ibid., pp. 164 & 203.
248 Ibid., p. 165.
249 Ibid., p. 163.
this human potentiality. It seems, in fact, that Mitchell has forgotten his own observation that ideology and fetishism are both "emblems of capitalism in action, one at the level of consciousness, the other in the world of objects and social relations.\textsuperscript{250}

It is only through this misconception of the real problem of idolatry, that Mitchell can see a similarity between Marx's iconoclasm, and Baudrillard's apparent fear of what he refers to as the "evil demon of images." Mitchell's critique of Baudrillard as a rather hypocritical iconophobiac, is, nevertheless, not as misguided as his attempt to accuse Marx of a similar crime. As we have already mentioned in this chapter, Baudrillard sees 'reality' as dominated by a principle of 'simulation'. There seems to be a tension in Baudrillard's work, however, as to whether he thinks that the 'simulacrum' is a more recent social development, or whether he thinks this is something with much more distant historical origins (or, indeed, whether he thinks that 'reality' has always been 'simulated'). As he states in "Symbolic Exchange and Death", for example: "Today, the entire system is fluctuating in indeterminacy, all of reality is absorbed by the hyperreality of the code and of simulation. It is now a principle of simulation, and not of reality, that regulates social life."\textsuperscript{251} However, while here it seems that this "hyperreality" is a problem for today, in some of his other works, Baudrillard seems to be saying that reality has always been 'hyperreal.' In his essay "Simulations and Simulacra," for example, Baudrillard argues that the problem of simulation can be traced back to biblical times. He claims that the problem of simulation "goes back to religion and the simulacrum of divinity," and that even the Second Commandment can in fact be interpreted as: "I forbade any simulacrum in the temples because the divinity that breathes life into nature cannot be represented."\textsuperscript{252} But is this really how the biblical iconoclasts understood the sin of idolatry? In what ways can the problem of 'idolatry' be conceived in terms of some sort of metaphysical conception of the dangers of 'simulation'?

Baudrillard in fact argues that the biblical iconoclasts were radical and courageous before their time, in that they knew that God did not exist apart from his simulated images. According to Baudrillard, the idea that 'God' exists apart from his simulacra, is an illusion, and he feels that only the truly courageous can destroy simulacra and face the fact

\textsuperscript{250} Ibid., p. 162.
\textsuperscript{252} "Simulacra and Simulations," p. 169.
that nothing exists behind them. This is, he argues, "precisely what was feared by the Iconoclasts, whose millennial quarrel is still with us today." \(^{253}\)

Their rage to destroy images rose precisely because they sensed this omnipotence of simulacra, this facility they have of erasing God from the consciousnesses of people, and the overwhelming, destructive truth which they suggest: that ultimately there has never been any God; that only simulacra exist; indeed that God himself has only ever been his own simulacrum. Had they been able to believe that images only occulted or masked the Platonic idea of God, there would have been no reason to destroy them. One can live with the idea of a distorted truth. But their metaphysical despair came from the idea that the images concealed nothing at all, and that in fact they were not images, such as the original model would have made them, but actually perfect simulacra forever radiant with their own fascination. But this death of the divine referential has to be exorcised at all cost. \(^{254}\)

For Baudrillard, ‘God’ is always nothing more than a simulation, a sign representing nothing. As Baudrillard argues, perhaps what has always been at stake is “the murderous capacity of images: murderers of the real; murderers of their own model as the Byzantine icons could murder the divine identity. To this murderous capacity is opposed the dialectical capacity of representations as a visible and intelligible mediation of the real.” As he continues:

> All of Western faith and good faith was engaged in this wager on representation: that a sign could refer to the depth of meaning, that a sign could exchange for meaning and that something could guarantee this exchange. God, of course. But what if God himself can be simulated, that is to say, reduced to the signs which attest his existence? Then the whole system becomes weightless; it is no longer anything but a gigantic simulacrum: not unreal, but a simulacrum, never again exchanging for what is real, but exchanging in itself, in an uninterrupted circuit without reference or circumference. So it is with simulation. \(^{255}\)

We could say, says Baudrillard, that “the iconoclasts possessed the most modern and adventurous minds, since, underneath the idea of the apparition of God in the mirror of images, they already enacted his death and his disappearance in the epiphany of his representations (which they perhaps knew no longer represented anything, and that they were purely a game, but that this was precisely the greatest game – knowing also that it is dangerous to unmask images, since they dissimulate the fact that there is nothing behind them).” \(^{256}\) While Baudrillard therefore seems to give iconoclasts a backhanded compliment, this is nevertheless based on his severe misunderstanding, not only of the practice of image-making, but also of the history and practice of iconoclasm as a reaction against

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\(^{253}\) Ibid.
\(^{254}\) Ibid.
\(^{255}\) Ibid., p. 170.
\(^{256}\) Ibid., p. 169.
idolatry. As our investigation in the previous chapter tried to show, the ‘idols’ that are the
target of iconoclastic critique, are not problematic because they are ‘signs’ (or
‘simulations’) of God; they are problematic because they are worshipped in place of God.

It is unclear, furthermore, as to whether Baudrillard is ultimately critical, or admiring
of what he understands as ‘simulations’, or ‘images’. On the one hand, as we have seen,
he thinks of those ancient iconoclasts who have realised the ‘simulated’ nature of reality,
as having the most “modern and adventurous minds”, while, on the other hand, he writes
books with titles such as “The Evil Demon of Images.” Baudrillard’s ambiguous attitude
to the ‘image’ can be seen in his critique of Marx’s theory of commodity fetishism. For
Baudrillard, fetishism is not a problem linked to the obsession with objects, it is an
obsession with the signs, or images of objects. Fetishism, says Baudrillard, is not a
“passion for objects,” but a “passion for the code.” There is no point in positing the
existence of an “empirical object,” says Baudrillard, because we are dealing, not with
political economy, but with the “political economy of the sign.” It is this “economy of the
sign” that, according to Baudrillard, precedes the creation and consumption of objects: it
“institutes a certain mode of signification in which all the surrounding signs act as simple
elements in a logical calculus and refer to each other within the framework of the system
of sign exchange value.”

Unlike Mitchell, who feels that Marx’s criticism of the ‘image’ is hypocritical, in that
Marx provides his own ‘images’ in order to replace the ones he disagrees with, Baudrillard
feels that the problem with Marx’s work is that he seems to base his argument on a
distinction between ‘representation’ and ‘reality’, without realising that ‘reality’ is always
already subject to the ‘code’ of simulation. It is by thinking about fetishism as a ‘passion
for the code’, says Baudrillard, that we can destroy the “artificial distinction between the
economic and the ideological.” There is no longer such a thing as ideology, says
Baudrillard; “there are only simulacra.” Although this is a severe misinterpretation of
Marx’s critical work, it forms the basis, not only of Baudrillard’s critique of Marx, but of his
entire picture of the ‘unreal reality’ of the modern world. Like Mitchell, although for
different reasons, Baudrillard sees Marx as a victim of his own critique of fetishism. As

257 Baudrillard, Jean. The Evil Demon of Images (Sydney: Power Institute of Fine Arts, University of
Sydney, 1987).
258 The Political Economy of the Sign, p. 92.
259 Ibid., p. 63.
260 Ibid., p. 191.
261 “Symbolic Exchange and Death,” in Jean Baudrillard: Selected Writings, Ed. Mark Poster (Stanford;
Stanford University Press, 1988), p. 120.
Baudrillard argues, the problem with the word ‘fetishism’ is that it “almost has a life of its own. Instead of functioning as a metalanguage for the magical thinking of others, it turns against those who use it, and surreptitiously exposes their own magical thinking.”

But is there not a lot of ‘magical thinking’ – by which Baudrillard means an argument based on ‘superstitious’ beliefs – in Baudrillard’s own work? It would seem so. By conceiving the judgement against ‘fetishism’ as itself based on a delusional idea that ‘reality’ can be seen as distinct from the ‘code’ of simulation, Baudrillard discounts any cases in which we might use a term such as ‘fetishism’ in a critical way. To think of fetishism, ideology, or even idolatry, in terms of a dualistic model of representation, or signification, as Baudrillard and others seem to do, is to misunderstand, not only the creation and use of signs and images in everyday life but also fetishism, or idolatry, as a real problem that needs to be tackled by critical thinkers. However, even if Marx did base his theory of fetishism on a metaphysical distinction between ‘reality’ and its ‘representations’ (which, quite clearly, he did not), is Baudrillard’s appeal to the principle of ‘simulation’, or the ‘code’ that dominates modern society, any less of a metaphysical description of reality?

It is noteworthy that a number of prominent ‘postmodern’ thinkers have read Marx’s critique of fetishism in this way – that is, as a critique of the ‘image’ as opposed to the ‘reality’ that he apparently defends – and have ended up providing a picture of ‘reality’ that is as metaphysical as the one they are trying to challenge. We will see a similar reading of Marx in the work of Jacques Derrida, whose deconstructive approach we will examine in the chapter that follows. William Pietz is highly critical of those structuralist and post-structuralist interpretations of Marx that reduce everything – including the ‘fetish’ – to a variety of ‘representation’ (opposed to ‘reality’). Although poststructuralism has made for real theoretical advances in many areas, says Pietz, “it has not helped us read Marx. Indeed its principal contribution has been a certain semiological reading of Marxian theory that impedes any fruitful engagement with Marx’s writing.” The problem with the semiological reading of Marx that seems to have won the day among cultural critics, he says, is that it eliminates from Marxian analysis that materialism that most distinguishes it, despite the fact that this materialism is “its greatest asset as a critical method.”

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263 Pietz, *Fetishism as Cultural Discourse*, p. 119.
either replaced altogether by a concept of objectified form, of the pure signifier, or else abstracted on a textualist model as sheer heterogeneity and contingency, as the 'outside' of pre-existing codes where semantic effects are produced by aleatory play among homologous structures and homophonic forms. In this way, all dualities between form and content, sign and referent, exchange value and use value, subject and object, difference and contradiction, are 'overcome', as is the need for dialectic.\textsuperscript{264} Pietz believes that, without the premise of materialism, "the Marxist critique of ideology would tend to portray the concrete social formation as a hall of mirrors... All essences would be reduced to appearances, and all appearances to the mutual reflection of overlapping social practices or 'discourses.'" This move, he says, exemplifies "the post-modernist's magisterial incomprehension of what Marx was actually talking about."\textsuperscript{265} Contrary to this sort of "semiological" reading of Marx, Pietz insists that materialism "provided Marx with a path out of the hall of mirrors."\textsuperscript{266} It is Marx's 'materialism' – or, more specifically, his praxeological approach – that we will defend at various points in this thesis. It only from a praxeological perspective, we believe, that we can examine the targets of our critique as practices in a way that avoids the speculative and metaphysical delusions that plague so many contemporary theoretical approaches, both in their conception of the problem, and in the alternatives they offer to it. It is from this perspective, too, that we can hopefully avoid making an iconoclastic scapegoat of a practice such as writing, and realise what the real targets of our iconoclastic critique should be.

2.4. Plato's Ideas as Eidōla? Understanding 'writing' as an iconoclastic scapegoat

The Platonic idea, too, is the object of thought... the object of belief and imagination. If the reality of thought is reality as thought, it is itself only thought, and we are forever imprisoned in the identity of thought with itself, in idealism.\textsuperscript{267} Plato's philosophy... was the product of literacy.\textsuperscript{268}

It seems, then, that the conception of various forms of representation as somehow opposed to 'reality', is based on a rather problematic dualistic metaphysical distinction. It

\textsuperscript{264} Ibid., p. 127.
\textsuperscript{265} Ibid, note 25.
\textsuperscript{266} Ibid., p. 129.
\textsuperscript{267} "Principles of the Philosophy of the Future", The Fiery Brook, § 31.
\textsuperscript{268} Walter Ong, The Presence of the Word, p. 55.
is rather ironic, then, that a number of theorists have sought to criticise metaphysical ideas, on the grounds that these ideas are mere ‘representations’ of ‘reality’. Plato, as we saw above, holds a rather metaphysical picture of writing as somehow opposed to the ‘reality’ of the Ideas. It is ironic, then, that a number of theorists have seen Plato’s Ideas as themselves a consequence of writing; that is, as the ‘representations’ of ‘reality’, however this is conceived. The critique of Plato’s Ideas as ‘idols’ of thought is nothing new: as we saw in the first chapter of this thesis, it is a critique that could be linked to the suspicion of metaphysics in general. The disdain shown by Feuerbach towards Plato’s ‘ideas’, as captured in the quote above, has its contemporary equivalent in Derrida’s deconstruction of the ‘logocentrism’ that can be found at the heart of Plato’s philosophy.

What is slightly more peculiar, however, is the association of Plato’s ‘ideas’ with writing: there are, it seems, a number of theorists who actually believe that the increase in literacy in Ancient Greece facilitated the reification of abstract ideas such as the Forms. This idea has, however, led to the development of a somewhat bizarrely circular argument: Plato’s ‘ideas’ (as the ‘reality’ he contrasts to ‘writing’), are themselves seen by a number of theorists as illusions that have been fostered by the use of writing, which is a ‘representation’ of a more ‘real’ reality. As Walter Ong explains, for example:

Plato’s ideas, the ‘really-real,’ were polarized at the maximum distance from the old oral-aural human life-world. Spoken words are events, engaged in time and indeed in the present. Plato’s ideas are the opposite: not events at all, but motionless ‘objective’ existence, impersonal, and out of time. Forming the ultimate base of all knowledge, they implied that intellectual knowledge was like sight [because] basically the Greek word idea means the look of a thing. It comes from the same root as the Latin video (I see), which yields the English ‘vision’ and its cognates. The ideas were thus in a covert sense like abstract pictures, even though other things were only pictures or ‘shadows’ of them.269

Ong feels that Plato’s “entire epistemology was unwittingly a programmed rejection of the old oral, mobile, warm, personally interactive lifeworld of oral culture,” while Plato’s ‘ideas,’ like writing itself, says Ong, “are voiceless, immobile, devoid of all warmth, not part of the human lifeworld at all but utterly above and beyond it.”270 As John Gray has similarly argued: “It is scarcely possible to imagine a philosophy such as Platonism emerging in an oral culture... How could a world of bodiless Forms be represented in pictograms?” It is significant, says Gray, “that nothing resembling Platonism arose in China.”271

269 Ibid., p. 33.
270 Orality and Literacy, p. 80.
271 Straw Dogs, p. 57.
One of the most ‘inspiring’ propagators of this idea that literacy led to a greater concern with more abstract problems, is the classics scholar Eric Havelock, who argues in his book *The Preface to Plato* that the emergence of ‘logic’ in ancient Greece roughly coincides with the earliest use of an alphabetic script. Havelock answers the question: “How did the Greeks ever wake up?” with a claim that, “The fundamental answer must lie in the changing technology of communication.” With writing, says Havelock, what had been written down could be “seen as an object and not just heard and felt. You could as it were take a second look [involving a] separation of yourself from the remembered word.” Havelock’s work has been appropriated and quoted, not only by media theorists such as Walter Ong and Marshall McLuhan, but also by anthropologists such as Pierre Bourdieu, as well as by Goody and Watt, who, after Havelock, believe that the “rise of Greek civilisation,” is the “prime historical example of the transition to a really literate society.” The Greeks developed a “new kind of logical method,” say Goody and Watt, and this “epistemological awareness seems to coincide with the widespread adoption of writing, probably because the written word suggests an ideal of definable truths which have an inherent autonomy and permanence quite different from the phenomena of the temporal flux and of contradictory verbal usages.” This critique of Plato’s ‘written’ ideas is, of course, based on a rather ‘Platonistic’ picture of writing itself. Ong specifically agrees with Plato, for example, that writing is an “external, alien technology,” while Goody and Watt (like Levi-Strauss before them, and Rousseau before him) seem to hold onto the idea of a more ‘real’ society, in relation to which writing is seen as a corrupting influence. As we have seen, however, this appeal to ‘reality’ (as opposed to ‘representation’) is not necessarily a description of ‘what is’, but an appeal to that which is ‘most real’, or ‘most valuable’. It is when this ‘reality’ is understood in terms of “full presence”, or as an ideal self-mediating identity which absolutely precedes or succeeds every difference, that we are left with a very metaphysical picture of things. According to Derrida, whose work we explore next, it is this metaphysical picture that is the real illusion that needs to be exposed and deconstructed.

273 Ibid., p. 208.
274 Bourdieu states, for example: “As Eric Havelock (1963) from whom this argument is borrowed, points out, the body is thus constantly mingled with all the knowledge it reproduces, and this knowledge never has the objectivity it derives from objectification in writing and the consequent freedom with respect to the body.” (*Logic of Practice*, p. 72)
275 *Literacy in Traditional Societies*, p. 42.
276 Ibid., p. 53.
277 Ibid., p. 81.
This is not to say that it is impossible to make distinctions between ‘true and false’, ‘authentic and inauthentic’, or ‘reality and illusion’ – on the contrary, this sort of critical work is altogether necessary – it seems unfortunate, however, that the tendency to create value-based binary oppositions has resulted in the relegation of a number of forms of ‘representation’ – such as writing – into the category of ‘unreality’. It becomes problematic, for example, when words such as ‘illusion’ are replaced with words such as ‘image’, which leads to a condemnation of all images as somehow illusory, or even ‘idolatrous’. When Feuerbach says, for example, that “the present age prefers the sign to the thing signified, the copy to the original, representation to reality, the appearance to the essence,” we should not be too hasty to see this as an opportunity to condemn all ‘signs’, ‘representations’, and ‘appearances’. As should hopefully have become clear throughout this chapter, making a distinction between ‘images’ and ‘illusions’ is not always an easy task, especially as images, understood as ‘representations’ of ‘reality’, have been associated with ‘illusions’ throughout the history of the Western philosophical tradition. To judge writing (or any form of ‘representation’) on the grounds that it is opposed to ‘reality’, is to take on the history of a constellation of concepts stretching from ancient philosophy to the present day. However, a critique based on the confusion of a descriptive and a critical term (including terms such as image/illusion, art/artifice, objectification/alienation) displays, not only a lack of knowledge of the history and polysemy of these terms, but also a misunderstanding of how practices such as writing could (or could not) be described in terms of these concepts.

It is hoped that by teasing out some of the conflated metaphysical assumptions surrounding writing, we have managed to catch some flies in the middle of the web of “speculative cobwebs” that has been spun around this particularly misconceived practice. More than better understanding writing, however, it is hoped that we have gained a better understanding of the real targets of iconoclastic critique, which is not images, but idols. Although many of the theorists and philosophers whose work we will examine could be described as ‘iconoclasts’ concerned with ‘idolatry’ of various sorts, it seems that writing has become a scapegoat for the real target of their iconoclastic critique, whatever this might be (although some major contenders include: metaphysical reification, exploitation, social alienation, or the erroneous evaluation of artefacts). It is by understanding the target of our iconoclasm, not as a particular thing, but as a way of doing things, or a way

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278 The Essence of Christianity, p. xix.
thinking of things, that we avoid many of the dangers that accompany a critical approach to ‘representation’ understood as something metaphysically opposed to ‘reality’. It seems, then, that we need to be rigorously self-critical in our own iconoclastic practice, in order to be sure that our critique of idolatry is not itself based on delusional assumptions. We need to expose invalid forms of iconoclasm if we hope, not only to understand those things that have been wrongly targeted – such as writing – but also if we wish to hold onto the possibility of using idolatry as a category that maintains some critical potency.
3.

DECONSTRUCTION AS ICONOCLASM?
DERRIDA AND THE PROBLEM OF ‘WRITING’

The deconstruction of presence turns out to be not a denial of the presence of God but a critique of the idols of presence, which has at least as much to do with Moses’ complaint with Aaron as with Nietzsche.279

In his book Graven Ideologies, Bruce Ellis Benson acknowledges that Derrida’s critique of metaphysics is part of a tradition of iconoclastic thinking that can be traced all the way back to the Hebrew and Christian scriptures, where we find a number of attempts to expose the ‘idolatrous’ illusions of what was identified as “vain philosophy.” This is a claim about Derrida’s work that is not so easy to defend, however, given that, on the one hand, Derrida is adamant that he is not offering a critique of metaphysics from a theological perspective, and while, on the other hand, he explicitly sets out to show how most instances of iconoclasm are themselves based on ‘logocentric’ delusions.

There is a way in which his conception of all iconoclasm as ‘logocentric’, however, means that Derrida misinterprets some valid iconoclastic efforts, including those that might actually have similar intentions to his own iconoclastic critique of what he calls the “metaphysics of presence.” It is this tension that will be explored in this chapter. We will look at three main issues in relation to Derrida’s ‘iconoclasm.’ Firstly, we will discuss the ways in which Derrida’s famous ‘method’ of deconstruction could be described as a type of iconoclastic practice, and we will attempt to understand Derrida as the heir of a more explicitly iconoclastic thinker such as Nietzsche. The problem with describing Derrida’s work as iconoclastic, however, is that he sees iconoclasm itself as something based on a number of metaphysical delusions. The second issue we will examine, then, is Derrida’s critique of other forms of iconoclasm, which he feels are ripe for deconstruction. It will be

argued, however, that perhaps Derrida is mistaken in seeing all forms of iconoclasm as ‘logocentric’, when it is clear that some forms of philosophical iconoclasm, including Derrida’s own, are a genuine reaction against illusions, or even idols, and not against ‘images’, or other forms of ‘representation’, conceived as somehow metaphysically opposed to ‘reality’. Derrida, then, it could be said, is offering an iconoclastic critique, of a problematic iconoclastic critique (and to this extent Derrida could even be seen as the next ‘link’ in the ‘iconoclastic chain’). It is in Derrida’s reading of Marx, however, that we see the dangers of considering all iconoclasm as based on a ‘logocentric’ delusion. We argue, in fact, that Marx is more successful than Derrida in exposing, and understanding, the delusional assumptions on which ‘idolatrous’ metaphysics is based. This is because Marx approaches what he sees as the illusions of metaphysics, as well as the idolatries of modernity, from a praxeological perspective. In the final section, then, we will discuss how Derrida himself is not free from the danger of overlooking certain problematic assumptions and constructions in his own work. We will argue that, it is only from a praxeological perspective, that the problem of ‘metaphysical idolatry’ can be deconstructed.

3.1. Deconstruction as iconoclasm? An introductory investigation

3.1.1. Derrida and the ‘other’ of metaphysics: theology or nihilism?

Many of his readers – including both defenders and critics – see Derrida as a ‘nihilistic’ thinker, following in the (supposed) footsteps of Nietzsche, who once famously announced the “Death of God.” On the other hand, however, there are a number of readers – again, both defenders and critics – who consider deconstruction to be “structured like a religion,” or to even fit into the religious tradition of ‘negative theology.’ As John Caputo and Richard Scanlon state in the introduction to their volume on God, the Gift, and Postmodernism, for example, Derrida’s ‘method’ of deconstruction could be seen as a “critique of the idols of presence, which has at least as much to do with Moses’ complaint with Aaron as with Nietzsche.” It is important to understand, however, that, while Derrida’s work might be described as iconoclastic, it is neither explicitly theological, nor nihilistic, and it seems that, by judging whether or not his ‘iconoclasm’ is successful from a

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280 Ibid.
theological, or even an ‘atheist’ philosophical perspective, we are doing some violence to his complex and sophisticated deconstructionist project.

Despite his lack of theological avowal, however, it seems possible to describe Derrida’s work as ‘iconoclastic.’ Derrida clearly follows in the footsteps of Nietzsche, who, as we have seen, could be described as part of an iconoclastic tradition that could be traced all the way back to the Hebrew scriptures. The target of Derrida’s critique is, following on from the work of Nietzsche and Heidegger, the problem of metaphysics. He claims that, if he was forced to name his greatest philosophical influences, he “would probably cite the Nietzschean critique of metaphysics, the critique of the concepts of being and truth, for which were substituted the concepts of play, interpretation, and sign (sign without truth present)... and, more radically, the Heideggerean destruction of metaphysics, of onto-theology, of the determination of being as presence.” Derrida’s attempt to problematise metaphysical thinking is done from a perspective that could be described, as will hopefully be clear, as ‘meta-metaphysical’. He is concerned to find a space (or non-space) from where ‘metaphysics’ itself might be questioned, although, because for Derrida metaphysics is inextricably entwined with a certain notion of ‘textuality’, the focus of his deconstructive work often revolves around the problem of writing (although, as we will see, Derrida often uses the term ‘writing’ in a very special way).

In the current section, we will focus on Derrida’s intention to continue Heidegger’s “destruction of onto-theology and the metaphysics of presence,” which, we feel, is one reason that Derrida’s thinking can be described as ‘iconoclastic.’ For Derrida, ‘onto-theology’ is the metaphysical appeal to an ideal or transcendent ‘ground’, that is used as the end or beginning point of a totalised, and totalising, philosophical ‘system’. Derrida describes this appeal to the transcendent (usually named as ‘God’), and its accompanying tendency to offer a totalising explanation of everything, as:

The enterprise of returning 'strategically', or 'ideally', to an origin or to a priority, thought to be simple, intact, normal, pure, standard, or self-identical, in order then to think in terms of derivation, complication, deterioration, accident, etc. All metaphysicians, from Plato to Rousseau, Descartes to Husserl, have proceeded in this way... this is not just one metaphysical gesture among others, it is... that which has been the most constant, most profound and most potent.

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Derrida sets out to interrogate this notion of a centre that is “based on a fundamental ground,” a “fundamental immobility and a reassuring certitude,” with which “anxiety can be mastered.” Derrida feels that it is imperative to preserve anxiety, because “anxiety is invariably the result of a certain mode of being implicated in the game, of being caught by the game, of being as it were from the very beginning at stake in the game.”

Derrida is not only critical of “fundamentals, principles, or centres” that “master anxiety”; he is also critical of anything that functions as a centre, that is, anything that functions to “orient, balance, and organize,” a structure, in order to “make sure that the organizing principle of the structure would limit what we might call the freeplay of the structure.” It is his deconstructive task to show that this “centre”, so fundamental to so many philosophical projects, is actually “mythological,” or nothing more than a “historical illusion.”

Derrida claims, after Heidegger, that onto-theology, which characterises all of classical ontology, “was not born out of a philosopher's carelessness or from a theoretical lapse. It is intrinsic to the totality of the history of the Occident, of what unites its metaphysics and its technics.” The history of metaphysics, “like the history of the West,” says Derrida, is the history of the “determination of Being as presence.... It could be shown that all the names related to fundamentals, to principles, or to the centre, have always designated an invariable presence – eidos, archē, telos, ousia (essence, existence, substance, subject) allētheia, consciousness, God, man, and so forth.” It is this that Derrida calls the “metaphysics of presence”, although it should be noted that Derrida is critical of metaphysics for two reasons: firstly, because metaphysical principles are illusions, and secondly, because they are attributed more value than they really have.

Regarding the latter critique, for example, Derrida feels that the “metaphysics of presence” (or onto-theology) makes it seem that the transcendent is something that is (or can become) ‘present’ to us. Rather like Heidegger’s ‘reminder’ about the mystery and depth of Being, as something we have ‘forgotten’, Derrida is concerned that metaphysics has eliminated the sense of mystery from philosophy, and even theology. The “metaphysics of presence”, according to Derrida, prevents us from being open to what he calls “the impossible.” Although Derrida is critical of “onto-theology”, then, he is not critical of...

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284 Writing and Difference, p. 279.
285 Ibid., p. 278.
286 Ibid., p. 287.
287 Of Grammatology, p. 72. Derrida's critique of Heidegger will be examined in Chapter 5, below, where it will be seen how Derrida thinks that his predecessor does not manage to escape the "metaphysics of presence" he sets out to deconstruct. But has Derrida read Heidegger properly? This question will be examined more thoroughly below.
288 Writing and Difference, p. 279.
'transcendence' per se. In fact, in his later work, he offers a sustained defence of the “impossible”, which is why his work has been appropriated by a number of ‘postmodern’ theologians. What Derrida has a problem with is the theological claim that we can ever know God, or any other divinity, in its full ‘presence’, that is, as immediately or fully present to our consciousness, as an object of knowledge. This, for Derrida, would be a form of onto-theology, or, we might say, even a form of idolatry.

Derrida is not interested in announcing the ‘death of God’, then, but simply in looking at the ways in which an onto-theological conception of ‘God’ actually closes us off to the radical alterity of something that we cannot conceive: “It would not mean a single step outside of metaphysics,” says Derrida, “if nothing more than a new motif of … ‘God’s death’... were the result of this move. It is that conceptuality and that problematics that must be deconstructed.” It is his aim, he says, to “make enigmatic what one thinks one understands by the words ‘proximity,’ ‘immediacy,’ or ‘Presence.’” Far from being nihilistic, then, Derrida’s work sets out to expose the poverty of any claim to ‘full presence’. In line with the thought of Levinas, Derrida wants to insist that that we cannot know the ‘thing in itself’, but only a trace of the thing, and this is important if we wish to maintain a relationship with something ‘other’ (or Wholly Other) than ourselves, something Other than the ‘Same.’ (Derrida admits that his work “implies the entire critique of classical ontology undertaken by Levinas.”) The ‘other’, for Derrida, can never be an object of knowledge, whether this ‘other’ is another person, or the ‘Wholly Other.’ It is this ‘otherness’ that we encounter in everyday life, that Derrida refers to as the ‘messianic’ structure of experience: that is, our ‘implicit’ faith in an ‘Other’ that we cannot fully comprehend, or which is always yet to come. Derrida insists that, rather than referring to any particular Messiah, the ‘messianic’ is a feature of everyday life; it is our openness to the future, to other people, to the ‘Wholly Other’, or even to our Being, coupled with their openness and inexhaustibilities, that guarantees that these things can never be ‘mastered’ by any philosophical, theological (or any other ideological) system. In the section that follows, we will examine how Derrida’s critique of metaphysics is wound up with a certain defence (or alternative picture of) ‘writing’. But does Derrida really offer a better picture of the written word? For Derrida, the sort of iconoclastic critique of writing we examined in the previous chapter, is something that can itself be deconstructed.

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289 Ibid., p. 68.
290 Ibid., p. 70.
3.1.2. A (critique of) metaphysics dressed up as grammatology?

One of the characteristics of Derrida’s work is that he focuses a great deal on the issue (or problem) of ‘textuality.’ It will become clear throughout this chapter that the notion of ‘text’ is used in a variety of ways by Derrida. For example, Derrida sees metaphysics, throughout its history, as something found in written texts, and he is therefore interested in the ways in which philosophers utilise language to formulate philosophical concepts. He is also concerned to examine the ways in which various philosophical (as well as literary, anthropological, or even theological) texts have tried to ‘close off’ any ‘openings’ towards the ‘other’, or to ‘other’ interpretations, through their ‘metaphysical’ control of language. He therefore sets out to show how philosophy is always ‘haunted’ by those issues that it leaves uncovered, or by those questions that it left unasked. ‘Deconstruction’, one of the most contested and fiercely debated terms in contemporary theory, could be described as an attempt to open a text (philosophical, or otherwise) to several meanings and interpretations, in order to show that the text cannot ‘control’ or ‘master’ its own meaning. Derrida describes deconstruction as, amongst other things, a form of psychoanalysis, as an attempt to read (and liberate) the ‘repressed’ meanings in a text. He also describes his own writing as ‘viral’, or as existing in the ‘margins of philosophy’, although he is a lot more generous to his ‘victims’ than is often conceded by their impassioned defenders.

In fact, it is clear that, in all his deconstructive work, Derrida usually sets out to show how the texts he is deconstructing hold within themselves the resources to solve the ‘aporias’ that can be found there. For example, Derrida is concerned to point out how Plato ‘deconstructs’ his own “metaphysics of presence” through his notion of the pharmakon, just as Rousseau performs a similar ‘self-deconstruction’ through his notion of the supplement. He is keen to point out what he calls the ‘undecideable’ words, phrases, or concepts in the texts he examines; that is, those words, concepts, or phrases, which ‘open’ a philosophers’ work up in ways of which they themselves are unaware. Derrida claims that he is interested in finding the “blindspots” in a philosopher’s texts; that is, the “not-seen that opens and limits visibility.”292 He claims that he is interested in exposing the ways in which a philosopher “says what he does not wish to say,” and “describes what he

292 Ibid., p. 163.
As he explains, his reading of the work of certain philosophers “is an analysis which tries to find out how their thinking works or does not work, to find the tensions, the contradictions, the heterogeneities within their own corpus.” It is for this reason, he says, that deconstruction “is not some method or some tool that you apply to something from the outside… [it] is something which happens inside; there is deconstruction at work within Plato’s work, for example.”

Derrida is concerned to explore a major theme dealt with throughout the history of the Western tradition, and this is the theme of **writing**. There is a subtle (or perhaps major) distinction that needs to be made here: while, on the one hand, Derrida is concerned to deconstruct the metaphysical ‘texts’ that have been produced throughout the history of Western philosophy, on the other hand, he is interested with the ways in which these texts themselves deal with the issue of **textuality**. (This, as we will see, however, leads to some rather troubling ideas about the ‘textuality’ of metaphysics: it seems that Derrida ‘reads’ a rather strange metaphysical picture of writing into his description of the writing of metaphysics). What Derrida is interested in exploring is the way in which ‘metaphysical’ philosophies of writing reflect the metaphysical assumptions, and ambitions, of the philosopher’s own writing of metaphysics. This approach makes Derrida very reflexive about his own ‘textuality’: not only is he concerned with the problem of **writing** as a subject of enquiry, but he is also interested in writing itself as a **problem**, which is probably one of the reasons why his own texts are so notoriously difficult to read. Derrida does not want to produce a text that pretends to be ‘transparent’ to its meaning: this, he would argue, involves precisely the type of metaphysical assumption about the way that language works that we need to deconstruct. It therefore requires a great deal of work (and patience) to read Derrida’s writing, and his arguments are impossible to neatly summarise. We can nevertheless attempt to draw out some of the major themes of his work, in order to make our own iconoclastic critique of it clearer.

First though, it might be helpful to look at the ways in which Derrida ‘deconstructs’ the ‘metaphysics’ of the sign, or what he calls the “classical semiology.” Derrida’s critique of the metaphysics of the sign could be seen as an attempt to expose the illusions of a certain metaphysical description of ‘reality’. While, as we have seen, Derrida is critical

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293 Ibid., p. 143.
295 Margins of Philosophy, p. 9
of the inappropriate attribution of (divine) value to certain metaphysical principles, he is also critical of the positing of metaphysical grounds that are non-existent or illusory. He often refers to this depositing of illusory grounds as a form of "logocentrism". Logocentrism is the positing of a transcendent reference point, a 'centre of meaning', an intelligible, meaningful and truth-giving "reality" to which all signs ultimately refer. Logocentrism is related to what Derrida calls "phonocentrism", which is the idea that the 'full presence' of 'reality' is best expressed or mediated through speech, and that every other form of communication is a derivation of or fall from this full presence. Nevertheless, despite this distinction we are making between Derrida's critique of metaphysics as illusory, on the one hand, and as 'idolatrous', on the other, it seems that these two critiques are inextricably interconnected. Taking his cue from Heidegger's announcement that "Ontology... and theology, are 'Logies' inasmuch as they provide the ground of beings as such and account for them as a whole,"296 for example, Derrida comments that, "All the metaphysical determinations of truth, and even the one beyond metaphysical onto-theology that Heidegger reminds us of, are more or less immediately inseparable from the instance of the logos, or of a reason thought within the lineage of the logos."297 Logocentrism, says Derrida, "would thus support the determination of the being of the entity as presence."298

Derrida's critique of the metaphysics of phonocentrism is directly linked to his critique of a certain metaphysical picture of writing. Phonocentrism is the idea that the human voice is the medium through which we directly and properly express the 'truth', or 'reality' (however, this is conceived). This true 'reality' could be, amongst other things, 'consciousness', a 'transcendental signified', or an 'ideal meaning' that is apparently immediately present to our consciousness. As Derrida explains, "the history of (the only) metaphysics, which has, in spite of all differences, not only from Plato to Hegel (even including Leibniz) but also, beyond these apparent limits, from the pre-Socratics to Heidegger, always assigned the origin of truth in general to the logos: the history of truth,

296 Identity and Difference, p. 59.
297 Of Grammatology, p. 11.
298 Ibid., p. 12. (Nevertheless, as we will examine in Chapter 5 below, Derrida feels that "such a logocentrism is not totally absent from Heidegger's thought, perhaps it still holds that thought within the epoch of onto-theology, within the philosophy of presence, that is to say within philosophy itself. This would perhaps mean that one does not leave the epoch whose closure one can outline." (Of Grammatology, p. 12).
of the truth of truth, has always been – except for a metaphysical diversion that we shall have to explain – the debasement of writing, and its repression outside ‘full’ speech.”

It is this ‘phonocentrism’ that, according to Derrida, can be seen in all the dualistic conceptions of language that dominate the metaphysical enterprise: “‘hearing (understanding)-oneself-speak’ through the phonic substance,” says Derrida, “has necessarily dominated the history of the world during an entire epoch, and has even produced the idea of the world, the idea of world-origin, that arises from the difference between the worldly and the non-worldly, the outside and the inside, ideality and nonideality, universal and nonuniversal, transcendental and empirical, etc.”

Phonocentrism, says Derrida, “merges with the historical determination of the meaning of being in general as presence,” while the “subordination of the trace to the full presence summed up in the logos, the humbling of writing beneath a speech dreaming its plenitude... are the gestures required by an onto-theology determining the archaeological and eschatological meaning of being as presence, as parousia, as life without difference.”

For most philosophers in this “logocentric epoch”, says Derrida, “reading and writing, the production or interpretation of signs, the text in general as fabric of signs, allow themselves to be confined within secondariness. They are preceded by a truth, or a meaning already constituted by and within the element of the logos. Even when the thing, the ‘referent,’ is not immediately related to the logos of a creator God where it began by being the spoken/thought sense, the signified has at any rate an immediate relationship with the logos in general (finite or infinite), and a mediated one with the signifier, that is to say with the exteriority of writing.” It is for this reason that the ‘signifier’ (usually simply referred to as the ‘sign’) has been treated with such suspicion throughout the history of the Western philosophical tradition. As Derrida explains:

The sign is usually said to be put in the place of the thing itself, the present thing, ‘thing’ here standing equally for meaning or referent. The sign represents the present in its absence... The sign, in this sense, is deferred presence... the circulation of signs defers the moment in which we can encounter the thing itself make it ours, consume or expend it, touch it, see it, intuit its presence... this structure presupposes that the sign, which defers presence, is conceivable only on the basis of the presence that it defers and moving toward the deferred presence that it aims to reappropriate.

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299 Ibid., p. 3.
300 Ibid., p. 7.
301 Ibid., p. 12 &71.
303 Ibid., p. 9.
What Derrida wants to show, however, is that this attempt to achieve ‘presence’ through signification is an impossible ambition. “It is thus the idea of the sign that must be deconstructed through a meditation upon writing which would merge, as it must, with the undoing [solicitation] of onto-theology, faithfully repeating it in its totality and making it insecure in its most assured evidences.”

Following the linguist Ferdinand de Saussure’s insight that language consists of signifiers (material elements) and signifieds (conceptual elements), that are ‘two sides of the same coin’, as it were, Derrida comes to the ‘realisation’ that all concepts are at the same time both signifiers and signifieds: there is not a ‘transcendental signified’, in other words, that is not, at the same time, also a signifier. If all concepts can be shown to be signifiers, says Derrida, then we are in a position to deconstruct the idea that speech is closer to the ‘logos’, ‘presence’, or ‘truth’ of the concept, than writing. Because the concept is itself always part of the ‘chain of signification’, this means that there is no significatory medium that makes a concept more ‘present’ than others. It is according to this insight, says Derrida, that we can say that writing is not a “sign of a sign, except if one says it of all signs.” That the signified is originarily and essentially always already in the position of the signifier, says Derrida, “is the apparently innocent proposition within which the metaphysics of the logos, of presence and consciousness, must reflect upon writing as its death and its resource.” Something which was "never spoken and which is nothing other than writing itself as the origin of language, writes itself within Saussure's discourse.”

Derrida’s target, it should be clear, is not ‘speech’ per se, but the logocentric privileging of a certain conception of speech over writing. However, not only is it clear that Derrida’s target is not ‘speech’ per se, but it also seems that he is not very interested in what he refers to as ‘vulgar writing’ either. Derrida is not interested in better understanding the practices of writing and speaking, so much as he is interested in the ways in which the metaphysical distinction between speech and writing is related to the whole history of metaphysics. Derrida is interested, then, not in the problem of writing, so much as he is interested in the problem of metaphysics: his ‘grammatology’ is, it seems, a critique of metaphysics dressed up as a concern with writing. Instead of exploring writing

304 Ibid., p. 73.
305 Ibid., p. 43.
306 Ibid., p. 73.
307 Ibid., p. 43.
and speaking as ‘real’ (as in ‘actual’) practices, to show how wrongheaded the ‘logocentric’
description of writing really is, Derrida seeks to understand how the metaphorical concepts
of speech and writing, as problematic as these concepts might be, have emerged from a
‘non-space’ (or ‘movement’) within metaphysics itself.

It is this ‘non-space’ that Derrida calls archi-écriture. Archi-écriture is the
transcendental condition of all inscription and conception, it is the condition of all
signification of what Derrida calls the ‘vulgar’ type (or, what we might call inscription of the
actual, ‘phenomenal’ kind). Derrida coins the term ‘archi-écriture’ to describe, not only
what we commonly understand as ‘writing’, but also to describe the totality of what makes
writing, indeed, all signification possible.\textsuperscript{308} It is in this extended sense of writing that he
considers writing, not as an anomaly, the “wandering outcast of linguistics,” but as the
“primary and most intimate possibility” of language.\textsuperscript{309} Although he is now using the word
in a completely different sense to how it is usually employed, Derrida explains that he will
maintain the word ‘writing’, because we can now see that the general description of writing
as a ‘signifier of the signified,’ is something that pertains to all language and conception;
there are no transcendent ‘signifieds’, only a series of ‘signifiers of signifiers’:

\begin{quote}
the word ‘writing’ has [not] ceased to designate the signifier of
the signer, but it appears, strange as it may seem, that
‘signifier of the signer’ no longer defines accidental doubling and
fallen secondarity. ‘Signifier of the signer’ describes on the
contrary the movement of language... the signified always already
functions as a signifier. The secondarity that it seemed possible to
ascribe to writing alone affects all signifieds in general, affects
them always already, the moment they enter the game. There is
not a single signified that escapes, even if recaptured, the play of
signifying references that constitute language.\textsuperscript{310}
\end{quote}

Archi-écriture is more ‘original’ than either speech or writing – it is the ‘differing/deferring’
“origin” that is the transcendental condition of all signification, conception, or indeed,
metaphysics itself. As the condition of signification, archi-écriture is the ‘other’ of
signification, in which signs are inscribed. As Derrida states: “signification is a priori

\textsuperscript{308} Derrida makes a distinction between ‘writing in the common sense,’ and archi-écriture, which
designates, “not only the physical gestures of literal pictographic or ideographic inscription, but also
the totality of what makes it possible.” (Of Grammatology, p. 9) He claims that he wishes to keep
‘writing’ as part of the name of this ‘extended’ notion of writing, “only because it essentially
communicates with the vulgar concept of writing... If I persist in calling that difference writing, it is
because, within the work of historical repression, writing was, by its situation, destined to signify the
most formidable difference. It threatened the desire for the living speech from the closest proximity, it
breached living speech from within and from the very beginning.” (ibid., p. 56ff).
\textsuperscript{309} Of Grammatology, p. 43.
\textsuperscript{310} Ibid., p. 7.
written." Archi-écriture is "not only the possibility of writing, but also "the possibility of the spoken word," and in all senses of the word, says Derrida, "writing thus comprehends language." As that which ‘comprehends’ language, as the condition of language, however, it is clear that archi-écriture can itself never be an object of knowledge: as the "condition of all linguistic systems," it cannot "form a part of the linguistic system itself and be situated as an object in its field." (It is interesting to point out that, although Derrida is critical of all ‘fundamentals, principles, or centres,’ or anything that functions to “orient, balance, and organize,” a structure, he nevertheless describes archi-écriture as the “origin of the origin,” an “originary trace or arche-trace").

When Derrida says "il n'y a pas de hors texte" (i.e. “there is nothing outside of the text”) his point is not so much that the world is a ‘library’, or that everything is linguistic, but that our language and thought are only possible because of the transcendentally ‘textual’ structure that is the enabling condition of saying, thinking, writing, or indeed, meaning, anything at all. As Derrida himself explains, “writing” in the extended sense is “outside of the horizon itself, outside the world as space of inscription, as the opening to the emission and to the spatial distribution of signs, to the regulated play of their differences." Nevertheless, as he says, “This play, thought as absence of the transcendental signified, is not a play in the world, as it has always been defined, for the purposes of containing it, by the philosophical tradition and as the theoreticians of play also consider it… It is therefore the game of the world that must be first thought; before attempting to understand all the forms of play in the world." The ‘play’ of “writing” is thus the condition of thinking anything at all; for Derrida, even ideal objects are subject to the condition of the possibility of their inscription. No phenomenon, according to Derrida, is ‘immediately’ accessible or present to us, and to describe it as such would be to fall into the trap of the "metaphysics of presence" that he has set out to deconstruct.

There is not much that separates the notion of archi-écriture from Derrida’s famous neologism, différance, which is also formulated in relation to Derrida’s ‘grammatological’ enquiry. Because Derrida seeks to problematise metaphysics as it is found in relation to the question of the sign, ‘metaphysics’ always remains, for Derrida, a semiological

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**References:**

311 Ibid., p. 70.
312 Ibid.
313 Ibid., p.7.
314 Ibid., p. 60.
315 Ibid., p. 61.
316 Ibid., p. 158.
317 Ibid., p. 44.
318 Ibid., p. 50.
problem. It is in relation to the problem of the sign, says Derrida, that "one would come to see something like an originary différance," which is that which makes, not only all signification, but, indeed, all conception – including metaphysical conception (although Derrida would deny there is any other type of conception) – possible.\textsuperscript{319} Derrida admits that différance can be substituted for (although it is not totally synonymous with) archi-ecriture, and he describes différance as that by which "every concept is inscribed in a chain or in a system within which it refers to the other, to other concepts, by means of the systematic play of differences. Such a play, différance, is thus no longer simply a concept, but rather the possibility of conceptuality, of a conceptual process and system in general."\textsuperscript{320}

It is différance that Derrida sees at work in the texts of metaphysics, that which "radically displaces" these texts from within, and it is the task of deconstruction to trace these openings towards différance, these openings which mark the limits, and possibilities – the transcendental conditions – of metaphysical discourse itself. Derrida feels that, by forgetting the différance that is the condition of possibility of all conception, philosophers are in danger of producing an ‘onto-theological’ metaphysics that leaves itself open for deconstruction. It is only through the realisation that all metaphysics – including all ontologies – originate in différance – says Derrida, that we can ‘comprehend’ the ‘text of metaphysics,’ which "is not surrounded but rather traversed by its limit, marked in its interior by the multiple furrow of its margin... the trace simultaneously traced and erased, simultaneously living and dead, and, as always, living in its simulation of life's preserved inscription."\textsuperscript{321} He is concerned, from the time of his earliest publications, with the question: "How to conceive what is outside a text? That which is more or less than a text's own, proper margin? For example," he asks, "what is other than the text of Western metaphysics?"\textsuperscript{322} The thing that is ‘other than the text of Western metaphysics’ is différance, the non-original ‘origins’ of all categorial ‘differences’, and of metaphysical thinking itself.

But is this not simply another metaphysical move that Derrida is making? Of course it is. And this is not something that Derrida denies. As he admits: “différance remains a metaphysical name, and all the names that it receives in our language are still, as names,
metaphysical.” Although he believes that we need to deconstruct onto-theological, or
logocentric ideas, and that we need to expose the ‘openings towards Otherness’ in
metaphysical texts, he also feels that “there is no sense in doing without the concepts of
metaphysics.” Différance is not other than metaphysics, it is the other of metaphysics,
that which remains unthought by metaphysics, because it is the condition of metaphysics,
the non-site in which metaphysics is inscribed, and from which it may be questioned. But
in what ways is différance a better description of ‘reality’ than those idealistic or
logocentric descriptions that Derrida has set out to deconstruct? Rather like Baudrillard,
Derrida seems to appeal to yet another metaphysical principle (for Baudrillard, as we saw,
it was the ‘principle’ of simulation) in order to problematise the distinction between ‘reality’
and ‘representation’, instead of enquiring into the actuality of these terms. Our critique of
Derrida, which will become more apparent as we continue, is that différance, as the
metaphysical condition of metaphysics, is perhaps as ‘illusory’ as other logocentric or onto-
theological conditions and principles that Derrida has approached iconoclastically.

3.2. Deconstruction vs. Logocentrism: an iconoclastic play-off?

3.2.1. Plato’s logocentric gesture: Ideas vs. Eidōla

Despite his ‘iconoclastic’ aims, it is important to point out that Derrida is himself critical of
a number of iconoclasts who he feels base their critique of idols on the logocentric illusions
that he is concerned to deconstruct. This metaphysical iconoclasm can be found in the
critical approach to writing, conceived as somehow opposed to ‘reality’, as we examined in
the previous chapter. We have already seen how Plato conceives of written representation
as a form of unreality, and how this conception of writing has been used to justify his
‘iconoclastic’ approach to writing, which he actually refers to as an eidōlon. It is precisely
this logocentric conception of writing that Derrida is keen to tackle in much of his early
work. Rather than seeing writing as somehow opposed to ‘reality’, Derrida questions the
rather logocentric conception of this ‘reality’ itself. From Plato onwards, Derrida argues,
writing, and other forms of communication (such as pictographic or ideographic scripts),

323 Ibid, p. 25.
324 Writing and Difference, p. 280.
are seen as secondary, external, artificial media, which not only endanger, but also corrupt the truth, or the ‘reality’ of the *logos*, which is thought to be mediated through *speech*.

Already in the *Phaedrus*, Derrida notes, Plato denounces writing as “the intrusion of an artful technique, a forced entry of a totally original sort, an archetypal violence: eruption of the *outside* within the *inside*, breaching into the interiority of the soul, the living self-presence of the soul within the true logos, the help that speech lends to itself.”

In his essay “Dissemination,” Derrida shows how Plato contrasts the “cadaverous rigidity of writing” with the “living and spoken word.” As Derrida notes: “While the phonic signifier would remain in animate proximity, in the living presence of *mnēmē* or *psuchē*, the graphic signifier, which reproduces it or imitates it, goes one degree further away, falls outside of life, entrains life out of itself and puts it to sleep in the type of its double.” This is the ‘gesture’ that Plato initiates: “Writing appears to Plato (and after him to all of philosophy, which is as such constituted in this gesture),” Derrida notes, “as that process of redoubling in which we are fatally (en)trained: the supplement of a supplement, the signifier, the representative of a representative.”

The danger of writing, for Plato, is that it results in the substitution “of prosthesis for the organ; the perversion that consists of replacing a limb by a thing.” As a ‘prosthesis’, writing is associated with the spectre, the ghost, the *eidōlon*: writing is “a semblance of breath. The phantom, the phantasm, the simulacrum (*eidōlon*, 276a)... this discourse that doesn’t amount to much, is like all ghosts: errant...like someone who has lost his way, who doesn’t know where he is going, having strayed from the correct path.” Like the other *eidōla* he calls to be banished, painting and poetry, writing is seen as one of a series of “mere figurines, masks, simulacra,” a form of “bewitchment {*l’envoûtement*}” that is “always the effect of a representation, pictorial or scriptural, capturing, captivating the form of the other.” Unlike the *eidos*, which is the form of the presentation of truth, and of which painting and poetry are themselves an imitation, writing is an imitation of an imitation: it is an “*eidōlon* in written form.” Writing, according to Plato, “is not a good *tekhnē*, by which we should understand an art capable of engendering, pro-duction,

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326 Ibid., p. 79.
327 Ibid., p. 110.
328 Ibid., p. 109.
329 Ibid., p. 108.
330 Ibid., p. 143.
331 Ibid., p. 136.
332 Ibid., p. 138.
333 Ibid.
bringing forth... the *alētheia* of the *eidos*, the truth of being in its figure, its ‘idea’, its nonsensible visibility, its intelligible invisibility." Rather, any writer who thinks that he has produced truth through a grapheme, "would only give proof of the greatest foolishness."\(^{334}\)

Despite Plato’s apparent ‘logocentric’ critique (and conception) of writing, however, Derrida sets out to show that we can find in his own work the resources to problematise this metaphysical conception. This ‘opening’ can be found in Plato’s description of writing as a *pharmakon*. As Derrida points out, *pharmakon* is a very ambiguous Greek word that means both ‘poison’ and ‘cure’. It is an ambiguity that needs to be taken seriously: "Writing is no more valuable, says Plato, as a remedy than as a poison."\(^{335}\) Although Plato intends to use *pharmakon* in the sense of ‘poison’ when he describes writing, this in no way denies that there is a possibility that the word could be used in the sense of a ‘cure’. Even the "*eidos*, truth, law, the *epistēmē*, dialectics, philosophy," says Derrida, are often referred to as *pharmaka* – although "all these are other names for that *pharmakon* that must be opposed to the *pharmakon* of the Sophists and the bewitching fear of death."\(^{336}\)

This ambiguity can be applied to writing itself, which, notes Derrida, is sometimes a good *pharmakon* that can be ‘written on the soul.’ In the *Phaedrus*, as we have seen, Socrates says that there "is another sort of discourse, that is brother to the written, but of unquestioned legitimacy," which he describes as the type of writing “that goes together with knowledge and is written on the soul of the learner."\(^{337}\) As Derrida notes, this is a gesture that continues throughout history: “There is therefore a good and a bad writing: the good and natural is the divine inscription in the heart and the soul; the perverse and artful is technique, exiled in the exteriority of the body."\(^{338}\) Yet on what grounds can Plato, who also employs the metaphor of writing as “inscription, imprint, mark, etc., in the wax of the mind or the soul,"\(^{339}\) defend his critique of ‘bad’ writing?

The *pharmakon* cannot so easily be categorised as inherently ‘good’ or ‘evil’, because it is what makes these categories possible in the first place. It is the *pharmakon* that, rather than being classed within any one oppositional category, marks the possibility of

\(^{334}\) Ibid., p. 135.
\(^{335}\) Ibid., p. 99.
\(^{336}\) Ibid., p. 124.
\(^{337}\) Ibid., p. 148.
\(^{338}\) Ibid., p. 17. "According to a pattern that dominates all of Western philosophy," says Derrida, "good writing (natural, living, knowledgeable, intelligible, internal, speaking) is opposed to bad writing (a moribund, ignorant, external, mute, artifice for the senses)." If the "network of opposing predicates that link one type of writing to the other contains all the conceptual oppositions of ‘Platonism’ – here considered the dominant structure in the history of metaphysics – then it can be said that philosophy is played out in the play between two kinds of writing"(*Dissemination*, p. 149).
\(^{339}\) Ibid., p. 140.
oppositional thinking altogether. As Derrida explains, "if one got to thinking that something like the pharmakon – or writing – far from being governed by these oppositions, opens up their very possibility without letting itself be comprehended by them; if one got to thinking that it can only be out of something like writing – or the pharmakon – that the strange difference between inside and outside can spring."

If the pharmakon is ambivalent, says Derrida, "it is because it constitutes the medium in which opposites are opposed, the movement and the play that links them among themselves, reverses them or makes one side cross over into the other (soul/body, good/evil, inside/ outside, memory/forgetfulness, speech/writing, etc.)." The deconstructed pharmakon therefore brings us back to différance. The pharmakon is "the movement, the locus, and the play: (the production of) difference. It is the différence of difference. It holds in reserve, in its undecided shadow and vigil, the opposites and the differends that the process of discrimination will come to carve out. Contradictions and pairs of opposites are lifted from the bottom of this diacritical, differing, deferring, reserve... It is from this fund that dialectics draws its philosophemes." The pharmakon cannot be contained in any one definition because it exceeds all definition; it is, rather, that which makes definition, philosophical distinctions, ontology itself, possible. Rather than being false, mimetic, or phantasmatic, then, the pharmakon is "the condition of possibility of a discourse on the false, the idol, the icon, the mimeme, the phantasm...and thus of writing." For Derrida, it is "at once the condition of possibility and the condition of impossibility of truth."

Derrida’s deconstruction of the notion of the pharmakon is a familiar gesture throughout his oeuvre – a gesture designed to stop the logocentric ‘Platonic gesture’ in its tracks. We find it again in Rousseau’s supplement, and in Marx’s obsession with the figure of the ghost. These are all terms whose ambiguity, Derrida feels, does not allow them to be contained within the oppositional logic of an ‘ontology’ based on presence/representation. What we will also see, however, is that Derrida seems to think that all iconoclasm is based on a Platonic critique of the eidōlon, which he feels can be exposed as logocentric. The problem is that, rather than looking at speech and writing from a practical perspective, in order to challenge the metaphysical distinction between them, Derrida points to what is arguably yet another metaphysical ‘principle’ in order to

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340 Ibid., p. 103.
341 Ibid., p. 127.
342 Ibid., p. 164.
343 Ibid., p. 168.
problematise the distinction: that is, in the case of his reading of Plato, the *pharmakon*. More than this problematic challenge to metaphysics, however, there seems to be yet another problem that emerges from Derrida’s suspicion of *all* iconoclasm as somehow based on a suspicion of the sign as a sign of the ‘fall’ from the ‘reality’ of a full and immediate presence. The trouble with this conception of iconoclasm, is that it discredits even valid iconoclastic movements, and this is an issue that arises in relation to Derrida’s deconstruction of the work of Marx, who Derrida describes as an ‘heir of Plato’. Despite this tension, which we will examine below, Derrida nevertheless does offer some helpful criticisms of those approaches to writing that can be exposed as logocentric, whether or not they are based on a description of the *eidôlon*. It is necessary, we will see, however, to distinguish between logocentric and non-logocentric forms of iconoclasm, if our critique is not to be exposed as ‘metaphysical’. Whether Derrida ultimately escapes this charge himself, however, is still open to question.

### 3.2.2. Marxism or Metaphysics? Levi-Strauss’s critique of writing

There is much food for thought in the matter of the price thus paid by a linguistics—a grammatology—which, in this case, professes to be Marxist, to the metaphysical tradition.344

In his earlier engagement with Levi-Strauss’s work, which we find in *Of Grammatology*, it is clear that Derrida does not read Marx ‘logocentrically’, and is keen to show that the French anthropologist’s theory of exploitation, is not so much indebted to Marx, as it is to Rousseau and Plato. Levi-Strauss sees the introduction of writing into the tribes of the Amazonian rainforest as a corrupting influence that could be compared to the institution of capitalism in the modern world. His argument is based on a rather ‘logocentric’ conception of writing as an evil technology that has infiltrated an innocent, natural tribe ‘from the outside’. Derrida nevertheless thinks that Levi-Strauss’s “model of a small community with a ‘crystalline’ structure, completely self-present, assembled in its own neighborhood,” can be seen as, not only ‘Rousseauistic’, but “already the inheritor of Platonism.”345 He therefore intends to show that Levi Strauss’s ‘Marxist’ critique of writing is actually based on a logocentric understanding of ‘reality’, and that Levi-Strauss, like many other

344 Ibid., p. 82.
345 Ibid., p. 137.
'logocentric' philosophers, has "written of writing" as "the anathema that the Western world has obstinately mulled over, the exclusion by which it has constituted and recognized itself, from the Phaedrus to the Course in General Linguistics."\(^{346}\)

Although Derrida has dealt with Levi-Strauss’ work at length in other studies,\(^ {347}\) in Of Grammatology he is interested in Levi-Strauss’s ‘Marxist’ credentials in his essay, “A Writing Lesson,” found in Tristes Tropique (which we have glanced at briefly in Chapter Two, above). From the start of his reading, however, as we would expect, Derrida is critical of Levi-Strauss’s judgement of the Nambikwara as a group of ‘innocent’ tribesmen who seem to be innocent, because they "could not write."\(^ {348}\) Derrida’s task – as in much of his work – is to show that, “No reality or concept would therefore respond to the expression ‘society without writing,’” and that this expression itself is dependent on an "ethnocentric misconception of writing."\(^ {349}\) This ‘ethnocentric misconception’ is, he feels, based on an appeal to a logocentric conception of ‘reality’ as a community in which all the members are ‘present’ to each other in a way that the modern Westerner could only hope to be. The ideal underlying Levi-Strauss’s critique of writing, says Derrida, is “the image of a community immediately present to itself, without difference, a community of speech where all the members are within earshot,” as opposed to his image of modern society, which consists of “a much larger and specifically ‘unauthentic’ system.”\(^ {350}\) Supporting this ‘ethnocentric misconception of writing,’ is Levi-Strauss’s association of literacy with evil and exploitation: The Nambikwara, “among whom evil will insinuate itself with the intrusion of writing come from without (exothen, as the Phaedrus says) – the Nambikwara, who do not know how to write, are good, we are told.”\(^ {351}\) Modern people, on the other hand, according to Levi-Strauss, communicate “by all kinds of intermediaries – written documents or administrative machinery – which undoubtedly vastly extend our contacts but at the same time make those contacts somewhat ‘unauthentic.’”

\(^{346}\) Ibid., p. 102.
\(^{347}\) Derrida’s most famous engagement with Levi-Strauss’s work can be found in his essay “Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences,” which was, rather controversially, presented at a conference on structuralism, where Derrida nevertheless questioned the validity of the structuralist project as a whole. Derrida questions in particular the ‘metaphysical’ assumptions of structuralism, by arguing that Levi-Strauss (one of the ‘founding fathers’ of the movement) has failed to think the "structurality of structure"; that is, other than something that has "a center or referring it to a point of presence, a fixed origin." Thus it has always been thought, says Derrida, "that the center, which is by definition unique, constituted that very thing within a structure which governs the structure, while escaping structurality. This is why classical thought concerning structure could say that the center is, paradoxically, within the structure and outside it. The center is at the center of the totality, and yet, since the center does not belong to the totality (is not part of the totality), the totality has its center elsewhere." (Cf. Writing and Difference, p. 280)

\(^ {348}\) Of Grammatology, p. 110.
\(^ {349}\) Ibid., p. 109.
\(^ {350}\) Ibid., p. 136.
\(^ {351}\) Ibid., p. 116.
Derrida is aware of Levi-Strauss's admitted Marxist aims,\textsuperscript{352} which become evident in his description of the Nambikwara leader's attempts to 'read'. As Derrida, notes, it is in fact tempting to read the story as "a parable in which each element, each semanteme, refers to a recognised function of writing: hierarchization, the economic function of capitalization, particularly in a quasi-religious secret."\textsuperscript{353} Derrida is concerned to show, however, that Levi-Strauss's 'Marxist' hypothesis is only a disguise for the real basis of his argument, which is a logocentric insistence on the evil of writing as an 'external' form of representation, rather than any particular application of Marx's theory of capitalist exploitation. This theory of writing, says Derrida, despite being "in the name of a Marxist hypothesis, is articulated with the finest example of what I have called the 'metaphysics of presence.'"\textsuperscript{354} If writing is seen as an artificial, external form of representation, says Derrida, this immediately permits "the distinction between peoples using writing and peoples without writing," which "supports an ethico-political accusation: man's exploitation by man is the fact of writing cultures of the Western type," while communities of "innocent and unoppressive speech are free from this accusation."\textsuperscript{355}

According to Derrida, this idea is totally ludicrous. Although Levi-Strauss has problematised many metaphysical assumptions through his structuralist method, "one no less perceives in his work a sort of ethic of presence, an ethic of nostalgia for origins, an ethic of archaic and natural innocence, of a purity of presence and self-presence in speech – an ethic, nostalgia, and even remorse which he often presents as the motivation of the ethnological project when he moves toward archaic societies – exemplary societies in his eyes."\textsuperscript{356} In a familiar deconstructive gesture, Derrida argues that, "there is a violence that does not supervene from without upon an innocent language in order to surprise it," that is, upon an innocent language that apparently "suffers the aggression of writing as the accident of its disease, its defeat and its fall," and this is because, says Derrida, we have

\textsuperscript{352} "Writing, the exploitation of man by man: I do not impose these words upon Levi-Strauss. Let us recall the Conversations by way of precaution: '...writing itself, in that first instance, seemed to be associated in any permanent way only with societies which were based on the exploitation of man by man.'" In Tristes Tropiques, says Derrida, Levi-Strauss is aware of proposing a Marxist theory of writing. Criticized, for example, by M. Rodinson in the name of Marxism, he complains in a letter written to the Nouvelle Critique in 1955: "If he had read my book, instead of confining himself to the extracts published a few months ago, he would have discovered-in addition to a Marxist hypothesis on the origins of writing-two studies dedicated to Brazilian tribes (the Caduveo and the Bororo), which are efforts to interpret native superstructures based upon dialectical materialism. The novelty of this approach in the Western anthropological literature perhaps deserves more attention and sympathy" (cf. Of Grammatology, p. 119).

\textsuperscript{353} Ibid., p. 126.

\textsuperscript{354} Ibid., p. 131.

\textsuperscript{355} Ibid., p. 121.

\textsuperscript{356} Writing and Difference, p. 293.
Derrida believes that “writing appears well before writing in the narrow sense; already in the différance or the arche-writing that opens speech itself.”

Derrida is right to deconstruct the “metaphysics of presence” at the heart of those ‘iconoclastic’ approaches to writing we have explored above; that is, those descriptions of writing as a form of re-presentation that is a fall from ‘full presence.’ It should be clear what Derrida’s reaction would be to the work of theorists such as Ong, McLuhan, Goody and Watt, and even Baudrillard. Nevertheless, just because these metaphysical descriptions of writing can be described as ‘logocentric’, does this mean that all iconoclasm falls into this category? This is obviously not the case, and Derrida himself could be considered as the heir of iconoclastic philosophers such as Heidegger, Nietzsche, and even Marx; philosophers we might not immediately describe as guilty of ‘onto-theology’ or ‘logocentrism’. As we will see, however, rather than seeing Marx as an iconoclast whose critique of metaphysical reification is similar to his own critique of logocentrism, Derrida feels that Marx can be described as a logocentric “heir of Plato.”

3.2.3. Marx’s critique of modern ‘idolatry’: deconstruction or logocentrism?

Although Derrida exempts ‘Marxism’ from the critique of writing in his reading of Levi-Strauss; by the time he writes Spectres of Marx, Derrida sees a number of similarities between Levi-Strauss’ logocentric critique of writing, and Marx’s ‘iconoclasm’, which Derrida feels is as logocentric as the former. Derrida feels that, like Plato, Marx is concerned to critique the eidōlon in various forms, although Marx does not realise that this sort of iconoclasm actually has a “boomerang effect,” and exposes the ‘idolatrous’ assumptions of his own iconoclastic work. Derrida, as we will see, interprets Marx’s critique of the ‘idols’ of modernity as a critique of ‘representation’, understood as somehow metaphysically opposed to ‘reality’. This is, however, as in the case of Baudrillard’s critique

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357 Ibid., p. 106.
358 Ibid., p. 127. Derrida is concerned to highlight the ‘metaphysical’ assumptions of writing, because, he notes, ethnology itself is a product of writing, which means that it expresses the assumptions it holds about language: “Ethnology – like any science – comes about within the element of discourse. And it is primarily a European science employing traditional concepts, however much it may struggle against them. Consequently, whether he wants to or not – and this does not depend on a decision on his part – the ethnologist accepts into his discourse the premises of ethnocentrism at the very moment when he is employed in denouncing them. This necessity is irreducible; it is not a historical contingency.” (Writing and Difference, p. 282)
of Marx, a severe misinterpretation of Marx’s critical practice, which is more similar to Derrida’s deconstruction of logocentrism than the latter might acknowledge. If Marx is guilty of practising a logocentric form of iconoclasm – which, it will be argued, he clearly is not – then in what ways does Derrida’s own deconstructive ‘iconoclasm’ avoid this same charge?

Marx, as we have seen, offers an iconoclastic critique of the ‘idolatries’ of modernity, which include, amongst other things, the fallacies of speculative metaphysics and ideology, the reification of exchange-value, and the fetishistic attitude towards money and commodities, evident in consumer behaviour. Marx traces these ‘evils’ to the alienated (and alienating) practices that characterise the modern capitalistic world. Derrida nevertheless feels that Marx’s iconoclasm is based on a logocentric distinction between ‘reality’ and ‘representation.’ Because, for Derrida, the belief in a ‘reality’ that is ‘unmediated’ is an example of what he calls the “metaphysics of presence”, he therefore feels that Marx’s work can be deconstructed on these grounds. According to Derrida, Marx’s obsession with the dangers of the ‘image’, or ‘appearance’, is evidence of his faith in the illusion of a ‘reality’, conceived metaphysically, as something ‘immediately present’ to itself. Marx’s obsessive quest to exorcise the ‘ghosts’, ‘phantoms’, ‘phantasms’, and ‘spectres’ that avoid being categorised as ‘real’, says Derrida, is similar to Plato’s quest to banish the εἰδῶλα from the Republic. According to Derrida, the theme of ‘spectrality’, more than a literary device, is actually the basis of Marx’s metaphysical ontology. But is Marx’s iconoclasm really directed towards ‘spectrality’, conceived as the metaphysical opposite of ‘reality’? Derrida’s misreading of Marx’s iconoclasm nevertheless forms the basis of his proposal that all traditional ‘ontologies’ should be replaced with ‘hauntologies’ that do not rely on any metaphysical distinction between ‘reality’ and ‘representation.’

Although we could offer a defence of Marx against Derrida’s misreading at this stage, it will perhaps be helpful to outline Derrida’s critique of Marx more fully, in order to see how misguided it is, and in order to fully understand the problems associated with Derrida’s own description of ‘reality’ as opposed to Marx’s. “Marx does not like ghosts,” says Derrida, and he “believes rather in what is supposed to distinguish them from actual reality, living effectivity. He believes he can oppose them, like life to death, like vain appearances of the simulacrum to real presence. He believes enough in the dividing line of this opposition to want to denounce, chase away, or exorcize the specters by means of critical analysis and
not by some counter-magic." It is his apparent belief in the dividing line between 'reality' and the 'image', or the 'spectral', that Derrida feels marks Marx as a 'logocentric' scholar (although there has "never been a scholar," says Derrida, "who, as such, does not believe in the sharp distinction between the real and the unreal, the actual and the inactual, the living and the non-living, being and non-being ('to be or not to be,' in the conventional reading), in the opposition between what is present and what is not, for example in the form of objectivity. Beyond this opposition, there is, for the scholar, only the hypothesis of a school of thought, theatrical fiction, literature, and speculation.")

Marx's 'logocentric iconoclasm', according to Derrida, can be seen in all his work, from his doctoral dissertation, to his description of commodity fetishism in *Capital*. Derrida argues that, in the *German Ideology*, for example, Marx accuses Max Stirner of 'conjuring ghosts', although he seems to be unaware of his own reliance on some rather 'spectral' ideas. For Derrida, however, it is almost impossible to avoid conjuring a number of ghosts, even while one is attempting to exorcise the ghosts one sees in the work of others. As he asks: "how to distinguish between the analysis that denounces magic and the counter-magic that it still risks being?" This, he argues, is a tricky business, and he feels that Marx does not manage to avoid producing a sort of 'counter-magic', as can be seen in his engagement with the work of Stirner. Stirner's exemplary fault, says Derrida, "for which he must be judged, judged for the example, would be the vice of modern speculation. Speculation always speculates on some specter, it speculates on the mirror of what it produces, on the spectacle that it gives itself and that it gives itself to see. It believes in what it believes it sees: in representations." But is Marx really concerned with Stirner's 'representations'? Derrida seems to think this is the case. For Derrida, Marx's critique rests on his defence of 'reality' over Stirner's 'ghosts', although Derrida feels that this distinction is itself, not a solution to Stirner's 'magic', but a form of 'counter-magic' in its own right. As Derrida warns, Marx's solution risks being:
a counter-sophistics that at every moment runs the risk of replicating the reply: reproducing in a mirror the logic of the adversary at the moment of the retort, piling it on there where one accuses the other of abusing language. This counter-sophistics (Marx as paradoxical heir of Plato, as we shall see) has to manipulate simulacra, mimemes, phantasms. It has to watch out for, so as to denounce, the maneuvers of an illusionist, the ‘conjuring tricks’ of a prestidigitator of the concept, or the sleights of hand of a nominalist rhetor.365

For Derrida, Marx’s metaphysical distinction between ‘reality’ and ‘representation’, or ‘reality’ and ‘spectrality’, is most clear in his critique of Stirner’s ‘ghostly’ theory of the ego, to which Marx opposes the ‘living reality’ of work and practice: “Marx seems to be warning Stirner: if you want to conjure away these ghosts, then believe me, I beg you [je vous en conjure], the egological conversion is not enough, nor is the change in the direction of a gaze, nor the phenomenological reduction; one must work – practically, actually. One must think work and work at it. Work is necessary, as an actual account of reality as practical actuality.”366 The problem with contrasting a ‘ghost’ with ‘practical actuality’, says Derrida, is that this conception of ‘reality’ is an illusion, a ‘ghost’ that needs to be exorcised. It is for this reason, he claims, that the “deconstructive critiques that Marx will address to the Stirnean ‘historical constructions’ or ‘montages’ risk coming back at him like a boomerang. Whence the endless, relentless pursuit.”367 It is in their common denunciation of the ghost, of the synthetic image or simulated speculation, says Derrida, that both Marx and Stirner can be seen as the heirs of Plato, and guilty of perpetuating the “metaphysics of presence” that can be found throughout the Western philosophical tradition.

Derrida sees a ‘logocentric’ logic in Marx’s critique of all the other ‘ghostly’ ‘reifications’ that can be found in modern society; including his notions of exchange-value, capital, and the commodity fetish. As Derrida notes, the “discourse of Capital on the ‘exchange process’ opens like a discourse on haunting,”368 and Derrida feels that this ‘discourse on haunting’ is based on a distinction between the ‘reality’ of ‘living work’ and the ‘prosthesis’ or ‘simulacrum’ of capital:

As is well known, Marx always described money, and more precisely the monetary sign, in the figure of appearance or simulacrum, more exactly of the ghost. He not only described them, he also defined them, but the figural presentation of the concept seemed to describe some spectral ‘thing,’ which is to say, “someone.” What is the necessity of this figural presentation?... The whole movement of idealization (Idealisierung) that Marx then describes, whether it is a question of money or of

365 Ibid., p. 126.
366 Ibid., p. 130.
367 Ibid., p. 140.
368 Ibid., p. 158.
Derrida feels that, just as Marx compares the ‘ghost’ of Stirner’s ego to ‘practical actuality’, so Marx contrasts the ‘spectrality’ of money, to the reality of ‘living work.’

Derrida links Marx’s and Stirner’s critique of the ‘ghost’ to Plato’s critique of the *eidoλon*, which, as we have seen, Derrida ‘deconstructs’ as a logocentric conception of ‘representation’ understood as a deviation from ‘reality’: “in what is at once most critical and ontological about it,” Derrida argues, “Marx and Saint Max are also heirs to the Platonic tradition, more precisely to the one that associates in a strict fashion image with specter, and idol with phantasm, with the *phantasma* in its phantomatic or errant dimension as living-dead.” It is this Platonic suspicion of the *eidoλon*, says Derrida, that we find in *The German Ideology*, and it is this that links Marx to the logocentric tradition: The “idol”, says Derrida, is “the philosophical *patrimony* such as it is handed down, through the most parricidal mutations, from Plato to Saint Max, to Marx and beyond.” What, then, is Derrida’s ‘solution’ to what he perceives as this example of Marx’s logocentrism? As he has done in relation to his work on writing, Derrida proposes that *différance* precedes the distinction between ‘reality’ and ‘representation’. Marx and Stirner, in their distinction between ‘reality’ and ‘spectrality’, he says, do not take into account “the *différance* of the technical apparatus, prosthesis, synthetic image, simulacrum, all of which begins with language, before language.”

In a similar way, Derrida ‘deconstructs’ Marx’s critique of fetishism, by pointing out that this critique is based on logocentric grounds. Derrida feels that Marx is ultimately unsuccessful in exorcising the ghostly fetish, because his distinction between *use-value* and *exchange-value* is, according to Derrida a ‘logocentric’ one. What Marx does not realise, says Derrida, is that the “limit-concept of use-value is in advance contaminated, that is, preoccupied, inhabited, haunted by its other.” What precedes both use value and exchange value, according to Derrida, is *différance*: “For if no use-value can *in itself produce* this mysticality or this spectral effect of the commodity, and if the secret is at the same time profound and superficial, opaque and transparent, a secret that is all the more secret in that no substantial essence hides behind it, it is because the effect is born of a

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369 Ibid., p. 45.
370 Ibid., p. 147.
371 Ibid., p. 141.
372 Ibid., p. 160.
relation (ferance, difference, reference, and différance).” Because Derrida feels that exchange-value will always ‘haunt’ use-value, he feels that Marx’s description of ‘fetishism’ is itself something that can be deconstructed. What Marx fails to realise, says Derrida, is that, “as there is production, there is fetishism: idealisation, autonomisation and automatisation, dematerialisation and spectral incorporation.” But how can all production involve fetishism? Is this not a misunderstanding of what ‘fetishism’ is, at least as Marx employs the term in a critical way? In fact, how can we ‘deconstruct’ fetishism at all?

For Marx, ‘fetishism’ involves a form of delusion, or even self-delusion; it is a misguided evaluation of things that needs to be approached critically. To identity a practice as ‘fetishistic’, is not to describe this practice in metaphysical terms, it is to make a judgement against a certain practice, because this practice is seen as based on illusory grounds. ‘Fetishism’, for Marx, is an alienated (as well as alienating) practice that prevents human beings from creatively expressing their ‘essential nature’; his judgement is not against a ‘fetish’ metaphysically conceived in opposition to ‘reality’, but against a certain misguided and delusional practice. If, according to Derrida, all idolatry is based on a logocentric conception of eido
dela, and all fetishism is based on a distinction between the ‘ghost’ and ‘reality’, then in what cases could we ever offer a genuine critique of either idolatry or fetishism? According to Derrida’s conception of the matter, it seems that we never could. Yet, as we have seen, Derrida himself seems to be part of an ‘iconoclastic’ tradition, and his own deconstructive practice is aimed at those metaphysical illusions that have been described by philosophers such as Nietzsche in terms of ‘idolatry’. How would Derrida describe his own iconoclastic practice, if, according to him, all iconoclasm is based on the illusory grounds of the “metaphysics of presence”? It is here that Marx’s conception of iconoclasm as a critical practice, aimed at illusions and idols, seems to be more helpful than Derrida’s rather ‘metaphysical’ conception of the problem. Derrida seems to end up in a rather metaphysical ‘space’, because he has overlooked the practical nature of both the problem of idolatry, and the iconoclastic response to this problem.

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373 Ibid., p. 154.
374 Ibid., p. 166.
3.3. Derrida’s *différance*: haunted by the ghost of practice?

Operating necessarily from the inside, borrowing all the strategic and economic resources of subversion from the old structure... the enterprise of deconstruction always in a certain way falls prey to its own work.\(^{375}\)

At risk of repeating ourselves, let us be clear about exactly what Derrida’s critique of Marx is. What Derrida finds problematic is that, as he sees it, “Marx advances that belief in the religious spectre, thus in the ghost in general, consists in autonomising a representation (*Vorstellung*) and in forgetting its genesis as well as its real grounding (*reale Grundlage*).”\(^{376}\) The problem with Marx, says Derrida, is that he wants to “ground his critique or his exorcism of the spectral simulacrum in an ontology. It is a — critical but predeconstructive — ontology of presence as actual reality and as objectivity."\(^{377}\) But is Marx’s ‘ontology’ really based on a metaphysical distinction between ‘representation’ and ‘reality’, conceived in a logocentric way? Let us be clear about what Derrida’s critique is here. For Derrida, the ‘onto-theological’ appeal to a metaphysical ‘centre’, in order to offer a totalising explanation of reality, is itself an illusion that needs to be exposed and deconstructed. He is thus particularly critical of Plato, for example, whose ontological appeal to an ideal reality beyond our senses performs the function of this metaphysical centre, and this affects everything, from his ethics to his theory of signs. But in what ways could Marx’s description of the ‘practical actuality’ of everyday life, be regarded as similar to Plato’s more obviously ‘onto-theological’ description of reality?

One of the differences between Marx’s ontology and Plato’s ‘onto-theology’ is that, while Plato places more *value* on his ‘ideal reality’ than anything else, Marx is simply trying to describe the *actual* reality ‘where we stand’ as human beings who are practically involved in a world that is both social and historical. According to Marx, we need to *begin* our analysis of the nature and problems of human reality, from an understanding of the ‘practical actuality’ of our existence. This is not something to be worshipped or revered over and above all other things: it is simply the ‘fact of the matter’, as it were, it is the place from where we must *begin*. Derrida’s conception of Marx’s work as an attempt to bring “representation back to the world of labour, production, and exchange, so as to

\(^{375}\) *Of Grammatology*, p. 24.
\(^{376}\) Ibid., p. 171.
\(^{377}\) *Spectres of Marx*, p. 170.
reduce it to its conditions,” is therefore simply a misinterpretation of what Marx is trying to do. Marx appeals to the ‘reality’ of human practices, to the “world of labour, production, and exchange”, in order to show what it is that metaphysics has overlooked; even the philosopher, according to Marx, seems to have overlooked that he is a social and historical being engaged in a material practical activity. Marx is not naming the ‘practical actuality’ of human life as something to be revered or worshipped, or as a ‘central’ metaphysical point that gives meaning to everything; he is starting from an analysis of the practices that he sees around him. We can hopefully now see the extent of Derrida’s misinterpretation of Marx’s ‘ontology’, as well as the problems with Derrida’s alternative ‘hauntology.’

Derrida, on the other hand, feels that Marx’s ontology is based on Hamlet’s question of what lies between “to be” and “not to be,” and it is for this reason that he feels that Marx is guilty of a common metaphysical crime. Is there, he asks, “between the thing itself and its simulacrum, an opposition that holds up?” In place of Marx’s supposedly ‘logocentric’ ontology, then, Derrida proposes a ‘hauntology’, that he feels would be “larger and more powerful than an ontology or a thinking of Being (of the ‘to be,’ assuming that it is a matter of Being in the ‘to be or not to be,’ but nothing is less certain).” If there is something like ‘spectrality,’ says Derrida, “there are reasons to doubt this reassuring order of presents and, especially, the border between the present, the actual or present reality of the present, and everything that can be opposed to it: absence, non-presence, non-effectivity, inactuality, virtuality, or even the simulacrum in general, and so forth.” But how would this ‘hauntology’ look? And how would it be different to an ontology such as Marx’s? It is here that we see the major differences between Derrida’s and Marx’s ‘ontological’ work, although we feel that Marx offers a more successful picture of things.

Whereas for Marx, metaphysical distinctions can be deconstructed by pointing to the ‘practical actuality’ of human life, Derrida feels metaphysical distinctions can only be deconstructed through an appeal to différance. The concept of hauntology, he says, includes the notions of archi-écriture, différance, and the pharmakon, while ‘hauntology’ does not belong “to ontology, to the discourse of Being of beings, or the essence of life and death.” Différence is the ‘hauntological’ space between, before and beyond any metaphysical distinction. It is necessary, says Derrida, “to introduce haunting into the very construction of a concept. Of every concept, beginning with the concepts of being and

378 Ibid., p. 170.
379 Ibid., p. 10.
380 Ibid., p. 40.
time. That is what we would be calling here a hauntology.  

While both Marx and Derrida are concerned with a critique of the illusions of metaphysical thinking, then, the differences between them lie in that, whereas Marx conceives of metaphysical thinking as a practice, Derrida conceives of metaphysics in a rather metaphysical way: that is, as something that has its ‘origins’ in *différance*. But why can we not simply think of metaphysics as a problematic type of philosophical practice that could be criticised for a number of reasons? The weakness of Derrida’s critique of metaphysics, through an appeal to *différance*, is very obvious in light of his misguided interpretation of Marx. What Marx fails to see, according to Derrida, is that ‘reality’ is always ‘haunted’ by ghosts, spectres, phantoms, representations, simulations (and including a list of other concepts that Derrida sees as traditionally metaphysically opposed to ‘reality’). For Derrida, it is *difference* that precedes the concept of ‘reality’ itself.

But is ‘reality’ really only a concept? And even if it were, how could *différance*, which is also a concept, precede ‘reality’. Derrida seems to have overlooked the ‘reality’ of our practical, embodied engagement with the world that precedes intellectual achievements, including the achievements of philosophical reflection, and the production of concepts such as *différance*. It is our practical engagement in the world that is the fundamental condition of all conceptualisation, including that of the metaphysical variety, and not another metaphysical concept, such as *différance*. It almost seems that Derrida, rather than starting from material human practices, and from our situation in a material environment, starts from the position of the ‘alienated philosopher’, and reads what he sees as the transcendental limits of language and signification, into the grounds of everyday life and practice. Rather than the concept of ‘practical actuality’ being haunted by *différance*, it seems that Derrida’s concept of *différance* is *haunted* by the ‘practical actuality’ of our embodied engagement in the world. We will examine this issue more thoroughly in Chapter 5, below. In the following chapter, we examine Catherine Pickstock’s critique of Derrida’s notion of *différance*. Although we are also critical of *différance*, we will see that Pickstock also fails to understand the problem of idolatry in praxeological terms.

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381 Ibid., p. 161.
We have seen in the preceding chapter how Jacques Derrida challenges metaphysics (in the pejorative sense of ‘onto-theology’, or ‘logocentrism’) by pointing to *différance* as the ‘non-space’ from whence metaphysical distinctions and categories themselves apparently originate. We argued, however, that *différance* itself seemed to offer a rather metaphysical picture of reality, and that, rather than thinking of metaphysical concepts as emerging from the ‘non-space’ of *différance*, it might be more helpful to think of metaphysics as a certain type of philosophical *practice* (albeit an arguably misguided one). *Différance*, it seems, offers us a *no less* idealistic and totalising picture of reality than other metaphysical pictures Derrida has attempted to deconstruct.

This is a critique that has also been offered by the theologian Catherine Pickstock, who feels that *différance*, as yet another metaphysical picture of ‘reality’, is an idea that should itself be approached from an iconoclastic perspective. Although we might agree with Pickstock that Derrida’s notion of *différance* resembles a number of other problematic metaphysical pictures of reality, there are, as we will discuss in this chapter, a number of problems with Pickstock’s own work. Firstly, Pickstock feels that the only solution to the problem of metaphysics is to turn to *theology*. She feels that only an appeal to God, or the practice of the Christian liturgy, can help us to overcome the ‘idolatry’ of metaphysics. Secondly, Pickstock feels that the problem of metaphysics is connected to the problem of *writing*. She feels that the only way to overcome *logocentrism*, as well as Derrida’s *deconstruction* of logocentrism, is to appeal to the spoken word, or, more specifically, to the ‘oral practice’ of the Christian liturgy, as providing a better model for human thought and action in general. The full title of Pickstock’s book, *After Writing: On the Liturgical Consummation of Philosophy*, hints at how both these very problematic ideas actually form the foundation of her thesis. Pickstock feels that the time has come to ‘consummate’, not only philosophy (whatever this might mean), but also writing (however this is understood),
through an appeal to the Christian liturgy. We argue that, although Pickstock’s intuition seems correct – that is, we need to approach metaphysical problems from somewhere other than a metaphysical perspective – it nevertheless seems that she goes about showing this in an entirely misguided way. By pointing to ‘orality’ and ‘liturgy’ as the only way we can challenge the ‘idolatry’ of metaphysics, Pickstock leads us down a very strange path indeed.

4.1. Modern mathēsis: A feature of literacy?

Against Derrida, I shall show how writing, not orality, is the precondition for Cartesian subjectivity.\(^{382}\)

For Pickstock, metaphysics involves the transformation of ‘real space’, into ‘mental space’, so that “space becomes a pseudo-eternity.”\(^{383}\) Pickstock feels that this sophistic ‘virtualization’ of reality has resulted in a shift away from the understanding of the world through embodied liturgical practice, and she describes this as a bizarre kind of “immanentist ritual,” or “anti-ritual,” resulting in an “arbitrary ordering of nothing, a nihilistic project in the merely formal interests of control itself.”\(^{384}\) She feels that modern metaphysics has been an attempt to “bypass the intervention of human temporality and subjectivity (which a liturgical knowledge and practice had embraced),” and that this metaphysical move has become “increasingly normative and has even infiltrated the very structures of our language.”\(^{385}\)

Pickstock refers to the spatialized abstraction of knowledge into a fixed set of categories as mathēsis – which is an allusion to Descartes’ attempts to produce a ‘mathēsis universalis’, a hypothetical universal science modelled on mathematical principles. According to Pickstock, the development of the so-called “New Science” was an attempt to “force all knowledge into a grid of a spatial mathēsis in which all the essences of things have a fixed and perpetual place.”\(^{386}\) The roots of this concept of mathēsis, according to Pickstock, can be found in the ideas and work of Peter Ramus, who proposed that ‘learning by heart’ should follow a systematic procedure, in which dialectical order was

\(^{382}\) After Writing, p. 62.
\(^{383}\) Ibid., p. 48.
\(^{384}\) Ibid., p. xiv.
\(^{385}\) Ibid., p. 48.
\(^{386}\) Ibid., p. 29.
to be sought and visualized according to schemas that would be "applicable to every art and science, and its emphasis on clarity and simplicity is thought to open every discipline to a condition of availability and accessibility."  

Pickstock’s critical attitude to the metaphysical transformation of reality into a sort of virtual ‘mathēsis’ does not seem to be problematic in itself; what is problematic, however, is that Pickstock sees this metaphysical reification, as well what she sees as the shift away from a more ‘liturgical’ interpretation of reality, to have been caused by the increase of literacy in the early modern world. Pickstock defines her task as an attempt to “trace the emergence of the unliturgical world,” which she feels was caused by the development of a “textual calculus of the ‘real.’” It is clear that Pickstock takes the notion of a ‘textual calculus’ quite literally. Drawing on the work of Goody, Watt, Ong, and a number of the other theorists whose work was explored in Chapter 2 above, Pickstock explains that she believes that the increase of literacy in the early modern world was at least partly responsible for the development of modern metaphysics and other ‘idolatrous’ practices. It was the increase in literacy from the eleventh century onwards, she argues, that led to the “sinister project of mathēsis or of ‘spatializing’ knowledge, that is to say, of mapping knowledge onto a manipulable grid” that has been identified as the ‘reification’ that plagues both philosophical and social practice.

The problem with writing, as with other technologies, says Pickstock, is that it attempts to usurp ‘reality.’ She feels that “technological progress in writing and other modes of mechanical operation provides us with an all too seductive facility. If one takes this facility for ‘the real,’ one is led to imagine that the ease and predictability of operations within a new artificial sphere exhibit our true, primary relationship to the world.” For Pickstock, writing, and especially printing, are products (and problems) of the modern world, and the only way to overcome these ‘seductive facilities’ is to return to the embodied liturgical practices of a pre-capitalist oral society. It was due to the increase of literacy towards the end of the Middle Ages, and the introduction of printing more specifically, according to Pickstock, that ‘reality’ became ‘textualised’ to the extent that it

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387 Ibid., p. 49.
388 Ibid., p. 50.
389 Ibid., p. 3.
390 Ibid., p. xiii.
391 Ibid., p. 48.
was something that could be ‘surveyed’ on the space of a page, or ‘read’ in a single, synchronic glance. This resulted, she says, in the “voiceless style which presaged the Cartesian attempt to ‘get outside’ subjectivity and language altogether, and to find the pure, unmediated mathēsis.”\textsuperscript{392} We will examine the problems with this idea as we continue, although will need to first lay out Pickstock’s argument as fully as possible in order to understand her exact criticism of Derrida’s work, and in order to understand how severely misguided her iconoclasm really is.

Drawing on the work of Ong, Pickstock explains how Ramus’ methodus involved the application of certain rules in order to categorise and memorise a variety of topics.\textsuperscript{393} The consequence of Ramus’ “fractal epistemology”, says Pickstock, is that, what was supposed to simply be a ‘method’ employed to better memorise a topic, became seen as an objective ‘law’ preceding that topic itself. The person employing the method became master of the ‘reality’ he was surveying, without realising that this ‘reality’ was really nothing more than a ‘representation’: “by adopting the stance of methodizer, the pedagogue obfuscates the confusions of reality, generating an apparently objective ontology, from a secretly subjective method. This subterfuge depends entirely upon a new distinction from, and elevation above, the flow of reality on the part of the subject, which alone permits reality apparently to render itself in terms of discrete definition, distribution, clarity, and distinctness.”\textsuperscript{394} Ramus’ method therefore appeared more real than the ‘reality’ it was examining, and in many ways, according to Pickstock, the method assumed “a supra-real” status, as though it was ordained to “deliver the clear and distinct essence of reality as it really is, rather than as it merely seems, by means of a direct and yet exalted access.” Pickstock’s critique, then, is that the ‘reality’ provided by Ramus’ method, was nothing more than illusion.

Although it might be a positive move to criticise this sort of illusion, for some reason Pickstock, in the same way as other theorists whose work we examined in Chapter 2 above, feels that this illusion can be linked to writing (which she understands as a ‘representation’ of ‘reality’). The main problem with Ramus’ method, says Pickstock, was that it was textual, or, more specifically, printed: “the apparently universal applicability of

\textsuperscript{392} Ibid., p. 55.
\textsuperscript{393} Cf. Walter J. Ong, S1. Ramus and the Decay of Dialogue (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1983), pp. 65-72. The Ramist method involved the application of a technique of deductive reasoning from general principles to particularities which was applied to all ‘knowledge’, regardless of the nature of the subject under scrutiny, the results of which were that each topic, belonging to any discipline, was seen as available to the same lateral grid of inquiry. See Figure 2 below.
\textsuperscript{394} After Writing, p. 52.
the *mathēsis* was specifically *textual*, and encouraged by the model of the manoeuvrable type of the printing press.” Because of its ‘textuality’, says Pickstock, Ramus’ method removed the “the reality of sound,” and reduced dialectic itself to the “sophistic rhetoric” of a “specifically *textual* monologue.” Such attempts to convert ‘reality’ into a ‘representation’, a “given” that could be surveyed or comprehended by the reader, says Pickstock, was “encouraged by post-Gutenberg communications, for the effect of printing was to reinforce the dominance of a linear structure of ‘given’ arguments apprehended at a glance on the surveyable page.”

According to Pickstock, Ramus’ method can be seen to prefigure the Cartesian subordination of ‘reality’ to a geometric or mathematical *extensio*. Descartes is usually identified as one of the guiltiest modern ‘metaphysicians’, and his ego-centric philosophy could rightly be seen as the result of what Feuerbach and Marx critique as speculative ‘objectification’ or ‘reification.’ It is through “objectifying being,” says Pickstock, that

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395 Ibid., pp. 53-55.

“Descartes transforms the determinations of reality into purely spatial classifications, as the ‘given’ rather than the gift of a donor through which the transcendent is mediated.” Descartes’ “objectification of reality turns the object into a sign,” says Pickstock, which results in the removal of ‘reality’ or ‘real’ matter from his philosophical system.  

Descartes’ philosophy, she says, results in an “epistemological virtual reality” that, “by defining being as the unvarying, clear, and distinct, subordinates it to the measure of the knowing subject, and finally places its objectivity in doubt.” We can see how writing, understood as a ‘representation’ of ‘reality’, is therefore linked by Pickstock to the realm of the ‘virtual’. As in her discussion of Ramus, Pickstock believes that Descartes’ virtual ‘epistemological projection,’ can be linked to writing.

Descartes’ mathēsis, according to Pickstock, is constituted, not of “oral transmission through time, but of spatial, written arrangement,” and she feels that his philosophy “liberates reality from its perceptual limits, leading to the creation of a new manipulable cosmos on a theoretical plane,” while “its elements, because of their simplicity, abstraction and reduction to the same transferable ‘substance,’ imply a freedom of permutation, like the exchangeable type of the printing press, suggesting that the language to which these signs belong is conceived on the lines of a visual (and typographic analogy).” Descartes is “precisely sophistic,” we read, “for his model, detached both from mediations of the good and from particularity, draws significantly upon analogies of writing and draughtsmanship,” and these “written analogies for the organization of knowledge” show how Descartes prioritises “formal consistency, or subjection to geometric, spatial rule over the incarnation of goodness.” It could be argued that Pickstock is mainly interested in writing used as an analogy, although she does not draw a fine line drawn between her condemnation of actual writing, and the reification, which she describes through a more metaphorical use of the term. The Cartesian subject, says Pickstock, estranges itself “from all that is material, including time, place, and particularity,” and it does this by “ordering itself through writing.” Descartes provides us with a “written subject”, whose “sole gesture is the act of writing itself... The mind which gathers itself in the (writing of) method is also an ideal writing, a collection of printed marks, divorced from circumstances, voice and

397 Ibid., p. 62. We are reminded here of Pickstock’s idea that Ramus’ ‘removed sound’ from his ‘manipulable grid’ – does this mean that ‘sound’ and ‘reality’ are related for Pickstock?
398 Ibid., p. 64.
399 Ibid., p. 60.
400 Ibid., p. 67.
401 Ibid., p. 58.
body, occupying the achronic instant of the text, in which there is no passing, progression, or transference.\textsuperscript{402} Descartes produces a subject that is an "interiorized written template which bears no traces of its physical situation, and so to the scalar flexibility of the object as death."\textsuperscript{403} For Descartes, she says, "the pure interior is sustained through writing and not speech," and that this interior is the "purest possible text."

4.2. Deriding Derrida: an heir of the sophistic vision?

Pickstock feels that, in light of this realisation that Descartes’ subject was a result of ‘writing’, Jacques Derrida is mistaken in thinking that consciousness is usually conceived as being mediated through an ‘inner voice’. Against (what she sees as) Derrida’s defence of writing over speech, Pickstock argues that, "writing is not the opposite of Cartesian interiority... but is commensurate with it."\textsuperscript{404} However, just because Derrida points out that consciousness is usually conceived according to a metaphysical picture that distinguishes the ‘inner’ speech from ‘outer’ writing, does this mean that Derrida believes Descartes’ subject was ‘commensurate with speech’? On the contrary, as we have seen, a great deal of Derrida’s work has attempted to deconstruct the fallacy that any medium of signification is, as Pickstock seems to think, a ‘precondition for subjectivity.’ Pickstock nevertheless believes that, “although Derrida might argue that Descartes’ writing, as alphabetic, is still metaphysical since it is always already subordinate to speech, in fact, although he does refer to alphabetic writing, Descartes’ emphasis on both formal order and diagrammatic consistency suggest that his epistemological writing is closer to Derrida’s supposedly non-metaphysical hieroglyph than to alphabetic script.”\textsuperscript{405} It seems that Pickstock has profoundly misinterpreted Derrida’s work in some significant ways: Derrida at no stage proposes a ‘non-metaphysical hieroglyph’ in opposition to speech, he simply sets out to show that the truth, or reality, is not something that either medium has access to. Derrida

\textsuperscript{402} Ibid., p. 72.
\textsuperscript{403} Ibid., p. 73.
\textsuperscript{404} Ibid., p. 72.
\textsuperscript{405} Ibid., p. 70. It is unclear as to why the idea of a ‘hieroglyph’ should be a problem for Pickstock, given that she prefers Plato’s metaphor of the ‘painted city’ over and above Descartes’ ‘written’ model: “Whilst Plato compares the construction of the ideal city to the painter using a heavenly model, for Descartes, the perfect city is primarily written, and wholly immanent” (p. 57). Pickstock’s claim that Descartes’ interest in order and proportion “imply a preference for the spatial pictogram rather than the seriality of alphabetic writing,” is in fact nonsensical in the light of her preference for Plato’s ‘painting’ model. It seems, moreover, that Pickstock in some ways contradicts herself by accusing Descartes of exalting “the morphological arts of weaving, carpet-making, and embroidery as pictorial and structural analogies of ideal and interior intellec” (p. 72) – are ‘weaving, carpet-making and embroidery’ not crafts usually associated with so-called ‘oral’ societies?
himself, as we have seen, furthermore, does not seem to be defending the actual practice of writing, or what he calls ‘vulgar’ writing; he is more concerned to find the ‘space between’ the metaphysical speech/writing distinction, which, as we have seen, is différance. Pickstock nevertheless goes to great lengths to show how Derrida himself is “culpably ‘metaphysical’ insofar as he celebrates sophistry and writing.406 But is this really a claim that can be made? Although we also think that Derrida is ‘culpably metaphysical’, we do not think this is because he ‘celebrates sophistry and writing’. We will explore Pickstock’s erroneous critique of Derrida in the section that follows.

Rather than refuting Cartesian logocentrism, she argues, Derrida actually “remains within a post-Cartesian set of assumptions whose ancestry lies in sophistry and not Platonic dialectics,”407 while she feels that Derrida is guilty of reading “Descartes back into Plato.”408 For Pickstock, Derrida is part of the problem, and not the solution, to the sophistic illusions fostered by metaphysical thinking, and she feels that this can be seen in his reading of Plato. Pickstock believes that the ‘idolatry’ of modern metaphysics, as well as capitalism, have their roots in the sophistry criticised by Socrates and Plato in Ancient Greece, and in her study of Plato’s Phaedrus, Pickstock is keen to show that the eponymous character is a defender of writing. Against this ‘sophistry,’ she says, it was Socrates and Plato who first radically challenged the beginnings of a “technocratic, manipulative, dogmatically rationalist, anti-erotic, anti-corporeal and homogenising society undergirded by secularity and pure immanence.”409 Pickstock therefore defends Plato against what she sees as the ‘sophistry’ of metaphysicians such as Descartes, as well as the person she identifies as his metaphysical ‘heir’: Jacques Derrida.

In order to better understand Pickstock’s critique of Derrida, we need to understand her alternative reading of Plato’s dialogue, the Phaedrus. As we have seen in the preceding chapter, Derrida sets out to show that it is not writing that leads to sophistic ‘illusions’, as Plato argues, but that Plato himself is guilty of a logocentric understanding of speech as inherently more ‘real’ than writing. Derrida, it should be emphasised, is only deconstructing Plato’s defence of speech insofar as it is linked to his logocentric understanding of ‘reality’. Pickstock thinks this is a total misreading of Plato, however, and she sets out to show that, in his defence of ‘writing’, Derrida actually fits the description of

406 Ibid., p. 47.
407 Ibid., p. 48.
408 Note 28, p. 116.
409 Ibid., p. 48.
what Plato would label a *sophist*. It is clear why Pickstock sees an element of ‘sophistry’ in the work of those modern philosophers who reify metaphysical concepts, which they consider to be *a priori* realities. What is less clear, however, is how this label can be attached to Derrida, who, as we have seen, is equally concerned to expose the ‘sophistic’ illusions found in some logocentric pictures of reality. For Plato, says Pickstock, writing is not necessarily a problem because it is a ‘representation’ of ‘reality’ (conceived in a rather logocentric way), as Derrida seems to think; rather, she says, writing is a problem because it is associated with *sophistry* (although, ironically, Pickstock seems to see writing as ‘sophistic’ precisely because it is a ‘representation’ of ‘reality’). In the *Phaedrus*, she says, Plato depicts the ruses of sophistry, and shows how, in a way similar to the ‘virtualization’ of reality instigated by modern metaphysics, the “sophistic protocols of division and manipulation can be seen to inaugurate a spatial reality without depth, in which a contractualized construction of subjectivity is substituted for genuine civic life grounded upon public, liturgical enactments of citizenship.”

According to Pickstock, Plato identifies “the nihilistic implications for epistemology and ontology of the sophistic instrumentalization of language, both in their construal of rhetoric, and in their denigration of oral modes of discourse.” In his *defence of writing*, says Pickstock, Derrida ultimately exposes himself as a ‘sophist.’

Contrary to the work of Derrida, she says, Socrates’ preference for spoken rather than written language is not a defence of ‘metaphysical presence’, but “the reverse, an attack on presence. His critique of writing and rhetoric does not presuppose a preference for a supra-linguistic philosophical logos, independent of time and place, but, to the contrary, it is precisely such a preference which Socrates associates with a *sophistic* vision,” while Derrida, she argues, is “heir to this vision.”

Hopefully the work in Chapter 3 above has shown that Derrida is no more an ‘heir of sophistry’ than he is a ‘critic of orality,’ or even a ‘defender of writing,’ for that matter. Derrida’s entire deconstructive project is based around the fallacies created by ‘sophistic’ philosophical work, and in his essay, “Plato’s Pharmacy”, Derrida is not defending the sophists, so much as he is interested in

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410 Ibid., p. 3.
411 Ibid., p. 5. It is unclear, however, as to why the Pickstock sees Plato accusing the sophists of ‘denigrating oral modes of discourse’ – especially if we remember that it is Plato himself who declares in Book X of the *Republic* that poets – who were ‘oral’ artists – should be banished from the city.
412 Furthermore, is it not fairly likely that the sophists used ‘oral modes of discourse’ most of the time?
413 Ibid., p. 4.
414 Even Derrida’s recognition of the association of writing with the *pharmakon*, she says, gives evidence of Derrida’s ‘sophistic vision,’ for what Derrida fails to see, she says, is that Plato’s suspicion of the *pharmakos* represents, “not a preservation of a dualism, but simply a suspicion of sophistic short-cuts” (*After Writing*, p. 28).
deconstructing Plato’s metaphysics. It is also unclear as to how Socrates’ preference for spoken rather than written language is ‘not a defence of metaphysical presence but the reverse, an attack on presence.’ How can a defence of speech be an ‘attack on presence’? Or, more to the point, why would anyone want to ‘attack presence’ in the first place? Derrida himself, as we have seen in Chapter 3, has no intention of ‘attacking presence’; he is much more concerned to show that ‘presence’ itself is always ‘enigmatic’, in that it can never be grasped through conception or signification. Derrida’s defence of writing is not a defence of ‘sophistry’ or ‘spatialized nihilism,’ as Pickstock seems to think; rather, Derrida wants to point out that any attempt to see speech as self-present to ‘meaning’ or ‘presence’, is itself resting on a fallacious logocentric metaphysics. In the section that follows, we will examine Pickstock’s critique of Derrida’s notion of différance, which she sees as an attempted usurpation of God himself, and therefore an idolatrous move.

Pickstock believes, rather hyperbolically, that, in pointing out the link between writing and sophistry, “the entire postmodern historical and philosophical perspective is called drastically into question,” so that it can be exposed for the “empty shadow-boxing” she feels that it is. We feel, however, that, rather than the ‘entire postmodern historical and historical perspective,’ it is Pickstock’s thesis itself that needs to be called ‘drastically into question.’ It seems that her critique of Derrida is based on the logocentric conception of ‘writing’ that Derrida himself has set out to deconstruct, and it is unclear, in this sense, whether Pickstock is actually saying anything critical about his work at all. Despite Derrida’s insistence on the fallacy of understanding speech as closer to the ‘reality’ than writing, Pickstock actually believes that ‘orality’ is the only ‘real’ medium. The ‘sophistic’ preference for writing, says Pickstock, contrasts with the only means by which to obtain such clarity, which is oral dialogue, while “the apparent fixity of the text, taken for the noumenal permanence of truth, is a mirage.”

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414 Ibid., p. 48.
415 Ibid., p. 18.
4.3. Derrida’s nihilistic gift? Pickstock’s misinterpretation of différance

Writing is structurally parallel to capital\(^{416}\)

It seems then, that Pickstock has an idea of ‘reality’ as something that can be opposed to a realm of ‘representation’. This, it seems, is a rather logocentric, or metaphysical understanding of ‘reality’ itself. As we have already pointed out in preceding chapters, however, there is a distinction to be made in the critique of metaphysics as offering an illusory account of reality, and, on the other hand, as attributing more value than is appropriate to certain metaphysical principles (which could be seen as a form of idolatry). Pickstock nevertheless seems to confuse these two themes, so that, for her, the only ‘reality’ is God. This confusion can be seen in relation to her critique of Derrida. As we have already argued, the problem with Derrida’s notion of différance, is that it provides an equally ‘metaphysical’ picture of reality. For Pickstock, however, the problem with différance is that it is not holy enough – it is, she feels, an idolatrous concept of what is ‘really real’. This should become clearer as we continue.

Pickstock feels that one of the major problems with Derrida’s work, is that he does not allow any space for the transcendent ‘Good’, or for the ‘Gift’, which defies any ‘economy’ of conception or signification. Because Derrida is concerned to defend writing, Pickstock actually feels that his work is trapped within an economy that could be described as ‘capitalistic.’ In a very strange section towards the beginning of her book, Pickstock feels that it can be shown that writing is ‘structurally parallel to capital.’ She recalls how, in Plato’s dialogue, the eponymous Phaedrus approaches Socrates with a written copy of Lysias’ speech hidden in his coat, in order to ‘coax’ as much dialogue out of Socrates as possible. Phaedrus, she explains, is guilty of a “fetishization of origins,” and his commodification of language can be seen in his “concealment of the text beneath his cloak.”\(^{417}\) According to Pickstock, Phaedrus is “disposed to treat words as capital,” and in the dialogue we can see how the “link between Phaedrus’ appropriation of the text and capital [is] repeatedly confirmed.”\(^{418}\) It is Phaedrus with whom we should align “the wavering allegiances of the market,” and we can see, in his dealing with Socrates, she says, how “his commercial interest thus instrumentalizes companionship and linguistic

\(^{416}\) Ibid., p. 10.
\(^{417}\) Ibid., p. 9.
\(^{418}\) Ibid., p. 10.
interchange alike.”\textsuperscript{419} Lysias’ speech, says Pickstock, “is something Phaedrus wishes to keep for himself and to capitalize on in order to impress others.”\textsuperscript{420}

Writing is “structurally parallel to capital,” says Pickstock, as both can be seen to involve the “standardization of exchange,” and the “homogenization and rationalization of human interaction, promoting transactions employed for purposes of a surfeit of advantages, preservation, and accumulation.”\textsuperscript{421} Pickstock feels that it is this ‘structural parallel’ between writing and capital that causes Plato to mistrust writing, which he sees as representing an “immanentist attempt to circumvent temporality and contingency and to spatialize time by gathering up the present moment with a view to offering it to an anonymous posterity.” Pickstock feels that, just like Phaedrus, Derrida “hypostasizes writing,” while it is clear, says Pickstock, that, “as a metaphysician” Derrida “upholds knowledge as writing, domination, and capital, for his exaltation of absence and postponement turns out to be but the inevitably nihilistic conclusion of a rationalism indifferent to the specificities of human place, time, and desire.”\textsuperscript{422} But is this really what Derrida is doing? According to Pickstock, this is certainly the case: it is curious, says Pickstock, that Derrida should defend writing over orality, “in spite of the persistent alignment of writing and ‘capital’ in the \textit{Phaedrus}.”\textsuperscript{423}

But does Derrida really defend ‘writing’ over ‘orality’? Derrida, as we have seen, does not criticise ‘orality’, but logocentrism, or what he terms the ‘metaphysics of presence.’ It is rather strange, then, that Pickstock accuses Derrida of performing an “act of fetishization realizing a ‘metaphysics of presence.’”\textsuperscript{424} Pickstock feels that, in his ‘identification of capital with speech’, Derrida has completely misinterpreted what Plato is trying to do. It is writing, says Pickstock, that Plato considers closer to the values of sophistry and capitalism: “it is precisely a sophistic suppression of genuine difference in favour of commercial and manipulative interests – through the instrumentalization of language – which Socrates attacks for being inimical to the practice of dialectical differentiation.”\textsuperscript{425} In contrast to the ‘capitalist economy’ of writing, Pickstock feels that Socrates and Plato defend the ‘Good’ as that which cannot be ‘comprehended’ within the limits of any ‘economy’. Unlike Phaedrus and Derrida, says Pickstock, Socrates’

\textsuperscript{419} Ibid., p. 6.
\textsuperscript{420} Ibid., p. 9.
\textsuperscript{421} Ibid., p. 10.
\textsuperscript{422} Ibid., p. 47.
\textsuperscript{423} Ibid., p. 7.
\textsuperscript{424} Ibid., p. 8.
\textsuperscript{425} Ibid., p. 6.
“withdrawal from such direct speaking of the good is neither a matter of capital’s fear of itself nor a metaphysical construal of the good as an unapproachable and therefore fetishized ideal. It is rather that the good cannot be circumscribed in the manner of ordinary, empirical data, and is not accessible to technical knowing, but instead must be allowed to arise in and through the excess of supplementary figures which successively illuminate its nature.” What Derrida fails to realise, says Pickstock, is that the Good is transcendent, “which makes immanent propositions concerning its content impossible.”

But does Derrida really fail to realise that the good is transcendent? Pickstock seems to think so. Pickstock defines the good as that which is “beyond’ the distinction of presence and absence;” it is the “sun which shines light onto beings” and is “present in the gifts of insight, truth, and beauty,” which is why it “cannot be grasped by a mathema and is unsayable.” As beyond being, “the good is also beyond appearance, beyond objectification, beyond ‘capital,’” and “the philosopher can only experience it positively via the process of slipping away from it. We cannot grasp or appropriate the good.” For Socrates, she notes, “the good always exceeds the object which manifests it physically and can never be grasped in an absolute presence,” while, “on account of the excessiveness of transcendence, the good is always overflowing into that subject which, via eros, strives to participate in it.” In contrast to Derrida’s ‘gaze of mastery,’ she says, the erotic gaze is “neither totalizing nor rationalizing, since its ‘object’ cannot be seen once and for all... The erotic gaze institutes an ontologically constitutive loss of self, a redemptive return of that which one loves above all but is willing to give away: the very antithesis of capital.” The good is not something that can be contained in any economy: it is a gift that remains beyond human comprehension or calculation. The ‘circulation’ of the gift, says Pickstock, is “neither subject to any calculation, nor is it a giving-away in order for others to be grateful for the price one has paid.” In contrast to Derrida, she says, “one can speak of a ‘return’ indissociable from the act of giving, simultaneous with it, a condition of its possibility, and yet not reducible to an economic market exchange.”

This is an extremely problematic critique of Derrida, however, given his own complex critique of logocentric metaphysics, and his views on the ‘gift’ or even Justice as something beyond all comprehension. The gift, for Derrida (as for Pickstock), is that which transcends

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426 Ibid., p. 12.
427 Ibid., p. 20.
428 Ibid., p. 13.
429 Ibid.
430 Ibid., p. 33.
all metaphysical conceptualisation or categorisation – it signifies the unsignifiable, and is occasionally identified by Derrida as the ineffable Name itself. Derrida would in fact agree with Pickstock that “genuine intellectual clarity is obtainable only when that which is to be ‘known’ is allowed to remain open and mysterious: an attitude synonymous with a kind of reverence.” We will discuss Derrida’s reflections on the ‘gift’ in greater detail below. It is also unclear as to how Pickstock can compare differance with the invisible and ineffable Wholly Other. The ‘unsayable’ and ‘invisible’ good, she says, “contrasts with the differance of Derrida, which is assimilated in turn to his notion of writing.” This is a grave misinterpretation of Derrida’s notion of differance, however, which, it should be clear, is not intended to signify the ‘Wholly Other’, but the transcendental condition of thinking anything transcendent at all. It is therefore uncertain on what grounds Pickstock can contrast Derrida’s notion of differance, to the divine ‘Gift.’ The apparently “medial undecideability of differance,” says Pickstock, “is not attributable to a genuine mystery, but rather to a false intransitivity which suppresses both agency and object, and transposes a temporal event into the spatial domain of givenness where nothing ever happens except the illusion of something happening.”

Pickstock believes that Derrida’s theory of the sign produces a “pseudo-transcendence of studied absence acting as a hovering, mysterious source, towards which each sign would seem to gesture,” and she names this ‘pseudo-transcendence’ as differance. Although we also feel that differance seems to suggest a ‘hovering mysterious source’, it nevertheless seems that Pickstock has confused two very distinct elements in Derrida’s work: that is, his notion of differance, as the transcendental condition of all thought and language, on the one hand; and Derrida’s reference to the “wholly other”, or the “impossible Gift,” on the other. This mistake is made apparent when Pickstock refers to ‘writing’ as the ‘Derridean god’: “Unlike inspiration from the Muses,” she argues, “there is here no knowing invocation of the impersonal Derridean god: writing. Such writing acts automatically, without reference to place or time. It is a universalizer in a nihilistic mode. There is no subject. There are only objects, death(s).” It is clear, however, that Derrida nowhere refers to ‘arche-writing’, or differance, as ‘God.’ To the contrary, differance is what makes all thought about God (or gods) possible, it is the condition of language and

431 Ibid., p. 20.
432 Ibid.
433 Ibid.
434 Ibid., p. 117.
435 Ibid., p. 36.
signification about the divine, it is not the divine itself. In a relatively early essay, Derrida insists that *différence* "is not the primary prescription or the prophetic annunciation of an imminent and as yet unheard-of nomination. There is nothing kerygmatic about this 'word,'" it is not an "ineffable Being which no name could approach: God, for example."

Rather, it "is the play which makes possible nominal effects, the relatively unitary and atomic structures that are called names, the chains of substitutions of names in which, for example, the nominal effect *différence* is itself enmeshed, carried off, reinscribed, just as a false entry or a false exit is still part of the game, a function of the system."\(^{436}\)

Those aspects of *différence* that are thereby delineated, says Derrida, are "not theological, not even in the order of the most negative of negative theologies." *Différence*, then, is "not only irreducible to any ontological or theological - ontotheological - reappropriation, but as the very opening of the space in which ontotheology - philosophy - produces its system and its history, it includes ontotheology, inscribing it and exceeding it without return."\(^{437}\)

It should be clear then, that *différence* is not intended as the ultimate 'transcendent' entity that would replace God or the 'wholly other' as the source of being; although Derrida might say that all discourse about God is possible only through *différence*, this does not mean that God could ever be reduced to *différence*. The Wholly Other, the Gift, the Name, or Justice, are things that, for Derrida, exceed all attempts to include them within a semiotic or conceptual 'economy'. Derrida would therefore only differ from many theologians in that he would refuse to name the unnameable Wholly Other, which, for Derrida, is that invisible and incomprehensible secret that cannot be articulated. For Derrida, this 'wholly other' remains ineffable, although no doubt he would be content to see theologians take into consideration the idea that their own conception of God is limited by *différence*.

This is, in fact, something that a number of theologians have done. Although, as we have seen, Derrida is critical of an "onto-theology determining the archaeological and eschatological meaning of being as presence, as parousia,"\(^{438}\) Graham Ward, for example, argues that "Derrida is attacking a certain form of theology: the use of God within classical rationalism and Enlightenment Deism."\(^{439}\) Ward, who has also written on how Karl Barth's theology of language contains some elements that appear similar to Derrida's notion of


\(^{437}\) Ibid., p. 6.

\(^{438}\) *Grammatology*, p. 71.

différance,⁴⁴⁰ argues that différance indicates that “meaning is always already caught up in a system of signs which mediates it.”⁴⁴¹ This has implications for how we think of, or conceptualise theological presence, says Ward, as it implies that “there is a gap between presence and consciousness,” and that “presence has to be signified by signs, which, by their very nature, announce the absence of what is present; which substitute for that presence.”⁴⁴² According to Ward, we occupy a place in the “shifting sands of semiotic systems, haunted by the possibility of presence and stable identity, but forever unable to produce it.”⁴⁴³ The divine promise itself, says Ward, is “always caught up in the doubling of being represented, mediated.”⁴⁴⁴ There are a number of theologians who are in fact interested in Derrida’s work as a form of ‘negative theology,’⁴⁴⁵ although Derrida has pointed out that, despite the resemblances, there is a major difference in that he would never fill the ‘negative’ space that différance opens up with a concept such as ‘God’. For Derrida, the ‘wholly other’ remains unknown and ineffable, it remains a question.⁴⁴⁶ Despite his reference to the “quasi-transcendental messianism”⁴⁴⁷ that is apparently a feature of all human experience, Derrida is loath to ‘close the enquiry’ by giving the ‘final word’ to one ‘Messiah’ in particular, and it is for this reason that he describes his own work as a “religion without religion.”⁴⁴⁸

The danger of dogmatic metaphysical and religious ‘systems’, for Derrida, is that they seem to close off the possibility of acknowledging an ‘autre’ that is ‘tout autre’ and therefore totally unknowable: it is so concerned to reach a state of ‘absolute knowledge’, a totalizing system, that it forgets about the mystery and impossibility that is the very possibility of all thought, language, and human experience in general. Derrida is afraid that the instantiation of an “onto-theological or teleo-eschatological program or design,” will leave no room for uncertainty and openness to the ‘other’ or to new ‘events.’⁴⁴⁹ Any ideal, for Derrida (including the ideals of religious faith, political ideals like communism or democracy, or even ‘justice’ in general), should be considered an ideal that is always “to

⁴⁴¹ Theology and Contemporary Critical Theory, p. 25.
⁴⁴³ Ibid., p. 25.
⁴⁴⁶ See, for example, Speech and Phenomena, p. 159 and p. 34 (referred to in Ward, Theology and Contemporary Critical Theory, p. 28).
⁴⁴⁷ Specters of Marx, p. 168.
⁴⁴⁹ Spectres of Marx, p. 75.
come,” a “messianic hope” that is like a “ghost which we cannot and ought not to do without.”\textsuperscript{450} This is, of course, an idea familiar to a number of religions, including Judaism and Christianity. There is a “messianic extremity, an eskhaton”, says Derrida, “whose ultimate event (immediate rupture, unheard-of interruption, untimeliness of the infinite surprise, heterogeneity without accomplishment) can exceed, \textit{at each moment}, the final term of a \textit{physis}, such as work, the production, and the \textit{telos} of history,” and it is “in the incoercible \textit{diff\'erance} that the here-now unfurls.”\textsuperscript{451} The \textit{messianic} structure of existence is open to the coming of an entirely ungraspable and unknown other, it implies an openness towards the “impossible”. Derrida feels that this messianic appeal belongs “properly to a universal structure, to that irreducible movement of the historical opening to the future, therefore to experience itself and to its language (expectation, promise, commitment to the event of what is coming, imminence, urgency, demand for salvation and for justice beyond law, pledge given to the other inasmuch as he or she is not present, presently present or living, and so forth).”\textsuperscript{452}

According to Caputo and Scanlon, for Derrida, the experience of the “impossible” represents the “least bad definition of deconstruction,” which is, according to them, a “dream and a desire of something \textit{tout autre}, of something that utterly shatters the present horizons of possibility, that confounds our expectations.”\textsuperscript{453} Derrida himself claims:

\begin{quote}
What I am interested in – and I often repeat that the deconstruction I try to practice is impossible, is \textit{the} impossible – is precisely this experience of \textit{the} impossible. This is not simply an impossible experience [but] the experience of \textit{the} impossible. That is what I try to do.\textsuperscript{454}
\end{quote}

As Caputo and Scanlon have explained, Derrida “insists on a general openness to an alterity without name, without identity... Derrida’s desire of God goes beyond the desire to have, to know, etc.”\textsuperscript{455} Caputo has also explained that, “Deconstruction turns on the unpresentable and unrepresentable, unforeseeable and unnameable, impossible and undeconstructible promise of something to come... a justice to come, or a democracy to come, or a gift or a hospitality to come, a stranger to come.”\textsuperscript{456}

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{450} Ibid., pp. 64 & 168.
\textsuperscript{451} Ibid., pp. 37 & 31.
\textsuperscript{452} Ibid., p. 167.
\textsuperscript{453} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{454} Ibid., p. 50.
\textsuperscript{455} \textit{God, the Gift, and Postmodernism}, p. 13.
\textsuperscript{456} \textit{Deconstruction in a Nutshell}, p. 164.
\end{flushright}
This 'unnameable' in which Derrida has faith, is occasionally referred to as the Gift, although Derrida is adamant that this is not the 'gift' as we know it, or as found in the gift-giving and receiving activities in daily life. This true Gift cannot be known or comprehended. It almost seems that, despite references to works such as *Given Time*, Pickstock has not read these works of Derrida very closely at all. In this book, for example, Derrida contrasts this ideal gift to all economies of exchange: the "gift" is that which exists "beyond the text", as it were, it cannot be articulated, exchanged, or even expected. The gift, the pure gift, is that which disrupts the economic circle and "no longer gives rise to exchange." In its essence the gift is that which cannot be returned and thus cannot be in the circle of economy; the gift is 'aneconomic.' For a gift to truly be a gift, says Derrida, there can be no return, no counter-gift, and no indebtedness on the part of the receiver; the gift is annulled as a gift, he says, as soon as there is some type of reciprocity involved. Neither the recipient nor the donor can even recognize the gift as a gift: "If the present is present to him as present, this simple recognition annuls the gift." The gift needs to be forgotten (or never known) the moment it is given and received; it cannot even be considered a 'gift' as this will insinuate it in the economy of exchange. The gift signifies the unsignifiable, it is a Name for the ineffable that transcends all conceptualization. The gift, says Derrida, is essentially *impossible*; we can never encounter a gift in experience. The gift, in a metaphysical sense, then, is *ideal*.

It seems that the problem with Pickstock's reading of Derrida, is that she seems to have mistaken the problem with *différance* as a potentially 'illusory' picture of reality, with Derrida's attempts to articulate the "impossible", as that which should be valued over all things. Derrida, for example, would certainly agree with Pickstock that the Gift is the "antithesis of capital" and "not reducible to an economic market system." He would actually go further than this and says that the "gift" (used in a rather ideal sense), is necessarily the antithesis of *any* system of exchange, whether capitalist or not. The gift is the "madness of economic reason," that which cannot be contained or calculated within the logic of any economy. Derrida would agree with Pickstock that the ideal "gift" is to be "contrasted with the secular 'given,"

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457 Ibid., p. 7.
458 Ibid., p. 13.
459 *After Writing* p. 138.
460 Ibid., p. 246.
that, despite her critique of Derrida, Pickstock’s appeal to the ‘unnameable gift’ bears some remarkable similarities to Derrida’s work. However, this does not change the fact that différance offers a really troublesome picture of reality, as the actuality of what is. Pickstock seems to realise that the problem with différance is that it tends to ignore the practical and embodied nature of human existence; however, because, for her, the ‘really real’ is God, she feels that différance can only be challenged through an appeal to religious practice. Not only is this religious practice less ‘idolatrous’ than différance, she feels, but, because it is an ‘oral’ practice, it apparently avoids the dangers of ‘writing’.

4.4. A post-metaphysical ‘reality’: The oral consummation of writing?

The ultimate conclusion of Pickstock’s thesis is that, whereas the idolatry of metaphysics, and différance, are based on writing, we can find an alternative to this metaphysical ideality in the ‘orality’ of liturgical practice. In a very peculiar way, Pickstock actually sets out to show how writing can be ‘consummated’ by speech, and that philosophy can be ‘consummated’ by liturgy. "Instead of the notion that orality is a mask for ‘presence,’” Pickstock argues, "it will be shown that orality is primarily linked to an account of the subject as doxological." In contrast to what she sees as the ‘written’ nature of modern metaphysics, Pickstock holds up the practice of the pre-modern medieval Roman Rite, which, she says, “reflects the oral character of the New Testament itself.” Pickstock believes that it is the orality of the Roman Rite that most effectively deals with this difficulty, and even makes liturgy possible to some degree. The Roman Rite, she argues, “makes manifest and surmounts the difficulty of liturgy,” and we can witness this in the “peculiarly oral dimension of this struggle.”

This ‘oral’ dimension, she says, is completely “unlike the view of reality implicit within immanentist language and the power of its textual permanence,” and is “embarrassing from an immanentist perspective for which language is fundamentally written and issues

461 Ibid., p. 19.
462 Ibid., p. 4.
463 Ibid., p. 200.
464 Ibid., p. 177.
465 Ibid., p. 178.
from a permanent, enclosed, and powerful stronghold.” For some reason, Pickstock does not seem to pay much attention to the fact that the Roman Rite was carefully written out as a text, and used as such. Although a number of people would have memorised the Rite, is it really the ‘text’ itself that was the problem? This should not even warrant much comment. Pickstock’s defence of ‘orality’ over ‘writing’ seems a totally misguided move, that ignores the fact that both writing and speaking are embodied practices, so that her ‘argument’ hardly requires much in the way of a sustained deconstruction. We can only attempt to highlight some of Pickstock’s most outlandish ideas, in order to see the extent of the problem, and hopefully be able to offer a more sensible alternative to the picture of ‘reality’ she proposes.

We will turn to her discussion of liturgy in the section that follows: for now, we will focus on her defence of ‘speech’ over ‘writing’. It is Pickstock’s defence of the ‘embodied’ nature of ‘orality’ that forms the basis of her attack against Derrida. Pickstock finds that Derrida’s insistence on the “transcendental writtenness” of language is a “rationalistic gesture which suppresses embodiment and temporality,” and she feels that Derrida “perfects, and does not refute, the Cartesian abstraction from embodiment.” It his “emphasis on writing,” says Pickstock, that leads to “a denial of the living and dying physical body,” because this “written model suggests no people at all, only a word which comes from nowhere, an autonomous word which conceals or violently eradicates its origins and dictates to its ‘author,’ rendering him entirely passive before a disembodied and (spiritual?) power.” Although we would agree with Pickstock that Derrida “subtly denies the fact that language of any kind requires bodily presence,” we do not feel that we can only highlight ‘bodily presence’ through an appeal to speech as a more ‘real’ medium. Is this not exactly the logocentric conception of speech, that is, as a more ‘real’ medium of expression, that Derrida has set out to deconstruct?

Nevertheless, Pickstock believes that Derrida has made a fundamental error in his conception of the oral sign as ‘metaphysical,’ and she believes that this can be remedied by reversing Derrida’s thesis and by seeing that it is really writing that falls into this

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466 Ibid., p. 177. Even though she acknowledges the presence of written texts within the context of liturgical practice, Pickstock says that this is justified because the liturgical text “is continuous with its repeated oralizations through time,” and because “many of the features of the linguistic structure of the liturgy already discussed are not merely enunciated or read aloud, but draw attention to their supreme vocality.” (p. 216)
467 Ibid., p. 4.
468 Ibid., p. 47.
469 Ibid., p. 19.
470 Ibid., p. 22.
471 Ibid., p. 21.
category. The only reason Derrida defends writing, says Pickstock, is because he cannot handle the ‘presence’ and ‘life’ of the oral sign: Derrida denigrates speech, she says, because "the breath of orality is construed as ultimately tied to the presence of the speaker who claims in his self-identity to be able to guarantee his meaning. The oral sign, by seeming to favour a pure anterior truth, seems too much to cling to life,"\(^{472}\) she notes, while "Derrida's emphasis on the commerce of absence and death with writing causes him irresponsibly to discount the way in which all language presupposes an engagement with living bodies."\(^{473}\) But does Derrida really argue that speech is more ‘metaphysical’ than writing? And what would it solve to claim that writing is actually more ‘metaphysical’ than speech, when this is a totally ludicrous description of any sort of linguistic practice. Is it not Pickstock’s conception of writing as ‘metaphysical’, that makes her more guilty of a sort of metaphysical delusion than Derrida?

The confusion regarding this theme can be seen in the question Pickstock asks: "why, in his critique of orality, does Derrida wish to construe speech as that which most readily inclines towards the ideal when, according to the traditional (metaphysical) hierarchy of the senses, it is the visual and not the acoustic which is held to be the most immediate and proximal to reason"?\(^{474}\) Despite the fact that Derrida never thinks of speech as ‘ideal’, we have to ask: why should either the ‘visual’ or ‘acoustic’ nature of a sign be described pejoratively, if it is the ‘physicality’ of language in general that Pickstock is interested in highlighting? Derrida, as we have emphasised time and time again, does not ‘critique orality’ – it is the description of any form of language as ‘ideal’ that is the bugbear of Derrida’s entire battle against the logocentric illusion he finds throughout the history of metaphysics. To say that he is guilty of a similar type of logocentrism, simply because he points out that logocentrism is a problematic feature of philosophy, is a very strange argument indeed. We hardly need to say more about this misinterpretation of Derrida’s work. What we could point out, however, is that Pickstock’s rather strange conception of writing seems to result in a ‘denial of the body’ no less problematic than the denial of corporeality we find in the work of Derrida.

In a rather ironic application of all the characteristics which Derrida has associated with writing, Pickstock believes that speech is a better description of the ‘supplementary’ nature of language: “If one must characterize language as either written or spoken,” she

\(^{472}\) Ibid., p. 115.
\(^{473}\) Ibid., p. 24.
\(^{474}\) Ibid., p. 116.
argues, then "I would suggest that spoken would be the most apt designation." She feels that, contrary to Derrida, "orality is supremely disposed in favour of supplementarity: this is to be seen not only in the ever-renewed utterance of individual words, but also in an individual word's making-way for subsequent words." It is this model of 'oral' supplementation, says Pickstock, that would even best describe the nature of the pre-modern liturgy, which, she argues, "is avowedly semiotic," and "riven with supplantations and deferrals." The "liturgical stammer", says Pickstock, "bespeaks its admission of distance between itself and the transcendent 'real.'" But is this not precisely what Derrida has been saying all along? This is a very strange alternative to Derrida's argument, given that much of Derrida's early work is dedicated precisely to showing that speech itself is 'disposed in favour of supplementarity.' Nevertheless, Pickstock feels that, in her replacement of writing by speech, she has constructed a better model of linguistic 'supplementation.' She feels that "writing is transcendentally oral, rather than speech being transcendentally written, as for Derrida." But why does language need to be described transcendentally at all? And how does this 'transcendental' conception of speech link to her concern with the body?

Pickstock believes that her model of 'oral supplementation' is better than Derrida's because, while "the Derridean colonization of supplementation by writing is tantamount to a metaphysics of presence," she argues, the "breath of orality does not remain internal but penetrates bodies." She insists that her prioritization of speech over writing includes "everything Derrida would wish to stress in terms of an infinite series of traces, but at the same time, would allow for the inclusion of living bodies at every stage." While "Derrida's written supplement is fissured by its disembodied, autonomous arrival and by the way in which its sign is empty, and reducible to the objectivity of death, a condition tantamount to the closure of the series," she says, "an orally-construed language allows a greater ecstatic dimension into his philosophy than Derrida seems willing to admit." This is because, she says, "the spoken word's physicality is such that it can be related to physical space, for although it does not occupy space in the manner of an extended thing,
yet it is always spoken by physical bodies in particular places, and as such, is not external
to things but can inter-penetrate them,” while “the written sign, by contrast, [occupies] an
idealized space which is non-ecstatically present, and supremely decontextualized.”

But how can writing – any writing – occupy an “idealised space”? Of course, Pickstock
is concerned with Derrida’s rather ‘idealised’ picture of archi-écriture, or différance, and it
seems that this is something that needs to be challenged. However, Pickstock never makes
the distinction between Derrida’s use of the word ‘writing’ in a more metaphysical, and in
an actual sense (or what he refers to as ‘vulgar’ writing). It seems that a reflection on
some actual practices of ‘vulgar’ writing might be all that is needed to show that writing is
a ‘physical’, and even an ‘embodied’ practice. How does Pickstock really challenge
Derrida’s notion of différance, by also describing writing as ‘ideal’? And does the positing
an ‘arche-speech’ as a better model for the ‘supplementary’ nature of language, really
highlight the ‘physicality’ and the ‘embodiedness’ of language more than Derrida’s notion
of arché-writing? Pickstock is so concerned to argue that Derrida “has no account of
physicality, bodies, choice, circumstance, historical difference, and of what might be ‘best’
for a particular person at a particular time,” that she never thinks of these things in
relation to writing herself.

When Pickstock does refer to the ‘actual’ practice of what Derrida terms ‘vulgar’
writing, it is only to accuse it of causing the ‘spatialization’ of thought resulting in the ‘ideal
text’ of speculative metaphysics. What ‘actual’ writing has to do with the ‘illusions’ of
metaphysics is unclear, however, especially given that literacy has been practised since
ancient times, by a number of different people, and for a number of different purposes. It
is not clear how either ‘speech’ or ‘writing’, as actual practices, could be thought of as
leading to ‘metaphysical illusions’, ‘sophistry’, or even ‘capitalism.’ Derrida’s
characterization of orality as a “manipulative device,” she argues, “overlooks the possibility
that it is writing, with its mobility of interest, ability to fasten itself to any situation,
absence of particularity, and endurance through time, which is to be associated with a
denial of physicality and death. Its deferred nature lends itself to concealment which
enables it to be manipulative, particularly given the tangibility and assumed authority of
the text and its untested power.” Not only does Derrida never refer to speech as a
‘manipulative device’, but even if he did, would it be any better to say that it was really

485 Ibid., p. 116.
486 Ibid., p. 34.
writing that was guilty of these crimes? Both writing and speech can be used to do a range of different things; it is not only ‘writing’ that is used for ‘evil purposes’, and not only speech that is used for good. Pickstock herself is aware of Plato’s distinction between the “genuine orator” and the “rhetorician,” who “merely seeks to elicit instant effects irrespective of truth or suitability.”  

Would it not have been a lot more radical for Pickstock to have done away with the metaphysical distinction between speech and writing altogether, in order to look at speech and writing as actual embodied practices? Although she seems to want to do this through her discussion of pre-modern liturgical practice, we will find another problem lurking in the wings. This problem is that Pickstock feels that, in order to ultimately overcome the ‘idolatry’ of metaphysics, we need to adopt a Christian perspective.

**4.5. Post-metaphysical theology: The liturgical consummation of philosophy?**

Although we might agree with Pickstock that it is important to remember the embodied nature of all communication (and this is indeed something that Derrida’s notion of différance ignores), then, by considering ‘embodiment’ according to a dualistic distinction between writing and speech (considered a more ‘real’ medium), it seems that Pickstock offers us no escape from the ‘metaphysical’ impasse she is so concerned to deconstruct. What then, about her claim that the only way to overcome metaphysical idolatry, is through an appeal to ‘liturgy’? It is here that we need to tread carefully, as in our brief engagement with the work of Marion towards the end of Chapter 1. For it is one thing to admit that ‘idolatrous’ metaphysics should be criticised, and it is quite another to think that metaphysics can only be ‘overcome’ from a theological perspective. This is nevertheless Pickstock’s goal: not only does she think that an appeal to liturgy would help to overcome ‘metaphysics’ from a theological perspective, but she thinks that through this appeal to liturgy, she can overcome ‘philosophy’ itself. It was philosophy, after all, that Pickstock feels led to the inauguration of a “new, non-liturgical subject.”

It is this ‘liturgical subject’ that Pickstock attempts to ‘reclaim’ through her theological work. Instead of reclaiming the ‘ontological’ (or praxeological) aspects of theology, however, Pickstock thinks that she can ‘overcome’ ontology itself through

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488 Ibid., p. 18.
489 Ibid., p. 57.
theology. And not only through theology, but through a return to the pre-modern Christian liturgy of the 'Roman Rite.' It is only the Roman Rite, she feels, that manages to "dislodge a metaphysics" of "a static presence of pure origin," and which prevents "the tendency of capital to displace the eschatological reserve in favour of an immanent teleology of accumulation."\textsuperscript{490} Pickstock actually believes that, through an appeal to one particular form of pre-modern Christian liturgy, we can overcome the dualistic speech/writing divide altogether: "in the Roman Rite, the configuration of language as simultaneously 'gift' and 'sacrifice' exalts a different and salvific formulation of the various dichotomies which have been seen to reside at the heart of immanentism: orality and writing, time and space, gift and given, subject and object, active and passive, life and death."\textsuperscript{491} (It should be clear that this statement is a self-deconstruction of Pickstock's entire argument, however, because, despite the fact that her whole thesis thus far has rested on a distinction between speech and writing, Pickstock now admits that the speech/writing divide itself "resides at the heart of immanentism"). Nevertheless, it is from this problematic starting point that Pickstock begins her 'liturgical consummation of philosophy.' Despite her constant distinction between "secular writing versus liturgical orality," Pickstock feels that we need to move towards a "liturgical balancing of writing with orality,"\textsuperscript{492} and she feels that this will overcome all 'metaphysics', including that of Derrida, because "liturgy (as opposed to Derrida) outwits the metaphysical interior-exterior duality."\textsuperscript{493}

It seems that, rather than thinking of both speech and writing as embodied practices, in order to overcome their conception in metaphysical terms, Pickstock believes that the only way we can transcend the limits of a speech/writing distinction is through a theological appeal to \textit{liturgy}. Pickstock feels that the ultimate aim of her thesis is to

\textsuperscript{490} Ibid., pp. 216 & 144.
\textsuperscript{491} Ibid., p. 169.
\textsuperscript{492} Ibid., p. 178.
\textsuperscript{493} Ibid., p. 217. The contradictions within Pickstock's project seem to multiply in the light of her idea that it is 'liturgy' that can overcome the speech/writing distinction. For example, despite her claim that Plato criticises writing because it is 'sophistic', she nevertheless argues that, "when Theuth is associated with writing, it is not a deathly writing, but is closely linked with life," because "the letters which Theuth is supposed to have invented are magical, efficacious, and \textit{liturgical}. He is said to have invented sacred speech, worship, and the language of the gods"(p. 51). Furthermore, in a strange sort of colonisation of Derrida's argument for her own (contrary) purposes, Pickstock notes that, when Plato speaks positively of writing, it is in the metaphorical sense of the "open-ended yet consistent 'writing on the soul' which continues forever,"(p. 19) while she describes the Platonic dialogue as "a kind of writing free from the dangers of writing."(p. 43) She feels that Plato's use of writing is justified because "we are led through it into doxology, which for Plato is our principle human function and language's only possibility of restoration"(ibid). Pickstock sees how the 'ultimate character of language as an expression of liturgy' is something we can see in the "peculiarly Christian negotiation of the 'duality' of orality and writing itself, considering especially the Gospel and its enunciation,"(p. 216). We can see this, says Pickstock, in the way in which Christ himself is "eternally present in God's decrees, a presence which is to be correlated with that of the \textit{written word}," to the extent, she says, that the "combination of salvific narration and pureificatory reading makes of the book a sacrificial altar"(p. 218ff).
produce "a revolutionary re-invention of language and practice which would challenge the structures of our modern world, and only thereby restore real language and action as liturgy." It is not because of the radical nature of this claim, however, that we can find it problematic. It just seems a rather bizarre leap to make: why, in order to emphasise the embodied nature of 'language and action', do we need to describe all human practices in terms of liturgy (and, further, all meaning in terms of Eucharistic transubstantiation)?

Pickstock seems to have made this error by modelling all 'embodied practices' in general, on a very specific (and idealised) picture of "liturgy" as a pre-modern, and oral, practice; a practice that she considers more 'real' than others. The misguided nature of Pickstock's argument can be seen in her statement that the "rejection of liturgy is tantamount to denying the priority of the Lebenswelt."

We feel that we could problematise certain metaphysical pictures of reality by pointing to the Lebenswelt, or the 'lifeworld', without seeing the Lebenswelt as fundamentally liturgical. This is not to deny the importance of the liturgy as a practice that might be judged as 'really real' (or important), in a valuative sense, by many Christians; however, here again, it seems, we cannot confuse a valuative sense of 'reality', with a more neutral ontological description of 'the state of things as they actually exist.' By saying that only the liturgy is 'real', are we denying 'reality' to all other practices in which human beings are involved? As we will insist in the chapter that follows, it seems that, in order to overcome the rather illusory pictures of reality provided by metaphysics, we need to start our investigation into the nature of 'reality' from 'where we stand', as it were; that is, as human beings who are engaged in certain practices, and are incarnately involved and situated in a world that is not only material, but also social and historical, amongst other things. This practice-based approach, as a better description of 'reality', is not an

494 Ibid., p. 171.
495 Ibid., p. 261. Just as Pickstock tends to see all action as liturgical, so she also tends to see all signification as 'transubstantial,' in the Eucharistic sense. Transubstantiation, she says, is "the condition of possibility for all meaning". In contrast to the "necrophiliac sign of postmodernity," the Eucharistic sign, according to Pickstock, "is able to outwit the distinction between both absence and presence, and life and death,"(p. 252) and it is only in "the integration of word and action in the event of the Eucharist," that "it is possible to restore meaning to language"(p. 253). The Christian Eucharist, she argues, is where "the optimum of meaningfulness and the optimum of living subjectivity coincide within the world – with all its temporality, space, and embodiment."(p. 273) It is only in this "integration of word and action in the event of the Eucharist," she argues, that "the (mystical) unknown is not reductively confined to a negative nothing – which amounts to the known – but is traversed as a genuinely open mystery which, by being partially imparted through the sign, and therefore recognizable as mystery, has a positive – but not fetishizable – content."(p. 253) Again, the problem is not the radical nature of this claim, so much as is the prioritisation of the Eucharist simply because it is "an essential action, and not as an isolated presence or merely illustrative symbol."(ibid)

But are there not other ways of understanding the 'embodied' qualities of signification, without seeing them all as 'transubstantial' in the Eucharistic sense?
496 Ibid., p. 27.
inappropriate veneration of this ‘reality’ over all other things; it is a description of the ‘state of things as they actually exist’, that does not rely on abstract metaphysical principles that apparently exist beyond human perception. This is not to deny that human beings can (and do) venerate, or at least value, certain things that lie beyond human perception, but the question of what is most worthy of this veneration is, a slightly different issue to our enquiry into the nature of human ‘reality’.

Pickstock herself occasionally offers us a glimpse into how we might better understand the practical and ‘incarnate’ nature of existence, as when she suggests that we consider that “life were an encounter between living bodies” and that “space, externality, and perception are not, after all, an inevitable void,” and she suggests that an “alternative phenomenology, such as that of Merleau-Ponty,” might be helpful in this regard. However, this is not something that she follows up, and it is clear that, had she read Merleau-Ponty’s work, she would be aware of some ways in which some illusory metaphysical pictures of ‘reality’ (including Derrida’s différance) could be challenged without an appeal to the Christian liturgical “consummation of philosophy.” The critique of metaphysics from a praxeological perspective is something that has been attempted by philosophers such as Feuerbach and Marx, and has found its way into the work of phenomenologists such as Heidegger, as well as social theorists such as Pierre Bourdieu. This family of praxeological and phenomenological ‘moves’ against metaphysics will be examined in Chapter 5, below.

497 Ibid., p. 107.
One of the terms that has cropped up time and again in our investigations is the word ‘reality’, although the meaning of this word, as we have seen, is largely dependent on the way it is used by a variety of theorists and philosophers, in a variety of different ways, and for a variety of different purposes. Nevertheless, we have seen the use of two main senses of the word in this thesis: firstly, in the sense of what ‘actually’ is, and secondly, in a more evaluative sense; that is, in the sense of naming what is ‘really real’, or what is (or should be) of most value to human beings. It should be clear as to how the problem of ‘idolatry’ is connected to both of these uses of ‘reality’, especially as we find the problem articulated throughout the philosophical tradition. Philosophy, has as one of its major functions the exposing of ‘illusions’, and illusions, we have seen, can be found in our perception of what ‘actually’ is, as well as in our beliefs about what is of most value to us.

The problem with the way of doing philosophy that has been called metaphysics, is that this style of philosophising appeals to something beyond human experience in order to explain or describe the ‘reality’ of this experience. Metaphysics has produced a family of philosophical systems that also seems to highly value those abstract principles that it uses as a means of explaining or describing ‘reality’. It is both of these aspects of metaphysics –

498 Marx, "Theses on Feuerbach," (§8).
that is, it’s the way it goes about describing ‘reality’, as well as its consideration of that which is ‘really real’ – that have been challenged by a number of ‘iconoclastic’ philosophers and theorists. In this chapter, we are concerned mainly with the philosophical function of describing ‘reality’ as that which is ‘actual’, and we are critical of metaphysics to the extent that it begins its description of the ‘actuality’ through an appeal to a principle or structure that lies beyond human experience. Against this sort of (transcendental) idealism, we appeal to the ‘practical actuality’ of human life, as the only place from where we might begin our enquiry into the nature of ‘reality’. We will focus more on the appeal to that which should be most valued, in the final chapter of this thesis.

The question: “what is metaphysics?” is a complex question to answer, especially given that it is metaphysics that has traditionally provided answers to the philosophical question: “what is?” It seems that, in challenging the traditionally metaphysical answer to this question, we need to approach the question: “what is metaphysics?” itself from a different perspective. The perspective we will defend is the praxeological. The praxeological approach does not rely on the positing of ideal entities or grounds beyond human experience in order to explain this experience. Rather, this approach starts from our situation as human beings, who are practically engaged in the world, and immersed in particular historical and social forms of life. This social and historical situation is the ‘place’ from which we ask any questions about the nature of ‘reality’ at all, even if these questions are sometimes answered in a rather ‘metaphysical’ way. Even though we are challenging certain metaphysical answers to questions about the nature of reality, we hope to point out that the asking and answering of ‘metaphysical’ questions are themselves practices performed by human beings. In this sense, then, the practical and material conditions of existence necessarily precede certain metaphysical pictures of reality.

This is not to deny that we might provide another ‘picture’ of reality from praxeological perspective. However, the picture that might emerge will, firstly, not rely on something beyond human experience, in order to make sense of this experience; and secondly, it will not attempt to offer a totalising account of ‘reality’. Furthermore, although the praxeological approach is a certain way of doing philosophy that results in a certain family of pictures of reality, the praxeological approach acknowledges that all philosophical pictures, including ‘metaphysical’ ones, are produced by human beings, and have meaning for human beings. We must begin from ‘where we stand’, as we can only ask and answer questions from this perspective. It is from this perspective that we can tackle the
misguided iconoclasm of Derrida and Marion, who seem to have overlooked the praxeological situation, not only of the philosopher, but of every other human being, in favour of some rather metaphysical – if not onto-theological – accounts of ‘reality’.

5.1. ‘Text’ and ‘hors-texte’: Alternatives to ‘metaphysical idolatry’?

How to conceive what is outside a text? That which is more or less than a text’s own, proper margin? For example, what is other than the text of Western metaphysics?500

To read the text from the point of view of its writing: from the point of view of the Word. This requirement, as untenable as it may appear (and remains), cannot be avoided.501

5.1.1. Deconstructing Heidegger: Dasein vs Différance?

We have seen in previous chapters how, for Derrida, metaphysics can only be challenged through an appeal to différance, or the “text” that precedes all metaphysical distinctions and categories. We argued, however, that perhaps différance itself was ‘haunted’ by the practical nature of human existence, which is something Derrida seems to overlook. Différance seems to offer as metaphysical a picture of reality, as some of the ‘logocentric’ pictures Derrida has attempted to deconstruct. Derrida’s avoidance of the question of the practical nature of everyday life, is something that is obvious in his reading of Heidegger, who, like Marx, he seems largely to have misinterpreted. Although deconstruction itself is derived from Heidegger’s notion of Destruktion, Derrida nevertheless states that: “despite this debt to Heidegger’s thought, or rather because of it, I attempt to locate in Heidegger’s text... the signs of belonging to metaphysics, or to what he calls onto-theology.”501 But why does Derrida make this claim against Heidegger?

Derrida feels that Heidegger’s analysis of the ontological difference, and his focus on the mystery of being in his later work, does not account for différance, as the condition of thinking anything at all. In his early essay, “Différence”, Derrida reads Heidegger’s

499 Margins of Philosophy, p. 25.
500 God Without Being, p. 149.
phenomenology (as he does with the phenomenology of Husserl) through the lens of structuralist semiotics. Derrida states that, although he is concerned with the ways in which we have tried "to formulate the meaning of Being in general as presence or absence, in the categories of being or beingness (ousia)," he feels that we should first "remain within the semiological problematic."\(^{502}\) As the theologian Kevin Hart notes, "Deconstruction is a dialogue with Heideggerian Destruktion, and this can be seen in the passage from Being to the sign as the point of incision for a critique of onto-theology."\(^{503}\) But in what ways is Derrida’s passing from ‘Being’ to the ‘sign’ really a critique of onto-theology (including what he sees as Heidegger’s ‘onto-theological’ philosophy)? It is only through a grammatological enquiry, says Derrida, that we can “deconstitute the founding concept-words of ontology, of being in its privilege.”\(^{504}\)

But what does Derrida mean by this? We need to remember, says Derrida, that “Being,” as it is “fixed in its general syntactic and lexicological forms within linguistics and Western philosophy, is not a primary and absolutely irreducible signified, that it is still rooted in a system of languages and an historically determined ‘significance,’ although strangely privileged as the virtue of disclosure and dissimulation.”\(^{505}\) For an ontology to be unaware of its grammatological conditions, according to Derrida, means that it could be an example of the ‘metaphysics of presence,’ that is, a discussion of Being as though it is something that can be ‘presented’, without taking into consideration that every presentation is always and only a ‘re-presentation.’\(^{506}\) Most ontologies, including Heidegger’s, says Derrida, speak about ‘reality’ or ‘being’ as something that can become ‘present’ to us; yet what these philosophers fail to realise is that “there is no presence before and outside semiological difference.”\(^{507}\) Whereas Heidegger is interested in a ‘step back’ that “goes from what is unthought, from the difference as such, into what gives us

\(^{502}\) Margins of Philosophy, p. 10.
^{504}\) Of Grammatology, p. 21.
^{505}\) Ibid., p. 23.
^{506}\) Ibid., p. 23.
^{507}\) In this sense, then, Derrida takes Heidegger’s announcement in his essay, “The Onto-Theological Constitution of Metaphysics,” very seriously: that is, the idea that, although we might problematise metaphysics, a problem remains in that, “Our Western languages are languages of metaphysical thinking, each in its own way. It must remain an open question whether the nature of Western languages is in itself marked with the exclusive brand of metaphysics, and thus marked permanently by onto-theologic, or whether these languages offer other possibilities of utterance – and that means at the same time of telling silence.” (Identity and Difference, p. 73).
^{507}\) Margins of Philosophy, p. 12.
thought,"\(^{508}\) Derrida sees this unthought as *différence*. 'Being', says Derrida, is not something that is present to us; it is itself "only an effect of writing."\(^{509}\)

But what is *différence*, that it should 'precede Being'? As we have already argued, Derrida's conception of *différence* produces a rather strange picture of 'reality', or at least the reality of human experience, which might be described in far less metaphysical terms. Heidegger himself has produced an analysis of the 'being for whom Being matters': that is, *Dasein*, the human being who exists 'in-the-world.' Derrida is aware that *différence* might initially appear very much like Heidegger's ontological difference: "Already it appears that the type of question to which we are redirected is, let us say, of the Heideggerian type, and that *différence* seems to lead back to the ontico-ontological difference;"\(^{510}\) however, it soon becomes clear that, for Derrida, the 'difference' he is concerned with is not ontological, but *semiological*. Derrida is interested in showing that the 'ontological difference' is itself a product of language, which means, he says, that "*différence*, in a certain and very strange way, (is) 'older' than the ontological difference or than the truth of Being."\(^{511}\) We need to "go by way of the question of being as it is directed by Heidegger and by him alone, at and beyond onto-theology," says Derrida, in order to find that the ontico-ontological difference is "not absolutely originary. *Différence* by itself would be more 'originary,' but one would no longer be able to call it 'origin' or 'ground,' those notions belonging essentially to the history of onto-theology, to the system functioning as the effacing of difference."\(^{512}\)

In what way can Derrida justify that *différence* precedes the "ontological difference"? We have already argued that Derrida has 'overlooked' what Marx is trying to say through his appeal to 'practical actuality', and it seems that he makes the same mistake in his reading of Heidegger. For Heidegger, the question of Being, if it is asked, is one that is always 'grounded' in our existence as human beings who are fundamentally situated in the world. This is simply the 'reality' of the situation. In what sense, then, can Derrida argue that *différence* is "more 'originary,' but one would no longer be able to call it 'origin' or 'ground,' those notions belonging essentially to the history of onto-theology, to the system functioning as the effacing of difference"?\(^{513}\) For Derrida, it seems, any appeal to 'grounds'

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508 Ibid.
510 Ibid., p. 10.
511 Ibid., p. 22.
512 Of Grammatology, p. 23.
513 Ibid.
is considered a form of 'onto-theology', and it is for this reason that he deconstructs any conception of 'groundedness.'

But what if, by 'grounds', we are not referring to some divinity or transcendent ideal, but to actual practical and material nature of human existence? We have already argued that Derrida's deconstruction of Marx's appeal to the 'practical actuality' of human life is completely off the mark, and it seems that he makes a similar mistake in his critique of Heidegger's appeal to the situation of Dasein 'in the world'. It seems that Derrida fails to distinguish between onto-theological grounds, and the actual, real grounds that are 'where we stand', as it were; that is, our situation as embodied human beings who live out our daily lives through our practical involvement in a social, material and historical world. Because Derrida thinks of all 'grounds' as onto-theological, he sees any description of the practical and material reality of life as a form of onto-theological metaphysics. For Derrida, the only 'ground' that is not onto-theological, is the 'non-ground' of différance. But where, or what, is différance? And how is it a better description of 'reality' than that provided by the phenomenological tradition, which emphasises the description of things and practices, in a bid to avoid the metaphysical speculation that plagues much philosophical work. For Heidegger, for example, the problem with metaphysics is that it is a wrong way of thinking, which means that, in order to challenge metaphysics, we need to discover a new or different way of thinking. As Heidegger states, the 'step back' out of metaphysics "does not mean an isolated step of thought, but rather means the manner in which thinking moves, along a path." Thinking, for Heidegger, is always a way of thinking, a manner of thinking that emerges out of our fundamentally relational and situated being-in-the-world. Heidegger's description of the existence of Dasein is not an appeal to an 'onto-theological' entity, or even something transcendent and 'impossible'; it is a description of our way of existing, our manner of being alive.

This is not to deny that Dasein is not interested in the question of Being, as the mystery, depth, and fullness of existence, and that this enquiry might not lead to an appeal to something 'transcendent' that might give meaning to reality and existence. What we simply cannot forget, however, is that this enquiry into Being is always done by human beings, who are situated in the world and within a particular social and historical form of life. It is a mystery, then, how Derrida can call himself a 'phenomenologist'. Derrida never takes seriously the importance of the 'natural attitude', or the 'lifeworld' from which

\[ \text{Identity and Difference, p. 50.} \]
phenomenological analysis always begins: that is, not as a conceptual ‘object’ to be investigated, but as that out of which phenomenological analysis itself emerges. Kevin Hart argues that deconstruction “cannot be reduced to phenomenology because it thinks the ground of phenomenology.” But is not the ‘ground’ of phenomenology the ‘natural attitude’? Not according to Derrida. For Derrida, *différance* is more primordial than the ‘natural attitude’, which he would argue cannot be known *other than* through metaphysical conception. As Derrida argues, the “phenomenological model” is “itself constituted, as a warp of language,” upon “a woof that is not its own.” This ‘warp and woof’, for Derrida, is *différance*. But how can we *not* first account for our embodied existence in the actual material world? Or the ‘place’ where we stand? For some reason, Derrida mistakes any appeal to the practical nature of our being-in-the-world as ‘onto-theology’, while his own picture of ‘reality’, as conceived in terms of *différance*, remains profoundly metaphysical. As we will see in the section that follows, Derrida’s former pupil appropriates this rather metaphysical picture of reality, although he makes another a move on top of this that might be described, not only as metaphysical, but as *onto-theological*.

### 5.1.2. Metaphysical idolatry or phenomenological heresy?

Marion, as we have seen in Chapter 1 above, challenges what he describes as the ‘idolatry’ of metaphysics. Robyn Horner explains that, for Marion, metaphysics "is (or involves elements of) a conception in terms of being as presence, with a claim to some kind of absoluteness, on the foundation of a transcendental I, whose existence and certainty is guaranteed by a term posited beyond the conceptual system: metaphysics is ‘onto-theology.’” Like Derrida then, Marion draws on Heidegger in order to question the ‘onto-theological metaphysics’ apparently found throughout the Western philosophical tradition, and it is this ‘onto-theological’ metaphysics that Marion describes as ‘idolatrous’. Yet while

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515 Trespass of the Sign, p. 64.
516 Of Grammatology, p. 67.
517 The Idol and Distance, p. 20.
Derrida appeals to *différance* – the “text” of reality – as the condition of our metaphysical conception of anything, including Being itself, Marion appeals to something “beyond the text”, as that which avoids metaphysical categorisation. Marion feels that Derrida’s work is still ‘idolatrous’, in that he seems to be subjecting, not only *Being*, but also *God* (or, more generally, what he calls the “unconditioned”), to the conditions of the “text.”

We have seen how, according to Derrida, we can never experience any transcendent ‘other’, outside of the transcendental conditions of *différance*. This can be said of all metaphysical, as well as theological, appeals to an ‘other’. As he explains:

> When the other announces itself as such, it presents itself in the dissimulation of itself. This formulation is not theological, as one might believe somewhat hastily. The ‘theological’ is a determined moment in the total movement of the trace… The presentation of the other as such, that is to say the dissimulation of its ‘as such,’ has always already begun and no structure of the entity escapes it.⁵¹⁹

For Derrida, then, there is “nothing outside the text,” because the “text” is the condition of knowing or naming anything at all, including the theological concept of “God”. In *God Without Being*, however, Marion challenges Derrida’s statement that there is “nothing outside the text,” with a statement that, “There *is* something outside of the text,” which is the “unthinkable” God who “exceeds every metaphysic.”⁵²⁰ For Marion, the pleasure of writing theology itself is due to the fact that “one is dealing with the impossible, the unthinkable, which nevertheless transgresses the text itself.”⁵²¹ Marion feels that Derrida is subjecting God to *différance*, which means that *différance* “remains idolatrous itself.”⁵²²

Marion therefore feels that Derrida’s conception of *différance* unnecessarily subjects the “unconditioned”, or the “Unthinkable”, to the conditions of metaphysics. The problem, says Marion, is that “*différance* does not risk being outflanked by the Unthinkable,” although “it is necessary to pay for that security with an idolatry.”⁵²³ Rather than questioning the praxeological credentials (or simply the ‘reality’) of *différance*, as we have done, Marion appeals to that which is ‘outside’ *différance*, which, in his theological work, is the Christian God, who apparently reveals Himself without any constraints. While we have argued that *différance* seems to overlook the practical and embodied nature of human existence, then, Marion feels that *différance* is a problem because it overlooks the

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⁵¹⁹ Of Grammatology, p. 47.
⁵²⁰ God Without Being, p. 163.
⁵²¹ Ibid., p. 149.
⁵²² Ibid., p. 232.
⁵²³ Idol and Distance, p. 230.
“unthinkable”, which, from his theological perspective, is the Christian God. But if, as in our view, *différance* is already a conception of human existence that is *too metaphysical*, then how would it help us to move into even *more* metaphysical—in fact, perhaps more onto-theological—territory, in order to question *différance*? Surely it would be more helpful to de-transcendentalise *différance*, by turning to Heidegger’s analysis of Dasein, or to a description of the ‘practical actuality’ of human reality?

It seems that, like Derrida, Marion has a very strange idea about the ‘ontological difference’, articulated by Heidegger as a relation between Being, and Dasein, the being for whom Being matters. While Derrida finds Heidegger’s work problematic in that he fails to think *différance*, as the *transcendental condition* of thought and language, Marion finds Heidegger’s work problematic because he feels that the “ontological difference” fails to take into account the *transcendent* condition of both *différance*, and the ontological difference—and this condition, for Marion, is the “Unthinkable” which, for Marion, *transcends* the relation between Being and beings. It seems that Marion, like Derrida, is guilty of misinterpreting what Heidegger means when he talks about the “ontological difference”, although it appears that Marion’s challenge to the ‘ontological difference’ leads us into territory that is even *more metaphysical* (if that is possible) than Derrida’s conception of *différance*.

Although Marion agrees with Heidegger that the “God of onto-theology is rigorously equivalent to an idol,” he nevertheless feels that Heidegger is guilty of a “second idolatry”, in that he fails to think ‘beyond’ the ontological difference: in not thinking ‘beyond’ or ‘outside’ Being/being, says Marion, “Heidegger himself is guilty of idolatry,” and although it is no longer a question here of the idolatrous “God” of onto-theology, says Marion, “it is perhaps still a question of an idol.” According to Marion, in order to overcome this idolatry, we need to consider the “gift” of God, that transcends the ontological difference altogether. It is this “gift” beyond our comprehension, says Marion, that is the transcendent condition of us being able to think at all:

This second idolatry can be surpassed only in letting God be thought starting from his sole and pure demand. Such a demand goes beyond the limit of a concept—even that of metaphysics in onto-theology—but also the limit of every condition whatsoever—even that of Being conceived in ontological difference. God can give himself to be thought without idolatry only by starting from himself alone: to give himself to be thought as love hence as gift;

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524 *God Without Being*, p. 18.
525 Ibid., p. 28.
526 Ibid., p. 211.
Marion feels that, in order to avoid this ‘second idolatry’, we need to rethink ontological difference as itself ‘given’ according to the “gift.” As he explains: “The gift is not at all laid out according to Being/being, but Being/being is given according to the gift. The gift delivers Being/being.” For Marion, the “gift” precedes the ontological difference; in fact, it is the “gift” that is the condition of the ontological difference. It is only through acknowledging the Gift that delivers Being/being, says Marion, that we realise that at issue here “is not the possibility of God’s attaining being, but, quite the opposite, the possibility of Being’s attaining to God.”

It is important to note, however, that Heidegger himself believed that any attempt to ‘think God’ in terms of Being was ‘idolatrous’ (or, in Heidegger’s terminology, ‘onto-theological’). In fact, Heidegger felt that the “godless thinking which must abandon the god of philosophy, god as causa sui, is thus perhaps closer to the divine God.” He was also very concerned to point out that, with onto-theology, the “deity can come into philosophy only insofar as philosophy, of its own accord and by its own nature, requires and determines that and how the deity enters into it.” One should not, then, according to Heidegger, identify ‘God’ with ‘Being’:

Being and God are not identical and I would never attempt to think of the essence of God by means of Being... If I were to write a theology – to which I sometimes feel inclined – then the word ‘Being’ would not occur in it. Faith does not need the thought of Being... One could not be more reserved than I before every attempt to employ Being to think theologically in what way God is God.

Although Heidegger’s disclaimer is in fact quoted in Marion’s work (indeed, it is this insight that lends itself to the title of Marion’s God Without Being), what Marion finds problematic is the line of thought that follows on from this, which is Heidegger’s belief that, “Being can never be thought as the ground and essence of God, but that nevertheless the experience of God and of his manifestedness, to the extent that the latter can indeed meet man,
flashes in the dimension of Being.” Marion feels that, although Heidegger has done us a service in pointing out the ‘idolatry’ of onto-theology, we nevertheless still face the challenge of thinking God “without any conditions, not even that of Being.” But what does Marion, or Heidegger, for that matter, mean by ‘Being’ here?

It is important to emphasise that, although Marion is usually understood as focusing on the importance of thinking “God without Being” (or, perhaps, “God beyond Being”), we cannot overlook the fact that his problem is, not only with Being, but with the “ontological difference” as such, that is, the difference (or relation) between Being and beings. This difference is articulated by Heidegger as the relationship between Being, as the mystery and fullness of existence, and Dasein, that being for whom the mystery of Being matters. For Marion, however, the problem with Heidegger’s analysis of Dasein is that the divinity becomes nothing more than an “experience of Dasein.” Heidegger, he says, proposes an idolatrous conception of God, in that “the idol testifies to the divine, but each time the divine thought starting from its aim, limited to a variable scope by Dasein. Therefore, the idol always culminates in a ‘self-idolatry.’” All Heidegger provides us with, says Marion, is “an image of the divine that Dasein forms.” Marion feels that Heidegger therefore “submits to the first condition of possibility of an idolatry.”

But how can Marion claim that an analysis of Dasein is the “first condition of possibility of an idolatry”? Is Heidegger’s study of Dasein not intended precisely to prevent onto-theological ‘idolatry’ in that, if we are aware of ‘where we stand’, we might be less likely to posit ‘onto-theological’ ideals or entities in order to explain and describe our existence? It is only from our situation as human beings, for Heidegger, that we can ask the question of the meaning of Being; we cannot even think of Being from outside of our situated perspectives as human beings, who are situated in the world, and whose existence is dependent on this worldly situation. Marion, however, does not seem to understand this, and his misconception of Heidegger’s analysis of Dasein, can be seen in his more explicitly philosophical approach to the ‘idolatry’ of metaphysics.

Although the appeal to an “unthinkable” beyond metaphysics is clearly a theological move in his earlier work, Marion feels that a similar move can be made against metaphysical ‘idolatry’ in philosophy. Marion distinguishes between his theological and

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534 Heidegger, Ibid.
535 Marion, ibid., p. 45.
536 Ibid., p. 28.
537 Ibid., p. 28-29.
538 Ibid., p. 43.
philosophical projects (as he states, "there could be no danger of confusion between these domains"), although he nevertheless feels that a "theological decision supports the philosophical decision." However, despite the fact that the relationship between his two projects has caused a fair amount of controversy, it seems that Marion's apparently 'theological' critique of metaphysics is perhaps not the main problem with his work. The main problem, it seems, is not the theological move that he appears to be making in both his projects, but the onto-theological move he seems to be making. What Marion hopes to do is to argue that the condition of our thinking anything at all, can be identified as the "gift", or "principle of givenness" that is unconditioned and unconditional. But is this sort of appeal not precisely what 'onto-theology' is? That is, the appeal to a transcendent ideal beyond human experience, used to offer an 'ultimate explanation' for this experience?

According to Thomas Carlson, a translator of Marion's work, Marion is concerned to "free the unconditional from any and all conditions that human thought might set upon its appearance, a concern central to Marion's theological project overall, [that] defines also the starting point for his phenomenological work." Marion's central phenomenological aim, says Carlson, can be taken "to mark a generalization of the specifically theological concern to free the appearance of the Christian God from idolatry." Seeking to "play outside the game of onto-theology," says Carlson, "Marion's theology and phenomenology alike will attack above all the characteristically metaphysical subjection of the absolute or unconditional... to the preconditions and limits of human thought and language." Marion feels that we need to appeal to something beyond the "ontological difference" in order to avoid idolatry, although it seems, as we have already commented, that he has misunderstood the importance of beginning our enquiry into the mystery of existence from 'where we stand', as it were; that is, from our existential situation as embodied human beings who are practically involved in the world in which we live. As Carlson notes, Marion considers the "unconditional" as existing beyond the "metaphysical presuppositions set either by subjectivity or onto-theological God." Marion seems to be thinking of 'subjectivity' and the 'onto-theological God' as one and the same problem, and it is for this

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539 Quoted in Carlson’s “Introduction” to The Idol and Distance, p. xii [From “Metaphysics and Phenomenology: A Relief for Theology,” in Critical Inquiry 20, no. 4 (Summer 1994)]
540 Ibid., p. xxii.
541 Ibid., p. xix.
542 Ibid., p. xviii
543 Ibid., p. xvi.
544 Ibid., p. xviii.
reason that he proposes we do away with the human ‘subject’ altogether. But what could 
he possibly mean by this?

Marion feels that we need to perform a ‘reduction’ of the human subject, if we want 
to give the ‘unconditional’ the respect that it deserves. For Marion, it is not the human 
subject who should provide the ‘horizon’ for the self-giving of phenomena, but the 
“givenness” that is a feature of all phenomenality. He feels that the only way to think 
beyond the horizon of the subject, and towards the “given”, is to ‘reduce’ the subject, so 
that “givenness is released, culminating in an event of bedazzling overflow beyond the 
objectivity of objects... which opens up a field or horizon where being and objectivity have 
no sway.”

Marion feels that the “death of the subject” will result in the “birth of the 
gifted, a subjectivity or subjectness entirely in conformity with givenness—one that is 
entirely received from what it receives, given by the given, given to the given.”

Thus the 
receiver, he says, would be “emancipated from all subjectivity.”

But in what ways would 
this “gifted receiver” be different to Dasein? Phenomenologically speaking, would they look 
any different? And could we even say that Marion is doing phenomenology? It is only in 
recognizing “givenness” as the condition of not only theology, but also phenomenology, 
says Marion, that we are being “faithful to phenomenology.”

But in what ways is Marion 
being ‘faithful to phenomenology’? Caputo and Scanlon argue that Marion’s intention is to 
be “more loyal to phenomenology than Husserl or Heidegger themselves, to propose a 
more radical phenomenology which stretches phenomenology to the limits of its possibility, 
to that limit where a radical ‘reduction’ of the subject releases a seemingly impossible 
‘givenness’.”

According to Caputo and Scanlon, Marion’s ‘new phenomenology’ would 
“let that which gives itself be given from itself,” that is, not according to any conditions or 
constraints. For Marion, they say, “It is a matter of releasing an excess of givenness 
behind the limits of any concept to conceive of or of any word to name it, a givenness that 
saturates any subjective condition or precondition that would contain its overflow or pre-
delineate its possibility.”

But how could we do away with the ‘horizon’ of subjective 
human experience? Is this not precisely what phenomenology, especially of the existential 

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545 This – which is the basis of Marion’s entire phenomenological project, in a nutshell – appears, 
however, to be based on a misconception of the ‘phenomenological reduction’ itself. The ‘reduction’ is 
not a ‘reducing’ (as in ‘making smaller,’ or ‘doing away with’), but a ‘focusing’ on certain phenomena, 
in order to understand the essential structure of its appearance to consciousness.
547 Ibid., p. 261.
548 God, the Gift, and Postmodernism, p. 68.
550 Ibid.
variety, is all about: that is, the realisation that we can only ever attempt to comprehend things from the perspective of our particular human situation?

In a famous confrontation between Derrida and Marion at the “Religion and Postmodernism” conference held at Villanova University in September 1997, Derrida accused Marion of a “heresy in phenomenology.” Derrida was reacting to Marion’s suggestion that the subjective horizon constrains the true “revelatory” potential of the phenomena that we encounter, and that any claim to the importance of the horizon “has no right to be made.” In order to be ‘true’ to phenomenology, Marion argued, we need to “describe the gift, notwithstanding all its obvious and prima facie inescapable aporias according to economy,” and, in order to do this, we need to “suspend the horizon.” We need to suspend the horizon, Marion said, so that “we can be led to open for the first time a new horizon, much wider than those of objectivity and being, the horizon of givenness.” But how does Marion understand the ‘horizon’, if he thinks it is something that can be ‘suspended’? The ‘horizon’ is the lifeworld in which we are situated, it is not something we can ever ‘detach’ ourselves from, or ‘take ourselves out of’, because it is only from within the horizon of our existence that anything matters to us at all.

As we have seen, for Heidegger, the philosophical enquiry into Being needs to start with our existential situation as embodied human beings, fundamentally related to the world in which we live, and this situation is the condition of our being able to know or experience anything at all. Philosophy must start from human experience as being-in-the-world, and we cannot posit abstract or transcendent entities in order to explain this experience, as this would be a form of ‘onto-theology’. Marion fails to see that the phenomenological reduction is impossible without taking into account Dasein, or at least Husserl’s intentional consciousness: for phenomenology, being is always in relation with, or consciousness is always consciousness of something, this is the structure of experience as described by the phenomenological reduction. Marion, like Derrida, thinks that both being and Dasein need to be thought of as conditioned by something else, although, while

551 Ibid., p. 60.
552 Marion actually relays a discussion that he had with Levinas in this regard: “I said to Levinas some years ago that in fact the last step for a real phenomenology would be to give up the concept of horizon. Levinas answered me immediately: ‘Without horizon there is no phenomenology.’ And I boldly assume he was wrong.” Levinas is mistaken, according to Marion, because it is only in the light of the ‘suspension of the horizon’ that “revelation – of course, for me, the revelation of Christ, but also any kind of revelation, if there are other claims to revelation – can acquire phenomenological status and match other kinds of phenomena.” (God, the Gift, and Postmodernism, p. 67)
553 Ibid., p. 62.
554 Ibid., p. 61.
Derrida sees this condition in terms of the “text”, or différance, Marion describes it as the “unconditioned condition” that exists “beyond the text”.

But how can we think of anything ‘outside’ of Dasein, that is, outside of our existence as human beings? Marion does not think that this is a problem. In fact, he says, “to think outside of ontological difference eventually condemns one to no longer be able to think at all.” But how can we start our enquiry from “outside the ontological difference”, or from “hors-texte”, when we really need to start from the place ‘where we stand’; that is, from our situation as embodied human beings who live in the world and are involved in certain practices (including practices such as worshipping God) in this world? It seems that, ultimately, Marion is afraid of producing a theology that looks like an ‘anthropology’, although this points to a failure to understand that the conception of God, or the relationship with God, is, first and foremost, an issue for human beings. Heidegger is not trying to say that the human being is a paradigmatic or exemplary entity, or that the question of Being is the most important of all questions; he is simply pointing out that it is Dasein who asks the ‘question’ of Being (or we could extend this to the ‘question’ of God). All questions, whether or not these are questions of a ‘theological’ or a ‘metaphysical’ variety, are questions that are asked by human beings, because it is human beings who are concerned to find the answers to these questions. Dasein, in this sense, is not simply one entity amongst others: it is the entity for whom the meaning of other entities, and existence in general (as well as that which lies ‘beyond existence’), is an issue. Nevertheless, this does not mean that we are worshipping Dasein over God, and it seems that Marion has confused the function of philosophy as naming that which is most valuable, with the function of describing the ‘reality’ of human existence.

This anthropological focus should not detract from the importance that Dasein might place on its relationship with God, for example. The problem with onto-theology, for Heidegger, is that philosophers have started their enquiry with the positing of an entity or concept such as ‘God’, without reflecting on how this is a matter of significance for human beings. To say that the question of God is significant for human beings is not a matter of ‘idolatry’; in fact, it seems that it is the forgetting of the human element that leads to some rather ‘idolatrous’ pictures of God in metaphysical terms. Heidegger’s concern, in fact, is that it is the philosophical or theological concept of God as an ideal entity, or as the causa sui, detached from any consideration of human beings, that is the real problem. As

555 God Without Being, p. 45.
Heidegger complains: "Man can neither pray nor sacrifice to this god. Before the causa sui, man can neither fall to his knees in awe nor can he play music and dance before this god."556 ‘God’ cannot be thought of as some sort of ‘onto-theological’ principle, in other words; rather, he is the divinity who is worshipped in different ways, by believers of different faiths. God is not worshipped as (or in the construction of) a certain metaphysical picture, he is worshipped when man “falls to his knees and plays music and dances.”

Idolatry, as we have discussed, is most helpfully conceived as a wrong or sinful worship practice. It is, then, something that human beings are doing wrong; it is a fundamentally human problem. How can we eliminate anthropology from the problem of idolatry? Idolatry starts, and ends, with human practices, it is not a ‘metaphysical’ problem. This is not to deny that the practice of metaphysics might involve the production of an erroneous ‘metaphysical’ picture of God, but this is no less a practical problem than the problem of worship as a religious practice. The problem of ‘metaphysical idolatry’ could probably also be articulated as a problematic philosophical practice; that is, as a practical problem involving the production of misguided metaphysical pictures. The praxeological approach which we are defending in this thesis, it should be emphasised, is not the practice of worshipping the ‘practical actuality’ of human existence, although it is through this approach that we would point out that worship itself is always a certain type of practice. It is from this praxeological starting point that we can begin to judge whether or not a certain practice might be described as ‘idolatrous’.

5.2. "Wonder in the face of the world": an alternative phenomenological path

Vielfältig das Unheimliche, nichts doch über den Menschen hinaus Unheimlicheres ragt sich regt. 557

It is significant that the theologian Bruce Ellis Benson, who defends Derrida’s iconoclastic approach to ‘metaphysical idolatry’, nevertheless makes the observation that Derrida’s work is still too metaphysical: “Oddly enough,” says Benson, “I think Derrida’s problem is that, in an important sense, he is too... Platonistic,” and Benson makes this judgement because he feels that Derrida “seems to be very uneasy with any kind of incarnation.”558

556 Identity and Difference, p. 72.
557 Heidegger, Martin. “There is much that is strange, but nothing that surpasses man in strangeness.” From the lecture “Hölderlins Hymne ‘Der Ister’” in Gesamtausgabe, Vol. 53 (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 1984), p. 73.
558 Graven Ideologies, p. 167.
Although we might agree with Benson’s accusation that Derrida’s philosophy is ultimately idealistic, we should nevertheless disagree with the next move that he makes, which is that we can only understand ‘incarnation’ through a turn to Christianity. Incarnation is important for Christianity, it should be remembered, not because it is a special feature of God, but because it is a feature of being human. Incarnation is a feature of our situation as beings who exist in the world, and it is this feature of being human that makes Christ’s incarnation, his ‘stooping to our level’, as it were, so poignant for Christians.

Merleau-Ponty is an heir of the phenomenological tradition who, instead of critiquing Heidegger’s analysis of Dasein through an appeal to some metaphysical conception of the “text”, or that which lies “beyond the text”, starts from Heidegger’s observation that we are incarnate human beings who are fundamentally situated in the world. Merleau-Ponty describes phenomenology as “wonder in the face of the world,” and he is keen to emphasise that, “far from being, as has been thought, a procedure of idealist philosophy, phenomenological reduction belongs to existentialist philosophy: Heidegger’s ‘being-in-the-world’ appears only against the background of the phenomenological reduction.”

Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy is concerned with ‘incarnation’ as both an issue for philosophical enquiry, and as a feature of all philosophical practice, and in this sense he offers a better alternative to the ‘impossible alternatives’ produced by Derrida and Marion. Unlike Derrida, who thinks that dualistic metaphysical distinctions can be deconstructed by pointing to the différance as the ‘place’ from where they apparently emerge, Merleau-Ponty is interested in the actual world, and our situation in it, as the ‘place’ from where metaphysical distinctions are made, and, hence, the place from where they can be deconstructed. For Merleau-Ponty, as for other phenomenologists, there is only one world which has both sensible and intelligible aspects, and it is for this reason that Merleau-Ponty criticises the metaphysical assumptions of both empiricism and rationalism (or intellectualism) as philosophical approaches. As Merleau-Ponty states: “In the first case consciousness is too poor, in the second too rich for any phenomenon to appeal compellingly to it. Empiricism cannot see that we need to know what we are looking for, otherwise we would not be looking for it, and intellectualism fails to see that we need to be ignorant of what we are looking for, or equally again we should not be searching.”

What both these approaches have failed to see, according to Merleau-Ponty, is that the

560 Ibid., p. 28.
human being is a perceptive ‘body-subject’ that is situated in the world, and that this comes before either empirical observation or intellectual achievements.

As he notes: “We started off from a world in itself which acted upon our eyes so as to cause us to see it, and now we have consciousness of, or thought about the world, but the nature of the world remains unchanged; it is still defined by the absolute mutual exteriority of its parts, and is merely duplicated throughout its extent by a thought which sustains it.” For Merleau-Ponty, there is no proper metaphysical distinction that can be drawn between the ‘inner’ and ‘outer’ human being, because: “Inside and outside are inseparable. The world is wholly inside and I am wholly outside myself.” Unlike Derrida, then, who sees metaphysical distinctions such as ‘subject’ and ‘object’ as something that can be deconstructed through an appeal to the ‘other’ of metaphysics, différance, Merleau-Ponty is concerned to point out what most philosophers miss, namely that we are both a “part of the world and coextensive with it, constituting but also constituted.” It is not différance, but the world that is “there before any possible analysis of mine,” and this world “is not an object such that I have in my possession the law of its making; it is the natural setting of, and field for, all my thoughts and all my explicit perceptions.” Merleau-Ponty’s focus on pre-reflective ‘perception’ is an attempt to show that, unlike the theoretical attitude of ‘surveillance’ that characterises much philosophical reflection, perception itself “is not a science of the world, it is not even an act, a deliberate taking up of a position; it is the background from which all acts stand out, and it is presupposed by them.” Merleau-Ponty, like Heidegger, is interested in articulating our ontological condition, our “being-in-the-world,” although he is clear that this will not entail a relationship between Cartesian Cogito trying to discover an objective hidden Logos, because “the only pre-existent Logos is the world itself.”

One of Merleau-Ponty’s major arguments in the Phenomenology of Perception, is that the dualistic picture of things held by both ‘empiricists’ and ‘intellectualists’ can be overcome if we focus on the living human body as something that cannot be reduced to either ‘mind’ or ‘matter.’ Merleau-Ponty claims that we are our bodies, and that our lived experience of this body denies the detachment of subject from object, mind from body, or

561 Ibid., p. 39.
562 Ibid., p. 407.
563 Ibid., p. 453.
564 Ibid., p. x.
565 Ibid.
566 Ibid., p. 79.
567 Ibid., p. xx.
any other dualistic conception of how human beings live, think, or act. By focusing on the
human body, Merleau-Ponty does not want to reduce all thought and mental activity to the
realm of the ‘physical’, so much as he wants to re-conceive the human body itself as
something that has the capacity to think and perceive. He does not therefore refer to the
individual as merely a ‘body’, but as a ‘body-subject’. The body, says Merleau-Ponty, is
“our anchorage in the world,” and it is our “general medium for having a world.” It is
in his later work that Merleau-Ponty becomes concerned, not with the mediation of the
body, but with our incarnate inhabitation of the world.

As Andrew Rawnsley notes: “Such inhabitation is a complex affair: human beings do
not ‘inhabit’ their bodies, but as persons inhabit the world. This inhabitation is
characterized by motility and movement and it is not, as a life continuum, principally about
the achievement or fulfillment of cognitive knowledge nor about the organization of this
continuum. It is principally about living it, inhabiting it, indwelling it, engaging fully with
it.” This engaging and indwelling can be seen in the way that ‘perception’ itself is
something that is learnt, through our situatedness in an embodied and communal
environment; that is, that our ability to perceive stems from a pre-reflective base that is
constituted mainly through what Merleau-Ponty terms ‘habituality.’ Our habits, which are
learnt mainly through imitation, are necessary as a means of ‘skilful coping’ in the world,
and because our habits are acquired through our relationships with people in the
communities, they are relatively stable and constitute what Wittgenstein might refer to as
a ‘form of life.’ It is our habituality, says Merleau-Ponty, that “gives our life the form of
generality and prolongs our personal acts into stable dispositions.”

Merleau-Ponty emphasises that it is the body itself that ‘understands’ in the acquisition of habits. It is
through ‘habituality’ that we come to experience certain instruments or tools that we use
in everyday life, as though they are extensions of our own body: “Those actions in which I

568 Ibid., p. 144.
569 Ibid., p. 146.
570 Roots to Rites, p. 90. In his later work, Merleau-Ponty feels that, in referring to the body as a
‘medium’, he has not yet extricated himself from the problematic of the distinction between
consciousness and objective world. As Andrew Rawnsley notes, it seems that at this early stage
Merleau-Ponty had simply displaced this notion of ‘consciousness’ as a centre and organizing principle
onto the body itself. Merleau-Ponty later realises that it is not ‘consciousness’ per se that is the
problem, so much as in the role played by consciousness, and it is this role that he transfers onto the
‘body’. Rawnsley explains: “What Merleau-Ponty rejects later is primarily the sentence ‘Consciousness
is being-towards-the-thing through the intermediary of the body.’ (Phenomenology of Perception, pp.
158-161. Merleau-Ponty’s italics)... Obviously the notion that the body is an intermediary between the
world and consciousness is problematic since it still places the emphasis on getting perceptions into
consciousness to be organized and processed in some way. Consciousness may be conceived as
embodied consciousness, but the principal telos of embodiment is still the achievement of some sort
of cognitive fulfillment.”
571 Phenomenology of Perception, p. 146.
habitually engage,” he notes, “incorporate their instruments into themselves and make them play a part in the original structure of my own body.”

We do things intelligently, not through a ‘mind’ that is ‘ensconced in our heads’ and that wills or oversees our behaviour, but because we have learned to do things through imitation and practice.

Despite his own critique of his earlier work, however, it is clear that there are a number of themes that are ‘fleshed out’ in later works such as the Visible and the Invisible. In the concluding words of the Phenomenology of Perception, for instance, Merleau-Ponty insists that “man is a network of relations,” and this is a theme that pervades his work as a whole. Merleau-Ponty is very concerned to highlight the complexity and multiplicity of our relations with things and with others in the world; he refuses to reduce this complexity to some sort of idealistic metaphysical ‘principle’ (such as Marion’s ‘givenness’). Moreover, one of the most prominent themes in the earlier work is the idea of the ‘reversibility’ of perception: “If I can, with my left hand, feel my right hand as it touches an object, the right hand as an object is not the right hand as it touches: the first is a system of bones, muscles and flesh brought down at a point of space, the second shoots through space like a rocket to reveal the external object in its place.” The body, in this sense, then, must no longer be conceived strictly “as an object of the world, but as our means of communication with it, to the world no longer conceived as a collection of determinate objects, but as the horizon latent in all our experience and itself ever-present and anterior to every determining thought.”

It is precisely this example that Merleau-Ponty uses in the Visible and the Invisible in order to explain what he means by one of his most famous motifs: chiasm. For Merleau-Ponty, ‘chiasm’ indicates the interweaving of ‘universal flesh’, the ‘texture’, the tissue or fabric that comprises the ‘visible’. He explains this by reference to the way in which we know how to touch, which is because of our own experience of tangibility and capacity to be touched.

An important aspect of the chiasmatic structure of being is that it involves a ‘divergence’, or a ‘gap’ (écart in French), in that touching/ being touched, although two sides of the same coin, are nevertheless not identical. As Merleau-Ponty explains:

If my left hand is touching my right hand, and if I wish to suddenly apprehend with my right hand the work of my left hand

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572 Ibid.
573 Ibid., p. 456.
574 Ibid., p. 92.
575 Ibid.
This ‘gap’ is particularly evident in the difference between our active engagement in the world, and our reflection on (or ‘interrogation’ of) it through philosophical work:

the situation of the philosopher who speaks as distinct from what he speaks of, insofar as that situation affects what he says with a certain latent content which is not its manifest content... implies a divergence between the essences he fixes and the lived experience to which they are applied, between the operation of living the world and the entities and negentities in which he expresses it.578

It is this ‘gap’ that prevents our ‘reflection’ from ever being ‘adequate’ to the world in which we live, there is always an excess that cannot be known or objectified. The fleshly interweaving that is chiasm always exceeds the capacity of its being thought and cannot be grasped completely. This fundamental divergence ensures the impossibility of any thorough and all-encompassing self-perception, language, and reflection, although it is also that which makes all perception possible. Just as we cannot reflexively attain to a self-identity with the hand that we are touching, for Merleau-Ponty the philosophy of reflection cannot entirely overcome similar divergences.579

Philosophy and other reflective pursuits cannot recuperate the pre-reflective faith or rediscover some pure immediacy: "What we propose here, and oppose to the search for the essence, is not the return to the immediate, the coincidence, the effective fusion with the existent, the search for an original integrity, for a secret lost and to be rediscovered, which would nullify our questions and even reprehend language. If coincidence is lost, this is no accident; if Being is hidden, this is itself a characteristic of Being and no disclosure will make us comprehend it."580 This impossibility of ‘totalisation’ or reflection ‘without remainder’ might be similar to an insight that can be found in Derrida’s project of deconstruction; however, it is possible to sketch out the major differences between Derrida’s and Merleau-Ponty’s projects. This difference can be seen most specifically in their respective notions of différance, and chiasm. For a start, chiasm is not enmeshed in semiotics, or shaped by it. Furthermore, although Derrida is concerned to disrupt the ‘recuperation of everything’ that results in metaphysical totalisation, it is perhaps possible

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577 Ibid., p. 9.  
578 Ibid., p. 87.  
579 Ibid., p. 38.  
580 Ibid., p. 121.
to level against him the critique that Merleau-Ponty lays at the feet of Hegel, Sartre and others, which is that, for these philosophers, “reflection recuperates everything except itself as an effort of recuperation, it clarifies everything except its own role.” Derrida certainly does not reflect on philosophy itself as an ‘effort of recuperation’; he never seems to go beyond (or before) différance to consider, to think, the ‘flesh’ of the world out of which we emerge as embodied and thinking – indeed, if we choose, philosophical – human beings. Whereas Derrida is from the outset concerned with the ‘other’ of thought, différance, Merleau-Ponty describes this ‘other’ as the flesh of the world in which we are fundamentally situated. It is our embodied life in the world, that precedes any reflection on it, and cannot be made an object of thought because it is the condition of that thought.

We can see then, how Merleau-Ponty, like Heidegger before him, is interested in starting his philosophical enquiry from ‘where we stand’, as embodied human beings who are situated in a world that is both natural and social. This is not to deny that ‘transcendence’ is not an important issue; it is simply to state that transcendence is an issue for embodied human beings. We cannot therefore start, as Derrida and Marion propose, from the metaphysical space of the “text”, or from “beyond the text”. We need to understand that transcendence is a human issue, or a human experience. As Merleau-Ponty explains:

Reflection does not withdraw from the world towards the unity of consciousness as the world’s basis; it steps back to watch the forms of transcendence fly up like sparks from a fire; it slackens the intentional threads which attach us to the world and thus brings them to our notice... in order to see the world and grasp it as paradoxical, we must break with our familiar acceptance of it and also from the fact that from this break we can learn nothing but the unmotivated upsurge of the world.  

We can see how different this approach is to the ‘phenomenology’ of both Marion and Derrida, who seem to feel that ‘transcendence’ only exists ‘outside’ the world, or ‘outside’ our experience. According to Rawnsley, one of the most (or perhaps the) fundamental phenomenological problem is, what it can mean for thought to be situated, and he feels that Merleau-Ponty takes this central concern of the phenomenological tradition in important new directions. Rawnsley feels that Merleau-Ponty, through his continual probing into the question of what it means to be an incarnate human being, is asking questions about the general structure of human involvement in the world, and the

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581 Ibid., p. 33.
582 Phenomenology of Perception, p. xiii.
583 Roots to Rites, p. 80.
expansion of an understanding of this involvement towards authentic existential engagement with concrete situations.\textsuperscript{584} As Merleau-Ponty notes, “all we must do is situate ourselves within the being we are dealing with, instead of looking at it from the outside... put it back into the fabric of our life, attend from within to the dehiscence which opens it to itself and opens us upon it.”\textsuperscript{585} Hopefully the misguided nature Derrida’s and Marion’s iconoclastic attempts are becoming more obvious. Instead of offering an alternative to the ‘idolatrous’ metaphysical pictures they are attempting to deconstruct, they seem to have produced an even more metaphysical picture of the nature of ‘reality’. And, in fact, their critique of Heidegger’s attempts to start his philosophical enquiry with an analysis of Dasein, points to how ‘metaphysical’ their own alternative pictures turn out to be.

5.3. Practice theory and theoretical practice: the art of ‘objectification’?

Intelligent practice is not a step-child of theory. On the contrary, theorising is one practice amongst others and is itself intelligently or stupidly conducted.\textsuperscript{586}

It is, we feel, only through a praxelogical approach, that we can avoid overlooking the importance of the human situation in relation to all philosophical and theological enquiries. And it is only from this perspective, it seems, that we can see the problem with those philosophical and theological pictures that might be described as ‘metaphysical’. If we wish to describe the ‘reality’ of the human situation, then it is not particularly helpful to start with a description of an ideal entity or principle – including Derrida’s différance or Marion’s “unthinkable” or “unconditioned condition”. Merleau-Ponty’s work has been one of the major inspirations for what has been labelled the ‘practice turn’ in contemporary theory, and it is not difficult to see why. As Theodor Schatzki claims, the contemporary turn to practices has been caused by impulses to move a number of academic disciplines beyond current problematic metaphysical (and especially dualistic) ways of thinking.\textsuperscript{587} Those

\textsuperscript{584} Ibid., p. 85.
\textsuperscript{585} Phenomenology of Perception, p. 117. Rawnsley feels that we need to follow in the direction of someone like Merleau-Ponty, in order to develop what he calls an ‘heir to metaphysics’. He characterises this ‘heir’ as a “strange new type of ‘metaphysics’, in which considerations of ‘space’, ‘location’ and the ‘where’ of events is emphasized. Such an ‘heir’ to metaphysics takes up critical and structural positions from previous versions into itself and transforms and twists them into new shapes, attempting, as it were, to obtain an Übersicht of the human situation.” This ‘heir’ might perform the same function as metaphysics, says Rawnsley, but goes about this in a totally different way. It is this ‘heir’ that he feels would “rival other traditional metaphysical accounts in both structural and organizational power.”(Roots to Rites, p. 151).
\textsuperscript{587} Schatzki, Theodor (Ed.). “Introduction” to The Practice Turn in Contemporary Theory (London: Routledge, 2001). Scatzki mentions such trends as, amongst others: intellectualism,
scholars adopting the ‘practice approach’ do so, according to Schatzki, in order to understand, amongst other things: the philosophical and social scientific significance of human activity; the nature of subjectivity, embodiment, rationality, meaning, and normativity; the character of language, science, and power; and the organization, reproduction, and transformation of social life. Despite the diversity of interests, however, Schatzki notes that practice approaches are united in the belief that such phenomena as knowledge, meaning, human activity, science, power, language, social institutions, and historical transformation, amongst a range of other things, occur within and are aspects or components of our practical involvement in the world, and it is this that is the linchpin of the theories and studies that could be seen as offering a ‘practice approach’ to the problems at hand. It is clear from the essays in Schatzki’s volume, however, that the articles included are concerned with defining a sort of ‘social ontology’, and Schatzki himself claims in the introduction that: “practice approaches promulgate a distinct social ontology: the social is a field of embodied, materially interwoven practices centrally organized around shared practical understandings.” It seems, however, that the ‘practice approach’ is not necessarily limited to an emphasis on the social nature of practices. Of course, the social is one important aspect of practices that needs to be taken into account; however, it seems that the practice approach could have positive implications in a range of different disciplines or fields of academic enquiry. The practice approach could be employed, we feel, anywhere we find certain things or practices described according to a rather ‘metaphysical’ picture of reality. And, in fact, because we find these ‘metaphysical’ descriptions in a number of different places, it seems that there are a number of different ‘practice approaches’ that have been (or need to be) employed.

We could, in fact, refer to a family of ‘practice approaches’ in order to describe those studies or theories determined to problematise some very strange metaphysical pictures that we find in a number of disciplines, in the humanities, social sciences, and even the physical sciences. The move to a more praxeological perspective is hence also an inherently inter-disciplinary phenomenon: it can be found, for example, in phenomenology (Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty), ‘ordinary language’ philosophy (Austin and Ryle), sociology (Bourdieu), anthropology (Ingold) and even the philosophy of science (Polanyi).

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588 The Concept of Mind, p. 1.
589 Ibid., p. 3.
If, according to Schatzki’s list, the ‘practice turn’ is a reaction against such metaphysical tendencies as ‘intellectualism, representationalism, individualism, and structuralism’ (amongst many others), then there will certainly be more than one discipline or intellectual tradition faced with the problem of ‘metaphysics’, and which would therefore benefit from adoption of a practice (or, we might say, a praxeological) approach.

There have also been a number of contemporary thinkers who seem to be articulating a more general ontological description of ‘reality’, than that provided by Schatzki’s focus on ‘social ontology’. Tim Ingold, for example, is an anthropologist who has become aware of the metaphysical (and especially the dualistic) pictures that have been produced in order to describe or explain human existence, and, as a counter to these strange pictures, his anthropological approach "takes as its ontological starting point the inescapable condition of human beings’ engagement in the world."\textsuperscript{590} Although Ingold has contributed, amongst other things, to some important questions in evolutionary anthropology, he admits to having spent a large amount of time trying to solve evolutionary problems such as when man acquired ‘language’, or when man became ‘technological’, before realising that perhaps the problem was not lack of archaeological evidence, but that words like ‘language’ and ‘technology’ were being wrongly used (and conceived). Ingold found that even the field of evolutionary anthropology was plagued by what Ryle might call ‘category mistakes’: “It is the Western tradition of thought whose penchant for constructing dichotomies is one of its main defining characteristics,” says Ingold, “that has given us a distinction between intellect (as a property of mind) and behaviour (as bodily execution), along with the idea that all purposive or intentional action is preceded by an intentional act of cognition, involving the construction of representations, the consideration of alternatives, and the formulation of plans.”\textsuperscript{591}

Rather than using the word ‘technology’ in order to produce a picture of a human being with an ‘innate’ technological capacity, then, Ingold suggests that we could challenge this picture by asking exactly what it means to use a tool skilfully.\textsuperscript{592} Using a tool skilfully does not mean having ‘knowledge’ in our heads that we then express externally; rather, according to Ingold, tool-use is the “skilled practitioner’s acting in the world, his way of

\textsuperscript{591} Ibid., p. 340.
\textsuperscript{592} We can see the difference here from Derrida’s deconstruction of dualistic metaphysical distinctions in that, while Derrida refers to différencé as that which precedes metaphysics, Ingold, who is also influenced by the phenomenological tradition, looks at our involvement in the world through our practices, as a way of challenging these problematic metaphysical pictures
knowing it – in direct contact with materials, whether or not mediated by tools, in the attentive touching, feeling, handling, looking and listening that is entailed in the very process of creative work. Skilled practice, then, is at once a "practical knowledge and knowledgeable practice." A skill is not something passed on through the transmission of formulae, but through practice, and ‘hands-on’ experience; skills are developmentally incorporated into the modus operandi of the body, through practice and experience in the environment. It is perhaps helpful to think of theoretical skills in the same way: hence, more than providing a better picture of how people of different times and places use tools, we could also gain a better understanding of how we use theoretical tools. This is something that a number of the thinkers whose work we have examined above, have set out to show. Hence Ryle, for example, highlights the fact that what distinguishes sensible from silly operations in scholarly work is ‘not their parentage but their procedure’, while Michael Polanyi, whose work we will examine below, explains how we ‘indwell’ theories, the same way we ‘indwell’ other tools through our skilful mastery of certain techniques.

The cause of overcoming the division between body and mind is ill-served by emphasising one term to the exclusion of the other, says Ingold, and it needs to be emphasised that one could in principle speak just as well of enmindment as of embodiment. Body and mind, after all, he says, “are not two separate things but two ways of describing the same thing – or better, the same process – namely the environmentally situated activity of the human organism-person... Mind... is not ‘in the head’ rather than ‘out there in the world’, but immanent in the active, perceptual engagement of organism and environment." It is important to recognise, then, that such processes as thinking, perceiving, remembering and learning have to be studied within the ecological contexts of people’s interrelations with their environments. The mind and its properties are not given in advance of the individual’s entry into the social world, but are rather fashioned through a lifelong history of involvement in relationships with others. Skilled practice is not an attribute of the individual body in isolation, but of the whole system of relations constituted by the presence of the artisan in his or her environment (and this would include the ‘academic artisan’). Understanding skilled organism-persons in this way then calls for a sort of ‘relational thinking’, because if every organism is not so much a discrete

593 Ibid., p. 433.
594 Ibid., p. 440.
entity as a node in a field of relationships, then we have to think in a new way not only about the interdependence of organisms and their environments but also about their evolution. With this in mind we come to see that the identities and characteristics of persons are not bestowed upon them in advance of their involvement with others but are the condensations of histories of growth and maturation within fields of social relationships, and we can conceive the human being, not as a composite entity made up of separable but complementary parts, such as body, mind and culture, but rather as "a locus of creative growth within a continually unfolding field of relationships."  

Not only is skilled practice inherently relational, it is also inherently situated. Practical enskilment, according to Ingold, is the embodiment of capacities of awareness and response by environmentally situated agents. Ingold is very concerned to understand what it means for human beings – at once organisms and persons – to inhabit an environment. The study of skill demands a perspective which situates the practitioner, right from the start, in the context of an active engagement with the constituents of his or her surroundings. Our skilled practices are always situated, and our involvement in the places where we find ourselves plays a huge role in who we are and what we can do. If we are to study the skills of a certain practitioner or group of practitioners, we should adopt what Ingold calls a ‘dwelling perspective’, which treats the immersion of the organism-person in an environment or lifeworld as an inescapable condition of existence. Drawing on the phenomenological tradition, and especially the work of Heidegger, Ingold argues that “the world emerges with its properties alongside the emergence of the perceiver in person, against the background of involved activity. Since the person is a being-in-the-world, the coming-into-being of the person is part and parcel of the process of coming-into-being of...
the world.” From this ‘dwelling perspective’ we see that “the world continually comes into being around the inhabitant, and its manifest constituents take on significance through their incorporation into a regular pattern of life activity.” It is from this perspective, too, that place becomes important, which is different to ‘space’ in that it owes its character to the experiences it affords to those who spend their time there. It is from this relational context of people’s engagement with the world, in the business of dwelling, says Ingold, that each place draws its unique significance. In contrast to those theorists who draw (sometimes metaphysical) distinctions between different types of environments, Ingold emphasises that: “life is given in engagement, not in disengagement, and in that very engagement the real world at once ceases to be ‘nature’ and is revealed to us as an environment for people. Environments are constituted in life, not just in thought, and it is only because we live in an environment that we are able to think at all.”

This means that even things such as building, as something that human beings do, is not something that can be traced to a ‘genetic capacity’. Human children, like the young of many other species, Ingold explains, grow up in environments furnished by the work of previous generations, and as they do so they come literally to carry the forms of their dwelling in their bodies – in specific skills, sensibilities and dispositions. Skills are the capabilities of action and perception of the whole organic being (indissolubly mind and body) situated in a richly structured environment. Becoming skilled in the practice of a certain form of life, then, is not a matter of furnishing a set of generalised capacities, given from the start as compartments of a universal human nature, with specific cultural content. Skills are not transmitted from generation to generation, says Ingold, but are “regrown in each, incorporated into the modus operandi of the developing human organism through training and experience in the performance of particular tasks.”

Human beings – including the beings who might be characterised as ‘homo academicus’ – are situated in environments, and ‘indwell’ these environments through their practical involvements with things and people, and their mastery of certain techniques.

One of the features of the ‘praxeological turn’, in whatever field or discipline we find it, is that it is, by its very nature, reflective about the practices of the thinker or theorist him or herself. If one of the major concerns of the practice approach is to highlight

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598 Ibid., p. 168.
599 Ibid.
600 Ibid., p. 60
601 Ibid., p. 5.
those practical elements of human being-in-the-world that metaphysical pictures seem to have overlooked, then it seems only natural to reflect on the practices of the philosopher, or the academic, in order to make sure that he or she has not overlooked the practical elements of his or her own work. For this reason, a number of thinkers have become interested, not only in everyday practices and the use of language, but also in the academic’s practices and uses of language. Practice theorists in general are interested, not only in certain theoretical pictures of reality, then, but also in theorising itself as a practice, or process, of producing theoretical pictures. As we have seen, for example, Derrida and Marion are critical of certain metaphysical pictures of reality, although their critique is misguided because they do not investigate the practices that have led to the production of these pictures. They seem to have, as we have seen, a rather ‘metaphysical’ picture, not only of our existential situation, but of the practice of metaphysical ‘picturing’ itself. In both cases, they seem to have overlooked the fact that theoretical pictures are produced for a variety of different reasons, by human beings who exist in a variety of different ways.

Gilbert Ryle is one philosopher who has tried to expose philosophical illusions, by pointing to the practices of the philosopher (especially his use of language), as well as to the practices that contradict the strange pictures that philosophers paint through their problematic use of language (as can be seen, for example, in their conception of ‘mind’). In his book The Concept of Mind, Ryle sets out to explore the implications of the “category mistake” that has resulted in a conception of the ‘mind’ as though it is a certain sort of entity, or substance. “The official doctrine, which hails from Descartes,” says Ryle, is that “every human being has both a body and a mind,” and the idea that, while human bodies “are in space and are subject to mechanical laws which govern all other bodies in space,” minds “are not in space, nor are their operations subject to mechanical laws.” This leads to a view that the human mind is like a ‘ghost in the machine’, says Ryle, although this conception falsely represents the facts of mental life as if they belonged to one logical type or category (or range of types or categories), when they actually belong to another. It is this mistaken practice of categorisation that Ryle refers to as a “category mistake.”

What we need to remember, says Ryle, is that, although ‘mind’ is a noun, it does not necessarily name an object. This conception of the ‘mind’ as a thing that can be located, he says, is nothing more than a “philosopher’s myth.” Ryle therefore sets out to offer an

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602 Concept of Mind, p. 11.
603 Ibid., p. 16.
alternative picture of 'mind', which will not succumb to the errors of those dualistic metaphysical pictures of intelligence that he finds so problematic. It is important to note that Ryle is not interested in *doing away with* 'mental activity', as is sometimes claimed; on the contrary, his whole book is devoted to trying to understand exactly what it is that we are talking about when we use the word 'mental', or 'the mind,' along with a number of other words employed to describe this 'phenomenon.' "I am not denying that there occur mental processes," he says: "I am saying that the phrase 'there occur mental processes' does not mean the same thing as 'there occur physical processes', and, therefore, that it makes no sense to conjoin or disjoin the two."\(^{604}\)

In a similar way to Wittgenstein, aspects of whose work we will examine in the chapters that follow, Ryle points out that, when we describe people as exercising qualities of mind, "we are not referring to occult episodes of which their overt acts and utterances are effects; we are referring to those overt acts and utterances themselves."\(^{605}\)

For Ryle, there can be such a thing as 'intelligent behaviour', without necessarily positing a mysterious and intangible entity ensconced inside the human head. To understand intelligent behaviour, we do not need a notion of 'mind' that "habituates its employers to the view that minds are queer ‘places’, the occupants of which are special-status phantasms."\(^{606}\) What then, is intelligent behaviour, if it does not rely on the effective operation of a place called the 'mind'? Intelligent behaviour, for Ryle, is the skilful execution of tasks and practices, which we are either taught, or have been acquired through observation and imitation. There is a distinction to be made, says Ryle, between the contents of our knowledge, or 'knowing *that*’ (which is what philosophers usually focus on), and 'knowing *how*’, which is a matter of *practice*: "We learn *how* by practice, schooled indeed by criticism and example, but often quite unaided by any lessons in the theory."\(^{607}\)

Performing an act skilfully, says Ryle, is *not* a matter of theoretical reason followed by practical action. It is not a case of two “tandem operations of theoretically avowing maxims and them putting them into practice."\(^{608}\) Ryle points out that, because our concept of ‘mind’ is often indistinguishable from our understanding of the 'intellect', we tend to think of human behaviour as something that requires a 'mental theory' before it can be successfully performed.\(^{609}\) Yet there are many activities which directly display qualities of

\(^{604}\) Ibid, p. 22.
\(^{605}\) Ibid., p. 25.
\(^{606}\) Ibid., p. 40.
\(^{607}\) Ibid., p. 41.
\(^{608}\) Ibid., p. 46.
\(^{609}\) Ibid., p. 26.
'mind', he says, that are not themselves 'intellectual operations.' When we describe a performance as intelligent, says Ryle, this does not mean that we do a bit of theory and then do a bit of practice. We need to understand, he says, that "efficient practice precedes the theory of it." Not only is Ryle concerned to point out the weaknesses in thinking of practices as reliant on 'theories' in the practitioner's 'mind', as it were, but he is also equally concerned with the conception of 'theory' as something that happens 'in the head'.

Ryle believes that this conception of theory is subject to the sort of 'category mistake' he has identified in the tradition of Cartesian dualism. Rather than understanding 'theory' as a mental activity that happens 'in the head' of the philosopher, then, Ryle feels that the practice of academic theorising should be conceived on new terms; that is, not like watching, but like playing a certain kind of game, in which all our skills are gathered in order to perform a certain task successfully. If things had been different, he says, we might have formed the habit of talking of theory "in the vocabulary of the football field, rather than in that of the grandstand." It is not only certain problematic theories (such as the dogma of the 'ghost in the machine'), but our picture of what 'theory' (or the activity of theorising) itself is, that needs to be re-drawn. What distinguishes sensible from silly operations in scholarly work, says Ryle, "is not their parentage but their procedure, and this holds no less for intellectual than practical performances." Learning, building, or having a theory, according to Ryle, is something we do, it is a practice depending on a number of practical considerations – and whether or not a theory is intelligent or not, depends not on whether it occurred in someone's 'mind', but on the question of whether or not it has been skilfully executed and skilfully used, or on the more ethical question of what the theorist is intending to do with his theory. Having and mastering a theory is therefore a type of knowing how – even if the goal of having this theory is to know that.

Ryle in fact feels that the philosophical branch of epistemology, should be replaced by a theory of knowledge in the sense of being the theory of getting to know; he does not resort to metaphysical solutions in order to solve what he sees as some major metaphysical problems; he simply shows that 'theory', which could include 'metaphysical' theory, is itself a practice that can be more or less intelligently performed. There is nothing

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610 Ibid., p. 30.
611 Ibid., p. 306.
612 Ibid., p. 32.
'ghostly' about theoretical academic work, in other words, even though some theorists have become particularly skilled at 'conjuring ghosts.'\(^{613}\)

Another thinker who has emphasised the importance of the range of 'tacit' factors that 'in-form' theoretical practice, is the former physical chemist Michael Polanyi. Polanyi has done some interesting work on the practice of scholarship in the field of science, although it seems that we could glean from this work a great deal in terms of our understanding of academic practices in general. For Polanyi, scientific research must be considered a type of 'skilful knowing' rather than something that happens 'in the mind' of the scientist. Polanyi, like many of the other theorists adopting what might be called a 'practice approach', feels that what many traditional epistemologies have overlooked is the personal, inter-personal, and other practical and environmental considerations that shape, not only what we know, but the way in which we know and do things. The target of Polanyi's most famous book, *Personal Knowledge*, is the idea of science as an 'objective' activity; that is, as an activity based on the disjunction of subjectivity and objectivity, seeking to eliminate the "passionate, personal, human appraisals of theories, or at least to minimise their function to that of a negligible by-play."\(^{614}\) The declared aims of science of establishing strictly detached, objective knowledge, says Polanyi, "turn out to be fundamentally misleading and possibly a source of devastating fallacies."\(^{615}\)

In place of the impersonal objectivist claim of the sciences, Polanyi asks us to remember the personal participation of the knower in all acts of understanding.\(^{616}\) We cannot disregard such factors as the choices and passions of the scientist, the skills he has learnt and the field in which he has been trained, the resources available to him, the interests of the scientific community at a particular time, as well as other less articulable factors, such as frameworks of 'vision' as to what the ultimate goals and aims of scientific research are, in trying to formulate an understanding of what 'knowledge' is. For Polanyi, the very nature of discovery is determined by a host of factors that influence the activity of the scientist – from the criteria set by the community in which he is working, to the skills as well as personal passions and interests he holds, which allow him to identify something

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\(^{613}\) Ryle, it seem, 'exorcises' the 'ghosts' of metaphysics far more effectively than Derrida, who is in fact not interested in exorcising ghosts at all (to the extent that he offers us a 'hauntology' as an alternative to metaphysics). Derrida is so concerned to destabilize metaphysical categories and distinctions that he never looks at (or returns to) the actual practices from which the problematic metaphysical descriptions have been derived. Instead, he turns to *différance*, which seems to paint a rather 'ghostly' picture of reality itself.


\(^{616}\) *Personal Knowledge*, p. viii.
as a ‘discovery’. There is not some objective realm of knowledge, he says, simply waiting to be ‘discovered’; on the contrary, the personal goals, aims and abilities of the researcher affect judgements about whether certain discoveries are more important or more relevant than others. Personal knowledge, the way we personally know things, has what Polanyi calls a ‘tacit dimension’ – that is, a variety of characteristics that cannot always be fully articulated. The scientist conducts his research through the use of skills and know-how which he has accumulated over years of training and research; these learnt skills have become ‘tacit’ through much training and practice, and range from the use of specific tools or instruments, to much more inclusive elements such as the mastery of a certain use of language. Much of this has always been, and remains tacit; it is only evident in ‘what we do’. According to Polanyi, we always “know more than we can tell.”

The ‘tacit dimension’ includes the way we know how to do things, our ability to ‘feel our way forward,’ as it were, although this ability cannot always (or ever) be expressed or explicitly articulated by the practitioner: “The unspecifiability of the process by which we thus feel our way forward,” notes Polanyi, “accounts for the possession of humanity of an immense mental domain, not only of knowledge but of manners, of laws and of the many different arts which man knows how to use, comply with, enjoy or live by, without specifiably knowing their contents.” Some skills cannot be specified in detail and cannot be transmitted by prescription, says Polanyi, since no prescription for it exists. It can be passed on only by example from master to apprentice. By watching the master and emulating his efforts in the presence of his example, the apprentice unconsciously picks up the rules of art, including those that are not explicitly known to the master himself. It is through training or apprenticeship that scholars come to ‘indwell’ a certain style of research, a certain theory, a whole body of knowledge, or even a certain form of life. This is similar to Ingold’s ‘dwelling perspective’: we ‘indwell’ certain tools (which might include certain theoretical tools) through our skilful use of these tools in our everyday practices.

For Polanyi, science is as much (and in a sense, more deeply) a way of knowing how as knowing that – it is only through the large number of factors that contribute to knowing how that we can make sense of the knowledge that we could describe as ‘knowing that’ or ‘knowing what’. ‘Knowing how’ for Polanyi is necessary in order to focus on certain things that could be described as ‘objects of knowledge’, and he therefore makes a distinction

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617 The Tacit Dimension, p. 10.
618 Ibid., p. 62.
619 Ibid., p. 53.
between two kinds of awareness, which he describes as ‘subsidiary’ and ‘focal’. Skilful knowing and doing, according to Polanyi, is performed by subordinating a set of particulars, as clues or tools, to the shaping of a skilful achievement, whether practical or theoretical. We then become ‘subsidiarily aware’ of these particulars within our ‘focal awareness’ of the coherent entity that we achieve. For Polanyi, like Merleau-Ponty and Heidegger, the tools we use are things used as such and not observed in themselves; instead, they are often made to function as extensions of our bodily equipment and this involves a certain change of our own being.\textsuperscript{620} If we think of a blind man feeling his way by the use of a stick, says Polanyi, his knowledge of how to use a stick to feel his way, becomes subsidiary to his awareness of what he is actually feeling: “We have here the transition from ‘knowing how’ to ‘knowing what’ and we can see how closely similar is the structure of the two. Subsidiary awareness and focal awareness are mutually exclusive.”\textsuperscript{621}

The French social theorist, Pierre Bourdieu, is also concerned with the practice of science or theory as something of which the philosopher or social scientist needs to be aware. Bourdieu would certainly agree with Merleau-Ponty’s suggestion that:

\begin{quote}
reflection cannot be thorough-going, or bring a complete elucidation of its object, if it does not result in awareness of itself as well as its results. We must not only adopt a reflective attitude in an impregnable Cogito, but furthermore reflect on this reflection, understand the natural situation from which it is conscious of succeeding and which is therefore part of the definition; not merely practise philosophy, but realise the transformation which it brings with it in the spectacle of the world and in our existence.\textsuperscript{622}
\end{quote}

Like Merleau-Ponty, Bourdieu brings to the fore that which has been ‘overlooked’ in reflective work, and he feels that this is something that all theoretical work must take into consideration. Bourdieu in fact cites Merleau-Ponty (along with Feuerbach, Marx, Weber, Husserl, Heidegger, Wittgenstein, Ryle, and many others!), as being influences in the development of his ‘praxeological approach’, which he describes as “a universal anthropology which takes into account the historicity and thus the relativity of cognitive structures, while recording the fact that agents universally put to work such historical structures.”\textsuperscript{623} Trained in philosophy but later drawn towards anthropology, Bourdieu describes his work as “fieldwork in philosophy,” and this highlights his interest in the ways

\textsuperscript{620} Ibid., p. vii.
\textsuperscript{621} Ibid., p. 57.
\textsuperscript{622} Phenomenology of Perception, p. 62.
philosophical (especially ontological) questions can be elucidated by anthropological or sociological research of appropriate kinds. He is particularly interested in articulating those structures already operative in a reality which is fundamentally social, material, and relational, and this all drawn together into his articulation of a ‘theory of practice.’

The influence of Marx on Bourdieu is clear, although it should be noted that Bourdieu develops the notion of ‘praxis’ much more extensively than Marx himself does, through his employment of both structuralism and phenomenology. From the outset of his research, however, Bourdieu follows Marx’s suggestion in the *Theses on Feuerbach*, which is that the oppositions between materialism and idealism can be exposed as false oppositions, if we look at human action through a praxeological perspective. In one of his earlier publications, *The Logic of Practice*, Bourdieu criticises the theoretical attitudes of objectivism and subjectivism (that is, the respective emphases on the importance of objective structures, and individual consciousness, as the main determinants of human behaviour) that he finds rampant in the social sciences: “Of all the oppositions that artificially divide social science,” claims Bourdieu, “the most fundamental, the most ruinous, is the one that is set up between subjectivism and objectivism.” Bourdieu’s research is based, not on a defence of one approach over the other, or even on finding the similarities between the two, but on exposing the fact that both subjectivism and objectivism are based on a privileging of the theoretical, or ‘objectifying’ attitude, understood, in a pejorative sense, as the reduction of people, and the practices in which they are involved, to ‘objects’ that can be comprehended by the philosopher or social scientist. For Bourdieu, the only solution is to “make explicit the presuppositions that they have in common as theoretical modes of knowledge, both equally opposed to the practical mode of knowledge which is the basis of ordinary experience of the social world.”

This privileging of the ‘theoretical attitude’, according to Bourdieu, results in the projection of certain theoretical attitudes onto all objects of study, and a ‘forgetting’ of the practical attitude that is a feature of their involvement in the social world, as well as their work as social scientists. Bourdieu feels that it is this projection of the ‘objectifying’

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624 As Rawnsley notes, “Bourdieu’s philosophy is inherently relational: one must constantly be vigilant not to place an undue emphasis on a singular term without keeping the whole nexus of other terms close by, allowing the terms to have a fluidity of application. Many commentators forget the relational core of Bourdieu’s ontology by focusing on one element of his work at the expense of this fundamental relational core. It is what this relationality consists in that is the essential question of his corpus. The difficulty in laying-out Bourdieu’s philosophy is precisely that it does not easily allow the isolation of a single component for analysis.”


626 Ibid.
attitude (that is, in a negative sense, the attitude that reduces people and practices to 'objects') that has produced some fallacious pictures of the social world and the people and practices of which it is comprised. He notes that scholars studying social practices change the very nature of the practices they are studying through shifting it to a theoretical schema, and that this is something that needs to be problematised. What we are dealing with here, he says, is "the gulf between two relations to the world: one theoretical, the other practical." It is this 'gulf' that leads to what Bourdieu describes as the "scholastic fallacy," that is, the illusion that the scholar is somehow 'detached' from the world he is investigating as an 'object' of study. He explains that the shift "from the practical schema to the theoretical schema, constructed after the event, from practical sense to theoretical model, which can be read either as a project, plan or method, or as a mechanical program, a mysterious ordering mysteriously reconstructed by the analyst, lets slip everything that makes the temporal reality of practice in process." What most social theorists miss, according to Bourdieu, is that human activities rely on a 'practical logic' that is intelligible, coherent, and oriented toward practical ends. This 'practical logic' cannot be made to conform with a sociologist's rationalized 'objectification' of the activity he is observing, and Bourdieu notes that, if asked to reflect on a certain practice, the person who possesses a practical mastery "loses any chance of expressing the truth of his practice... he cannot communicate the essential point, which is that the very nature of the practice is that it excludes this very question." Bourdieu feels that a praxeological approach should take into account those aspects of human action that could be understood as a "cultivated disposition, inscribed in the body schema and in the schemes of thought, which enables each agent to engender all the practices consistent with the logic of change and riposte, and only such practices, by means of countless inventions, which the stereotyped unfolding of a ritual would in no way demand." In order to explain the 'mode of generation of practices' that avoids recourse to any type of 'mind' controlling the human agent, (or any other 'ghost in the machine'), Bourdieu uses

629 Ibid., p. 81.
630 Logic of Practice, p. 91.
the term *habitus*, which could be described as an incorporated system of dispositions that can be seen as a certain specific 'way' or 'style' of being in the world.  

As a form of 'practical logic', *habitus* refers to the way in which agents *do things* skilfully and intelligently, without prior 'theorising' or 'mental reflection.' *Habitus* might be understood as "history turned nature", in that it involves the "forgetting of history which history itself produces by incorporating the objective structures it produces in the second natures of *habitus*." It is precisely because subjects do not always know what they are doing, says Bourdieu, "that what they do has more meaning than they know." *Habitus* is the universalising mediation which causes an individual agent's practices, without explicit reason or signifying intent, to be none the less 'sensible' or 'reasonable.' *Habitus* is that part of a practice that remains obscure in the eyes of its producer, and it is the aspect by which these producers are objectively adjusted to other practices and to the structures of which the principle of their production is itself the product. It can be seen, for example, in the etiquette or codes of honour of a group, including groups such as scientists and artists: "The source of historical action, that of the artist, the scientist, or the member of government just as much as that of the worker or the petty civil servant, is not an active subject confronting society as if that society were an object constituted externally. The source resides neither in consciousness nor in things but in the relationship between two stages of the social, that is, between the history objectified in things, in the form of institutions, and in the history incarnated in bodies, in the form of that system of enduring dispositions which I call *habitus*.' The manner by which the behavioural patterns of the *habitus* are embedded in individuals may take various forms, manifesting themselves in every aspect of human interaction with the world, not just in terms of ideas or patterns of speech or dress, but also with regard to the body and its demeanour.

As we will discuss more thoroughly in Chapter 7 below, there is a way in which this notion of *habitus* might help us to understand the importance of the normative element that is involved in all human practices. Our understanding of what is 'right' and 'wrong', or even what is in good and bad taste, for example, is to a large extent dependent on our

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632 *Habitus* is not Bourdieu's neologism – Bourdieu tells us that it is a "'rethinking' of an Aristotelian/Scholastic concept" (in *In Other Words: Essays Towards a Reflexive Sociology*, Cambridge: Polity, 1990, p. 10) which he adopted from a study on Gothic architecture by the art historian Erwin Panofsky (cf. Panofsky, *Gothic Architecture and Scholasticism* (New York: Meridian, 1971; translated Into French by Pierre Bourdieu). We can also see similarities between *habitus* and Hegel's *ethos*, Mauss's *hexis*, and Husserls' *Habitualiteit.*

633 Ibid., p. 78.

634 Ibid., p. 81.

635 *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, p. 190.
situation in life, as well as the practices in which we are involved. The judgements that we make are often based on a number of tacit assumptions that we cannot always (or ever) articulate, but which give us our sense of what behaviour is acceptable or unacceptable, deserving of acclaim, or deserving of ridicule or even punishment (while some people, of course, are more skilled than others at making these sorts of judgements against certain types of behaviour). Many of our beliefs and convictions which are tacitly held rather than explicitly articulated, are shown through our habitus, our manner of being and acting in the world. The general modes of behaviour, or dispositions, produced by the habitus, are passed on through the generations, inculcated from an early age and socially reinforced through education and culture, while others are more specialised, and are often built up later. As Bourdieu explains: “The habitus is precisely this immanent law, lex insita, which is the precondition not only for the co-ordination of practices but also for practices of co-ordination, since the corrections and adjustments the agents themselves consciously carry out presuppose their mastery of a common code.”

Habitus is thus the result of the training and education that a person is subject to from the day he is born – it is everything that ‘inculturates’ us into, and makes us masters of, a certain form of life and way of being, although there is also a great deal of room for diversification, and specialisation of the practices in which we might be involved. Habitus is a “pattern of postures that is both individual and systematic, because linked to a whole system of techniques involving the body and tools, and charged with a host of social meanings and values.”

Habitus is formed in and through our involvement with the various fields that make up the natural and social worlds, and this involvement is articulated through the particular practices in which we are engaged. The relationship between habitus and field can be described basically as dialectical. It is significant that Bourdieu describes the relation between habitus and field in terms of Marx’s praxeological transformation of the Hegelian dialectic; that is, in terms of the dialectic between ‘objectification,’ and ‘incorporation,’ which Marx sees as part of the ‘practical actuality’ of reality, and not in the idealistic sense intended by Hegel. As we saw in Chapter 1 above, it is from the starting point of ‘real, active men,’ that Marx transforms the German Idealist notion of Entäusserung, which he sees, not as the expression of Spirit, but as the creative, external, expression of men who are working as free human beings: In this experience of ‘objectification’

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636 Ibid., p. 81.
637 Ibid., p. 87.
(Vergenständlichung) says Marx, "Our products would be so many mirrors in which we saw reflected our essential nature." Bourdieu describes the formation of *habitus* through a dialectical process of ‘objectification’ and ‘incorporation’ respectively, and he describes his theory of practice as a “theory of the mode of generation of practices, which is the precondition for establishing an experimental science of the dialectic of the internalisation of externality and the externalisation of internality, or, more simply, of incorporation and objectification." It is in the dialectical relationship “between the body and a space structured according to the mythico-ritual oppositions,” according to Bourdieu, that one finds “the form par excellence of the structural apprenticeship which leads to the embodying of the structures of the world – that is, the appropriating by the world of a body thus enabled to appropriate the world.”

*Habitus* is that through which we participate in history as it is “objectified in institutions,” and Bourdieu is using the word ‘objectification’ (that is, in the sense of “objective structures, the products of collective history”) in a completely different sense to his *critique* of the (bad) ‘objectification’ that characterises the theoretical attitude that he sees as leading to the reductionist ‘scholastic fallacies’ of objectivism and subjectivism. It is important to highlight this difference, as it tends to lead to some inconsistencies in his work, especially when Bourdieu confuses a more neutral ontological sense of the word, with a critical sense. In its ontological or dialectical usage, ‘objectification’ refers to the manifestation of culture in ‘objective’ forms, which is totally different to ‘objectification’ as a negative consequence of unreflective theorising. *Habitus* and *field* are intended to offer an alternative to the ‘scholastic fallacies’ of objectivism and subjectivism, by highlighting the fundamental situatedness and relationality of human involvement in the world. As Bourdieu explains in a more recent work, *Pascalian Meditations*:

> *Habitus* as a system of dispositions to be and to do is a potentiality, a desire to be which, in a certain way, seeks to create the conditions of its fulfillment... The principle of action is therefore neither a subject confronting the world as an object in a relation of pure knowledge nor a milieu exerting a form of mechanical causality on the agent... It lies in the complicity between two states of the social, between history in bodies and history in things... between the history objectified in the form of structures and mechanisms... and the history incarnated in bodies in the form of *habitus*...  

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639 Outline of a Theory of Practice, p. 78.  
640 Ibid., p. 90.  
641 Logic of Practice, p. 57.  
642 Ibid.  
As Bourdieu explains, *habitus* and *field* "both imply one another, with objective positions implying position-takings, which are a part of the practices enabled by the dispositions which are *habitus*. This means that... the real is the relational: what exists in the social world are relations – not interactions between agents or intersubjective ties between individuals – but objective relations which exist independently of individual consciousness and will." Bourdieu’s phenomenological influences should be clear here, and it is interesting that he has been identified as one of the most faithful heirs of Merleau-Ponty, whose phenomenologically situated and relational notion of *chiasm* we explored above.

*Habitus*, as layers of sedimented skill acquisitions, has its roots in the *situatedness* of agents within particular environments. Andrew Rawnsley explains that this means that what is ‘universal’, is that *habitus* and field are both *generated* by bodily situatedness in particular environments, and themselves, in turn, *generate* new ways in which this situatedness unfolds. Practices are those particular human activities which arise out of the recursive relation between *habitus* and *field*, between historically objective structures and historically conditioned sedimentations and acquisitions. Bourdieu shows that this relation is fundamental to understanding human sociality and its problems, and he shows that this relation can best be understood by focusing on the practices which articulate it. Practices, in other words, are the specific activities that *articulate* the *practical logic* that is a result of the relation between field and *habitus*. Our practical involvements in concrete situations have their own logic and such logic is bound up, says Rawnsley, “not with a transcendent structure ‘above’ the world, nor with transcendental structures of ‘consciousness’, but with the *situated and incarnate involvement of human beings in and with their environments, and which is articulated in an array of practices, which thus forms a ‘world’.* This ‘practical logic’ can be seen *at work* in the *particular practices* in which people are involved. According to Bourdieu, *habitus* "produces practices which tend to reproduce the regularities immanent in the objective conditions of the production of the generative principle, while adjusting to the demands inscribed as objective potentialities in the situation, as defined by the cognitive and motivating structures making up the *habitus*." As Rawnsley points out, however, what Bourdieu unfortunately does not really get round to doing, is providing any *specific* analyses of practices which might best

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**Footnotes**

645 *Roots to Rites*, p. 135.
646 Ibid., p. 158.
647 *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, p. 78.
illuminate the way in which this articulation occurs. This is indeed unfortunate, as it seems that a greater focus on some ‘actual’ practices, in light of this theory of habitus, might have led to the diversification as well as an illumination of Bourdieu’s rather general picture of the social world (which, as we have seen, is a feature of some of the other, more ‘metaphysical’ pictures, that we are trying to challenge here).  

Bourdieu is keen to point out that, not only do academic theorists often ignore the always situated and praxeological character of the agent’s engagement with the world, but they also ignore the fact that academic work is itself a historically and socially situated practice, that relies on a number of tacit understandings and embodied skills. He therefore insists on the importance of a reflexive sociology in which sociologists conduct their research with conscious attention to the effects of their own position, their own set of internalized structures, and how these are likely to prejudice their objectivity. His own work is consistently self-reflexive (as can be seen, for example, in the opening chapter of his study of academic culture, *Homo Academicus*, which is titled “A Book for Burning”).

It should be highlighted that, although Bourdieu is critical of this ‘bad’ sort of objectification in theoretical work, he is mostly critical of it to the extent that it does not take into account the effort of objectification as a theoretical practice. He does not feel that ‘objectification’ as a feature of academic work should be done away with; he actually feels that we need yet another objectification; which should be directed towards the scientist’s own objectifying practice. For Bourdieu, it is not this objectification (at least the third different use of the word we have found in Bourdieu’s work) that is a problem of theory (it is in fact a necessary function of theory); he simply feels that we need to account for those factors and conditions that make theoretical objectification possible. He feels it is the social scientist’s task to ‘objectify the objectification’ of the academic theorist or scientist, in order to highlight the practical basis of academic work. What has to be done is “not to sweep away the distance magically through spurious primitivist participation, but to

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648 We will provide our own examination of the practice of writing in the chapter that follows: this is a practice, as we have seen, that has been particularly misconceived according to a rather ‘metaphysical’ model. We challenge this model, not through an appeal to difference, as Derrida does, but to some actual practices of writing, in order to see how fallacious this idea of a distinction between ‘reality’ and ‘representation’ actually is.


650 We have already looked at ‘objectification’ in the negative sense of ‘reduction to an object’, as well as in the ontological or dialectical sense of ‘external cultural expression.’ This use of ‘objectification’ as a ‘positive function of theory’ indicates a third, and entirely distinct, use of the word.
objectify the objectifying distance and the social conditions that make it possible, such as the externality of the observer, the objectifying techniques he uses, etc.  

Bourdieu’s own study of academic practices therefore, as he points out, “presupposes a critical objectification of the epistemological and social conditions that make possible both a reflexive return to the subject experience of the world, and also the objectification of the objective conditions of that experience.” What philosophers, sociologists, historians, and all of those whose profession it is to think and speak about the world have the greatest chance of overlooking, says Bourdieu, are the social presuppositions inscribed in the scholastic point of view: it seems that thinkers leave in a state of “unthought” (impense, doxa), the presuppositions of their thought, that is, the social conditions of possibility of the scholastic point of view and the unconscious dispositions, productive of unconscious theses, which are acquired through an academic or scholastic experience. One needs to realize, however, how much of this ‘unthought’ is tacit, and how difficult it is to dig out and articulate (even very partially) this tacit component in our intelligent and skilful practices – including those that might be described as ‘theoretical’, or ‘scientific’. It is this process of ‘digging’ out that which has been left ‘tacit’, or ‘unthought’, that is, we might say, one of the functions of the praxeological approach. It is this function that we will discuss in the section that follows.

5.4. Knowing ‘where we stand’: the functions of the praxeological approach

So durchlauf ich des Lebens
Bogen und kehre, woher ich kam.

The praxeological approach is not only critical of particular metaphysical ‘pictures’ of reality, then; it is also critical of metaphysics as an approach, as a way of doing philosophy. This praxeological move against metaphysics is, of course, hardly a twentieth century phenomenon. We cannot forget that Marx attempted exactly this sort of critique of metaphysical philosophy a century and a half ago. Marx’s critique of the then-contemporary German Idealist philosophical tradition, is that these philosophers simply

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652 Ibid., p. 25.
653 Practical Reason, p. 129.
overlooked the obvious actuality of human life: which is that it is at root situated material activity done in multiplicity, diversity and complexity. Marx’s praxeology, as a philosophical move, is an attempt to point to that which has been overlooked by ‘alienated’ (and alienating) practices, including what he sees as the alienated (and alienating) practice of metaphysical philosophy. In the German Ideology, for example, Marx sets out to show that the “production of ideas, of conceptions, of consciousness, is at first directly interwoven with the material activity and the material intercourse of men, the language of real life.”\(^{655}\) In direct contrast to the idealistic metaphysical philosophy that “descends from heaven to earth,” Marx claims that his philosophy will “set out from real, active men.”\(^{656}\)

Amongst other things, it seems that the pictures provided by metaphysics are produced from the standpoint of a philosopher who is under the illusion that he is objectively ‘detached’ from the world. Not only has this sense of detachment, this ‘view from nowhere’ led to some strange pictures of human reality, but it has also led to a very strange picture of the status of the philosopher himself. Marx, as we have seen, claims that the problem of metaphysical speculation arises when the philosopher as an “estranged man – takes himself as the criterion of the estranged world.”\(^{657}\) Marx’s critique of metaphysics, as a way of doing philosophy, is at the same time accompanied by the expression of a better way of doing philosophy. An important question that comes to the fore here, however, is: why, if philosophy produces such troublesome pictures of the world and human existence, should we try and find a better way of doing philosophy at all? This might seem to have an obvious answer, but it is one that is often overlooked. Philosophy, including philosophy of the ‘metaphysical’ variety, as a certain human practice, fulfils a number of functions. One of these functions is to provide an account of ‘reality’ that helps us to ‘locate’ ourselves, to make sense of our situation in the ‘greater scheme of things’, as it were. If we consider this as an important philosophical function, then surely it should be clear that the ‘praxeological’ approach, as concerned with our actual ontological situation, does this better than those metaphysical approaches that ‘situate’ us in relation to transcendent or transcendental structures that are ‘beyond’ our experience or comprehension? Although the praxeological approach is critical of the way that metaphysics fulfils this function, however, it is not critical of this function itself. It is in this sense that the praxeological approach could be described as an ‘heir’ to metaphysics.

\(^{656}\) Ibid., p. 36.
According to Rawnsley, our task is thus, "not a critique of metaphysics *per se*, but a critique of the ways in which metaphysical contents, systems or explanations are *used*. Thus, there is a *function or role* that metaphysics plays and a *way* in which this metaphysical function is *used*. The ‘heir’ to metaphysics must perform a similar structural or classificatory *role* as metaphysics, says Rawnsley, although, unlike metaphysics, which *starts* its description from a point *outside* of human experience, it must attempt to:

describe the ‘shape’ of phenominality as this phenominality is presented to human beings as *situated* and to provide some sort of adequate terminological and descriptive framework for the articulation of this ‘shape’ so that human life as situated is able to cope with such situatedness. In this sense it is an attempt to provide ground-level tools for doing such coping and, as such, is a necessary task for critical and constructive work in *any* discipline or field of study, involving a working-out of the relationship between local and specific strategies of situated life and the more thematic making-explicit of what is already-always going on in local environments.⁶⁵⁸

Although such an ‘heir’ would retain the structural and descriptive power of traditional metaphysics, then, it would set out a "*situational, concrete* and *practical* framework amenable to work done in a variety of disciplines across scientific and humanistic concerns."⁶⁶⁰ What the metaphysical approach seems to have overlooked, says Rawnsley, is the "*common world* in which we live our lives, the world of our *environment* as we *experience* it, the character of our *localities*, something which we encounter in our *everyday intercourse and involvements*.⁶⁶¹ It is this ‘common world’ that is taken as *primary* by a praxeological approach, he says, because this is the only place from where we can *begin*. This sort of approach would offer us a "*new kind of philosophical framework*, one built up from a close analysis of *sociality*, broadly conceived, by focusing on social activities and the *situational (sited) structure of action, involvement and engagement*.⁶⁶²

It is the articulation of this ‘incarnate involvement’ that is one of the illuminating, or perhaps even what Bourdieu would call the ‘objectifying’ functions of philosophical work (and perhaps Bourdieu intends something closer to what Heidegger means when he talks

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⁶⁵⁸ Roots to Rites, p. 5. As Rawnsley explains: "This is a distinction which is invoked on the level of activity: we distinguish between function and use only to point out that there is a difference here which is akin to the distinction between the function of a tool and the way in which we wield it to accomplish that function."

⁶⁵⁹ Ibid., p. 153.

⁶⁶⁰ Ibid., p. 151.

⁶⁶¹ Ibid., p. 191.

⁶⁶² Ibid.
about the ‘objectification’ as “opening up the ontological constitution of a field.” It is this ‘objectifying’ function of philosophy that Merleau-Ponty also understood. As he states in *Phenomenology of Perception*: “My body has its world, or understands its world, without having to make use of my ‘symbolic’ or ‘objectifying’ function.” What is being illuminated by the praxeological approach, then, is not *différance*, as Derrida would have it, but our incarnate involvement in the world, that precedes any attempt to conceptualise it. It is important to remember, however, that ‘conceptual’ practices such as philosophy do not supersede situational practices; they always presuppose situational practices.

Despite our distinction at the start of this chapter, then, there seems to be a fine line between the function of the praxeological approach as an attempt to describe reality as what ‘actually is’, and its use as an attempt to describe ‘what really matters’. The praxeological approach, although also hopefully providing a better picture of ‘reality’ as the ontological and existential situation of the human being, is also drawing attention to some things that that should be valued, as these things have been forgotten, or overlooked, by traditional metaphysical pictures of reality. It is hoped that, by valuing our embodied engagement in the environment, for example, we might have less of an ‘alienated’ attitude towards the world (social and natural) in which we are always (despite some attempts to create illusions to the contrary), inextricably involved. It is when certain theoretical pictures become embodied, or even institutionalised, that they have a very strong and perpetual effect on the structure of society and the people therein: “The principles embodied in this way,” says Bourdieu, “are placed beyond the grasp of consciousness,” they are the “values given by the body, made body by the transubstantiation achieved by the hidden persuasion of an implicit pedagogy, capable of installing a whole cosmology, an ethic, a metaphysic, a political philosophy.” It is then against not only a certain ‘metaphysical’ picture of reality, but against a ‘whole cosmology,’ an ‘ethic’, a ‘political philosophy’, that the praxeological approach has emerged. This was precisely Marx’s insight about the ‘practical’ nature of theory: the perpetuation of philosophical illusions is not ‘merely’ a philosophical problem: it is a social problem (as well as a personal one). As

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663 Ibid., p. 179. ‘Objectification’, for Heidegger, as Rawnsley explains, is essentially “the opening up of a region in which certain activities of investigation can be carried-out.” What Heidegger is interested in, says Rawnsley, is what grants objectification as a possibility, or what human objectifying activities are dependent on in order to function as such. For Heidegger, “this is the a priori which he locates in Dasein as openness to the world. Objectification, or the opening up of a region for investigation, is one way in which this openness is disclosed. It is a way of getting at the structures lying neither in subjectivity nor objectivity but in a factor beyond both, something out of which both emerge.”
664 *Phenomenology of Perception*, p. 140.
665 *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, p. 94.
Habermas claims: "What remains for philosophy is an illuminating furtherance of lifeworld processes of achieving self-understanding... For the lifeworld must be defended against extreme alienation at the hands of the objectivating, the moralizing, and the aestheticizing interventions of expert cultures." In this sense, then, the praxeological approach is itself a form of praxis, or 'practical action': just as we can change the way we think by changing the way we live, it is hoped that, by changing the way we think about the world, we can change our way of living, or, more generally, our way of being in this world.

Nevertheless, it should be emphasised that, in offering a praxeological description of 'reality', we are not saying that this practical reality is of ultimate value. There are a number of candidates for this claim to 'ultimate' importance, and it is up to iconoclastic thinkers from different religious (or other) traditions to thrash this issue out. What we are would say from a praxeological perspective, however, is that the attribution of ultimate value to things (including gods, or other ideals), is something that human beings do. Before we can evaluate the worth (or worthiness) of certain 'gods' and 'ideals' then, we need to look at the lifeworlds and the practices of the people who are making certain claims about what is ultimately important to them. These claims might even be 'metaphysical' by nature, but the making of these claims is not a 'metaphysical' act. Our belief in certain religious (or even metaphysical) ideals is not something that can be described in a metaphysical way, because it is a feature of our life as practical, embodied human beings, who are situated in a world that is, amongst other things, social and historical. Our beliefs are practical concerns, and this is no more evident when we find that our beliefs, as well as our practices, are different to those of other people. It is this issue that we will explore in the final chapter of this thesis.

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666 Post-Metaphysical Thinking, p. 18.
It seems then, that, rather than appealing to yet another metaphysical principle – such as différance – in order to challenge certain metaphysical pictures of ‘reality’, we should attempt to describe reality from a praxeological perspective. This could equally be applied to the problematic valuative distinction that is made between ‘reality’ and its supposed ‘representations’, which has led to the iconoclastic critique of a number of inscriptive practices, such as writing. In what way is writing connected to ‘idolatry’, especially that of the ‘conceptual’ variety? Writing, as has hopefully become obvious, is more of a straw idol than a ‘graven error’; it is a scapegoat for the real target of iconoclastic critique, which is idolatry, as a wrong or sinful way of doing things, or the inappropriate attribution of value to things not deserving of this evaluation. Writing per se has no implicit connection to

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idolatry, just as idolatry does not necessarily have anything implicitly to do with 'representation', conceived as somehow metaphysically opposed to 'reality'.

In this chapter, we will look at writing from a praxeological perspective. That is, rather than understanding it as somehow opposed to 'reality', we will look at writing as a 'real' (in the sense of actual) practice, or family of practices, that takes a variety of forms throughout history. This praxeological examination of writing, it should be noted, is totally different to Derrida’s problematisation of the reality/representation distinction, through an appeal to différance as the 'non-place' from where all metaphysical distinctions apparently emerge. Derrida’s 'grammatology' is actually a concern for transcendental metaphysical conditions, that is dressed up as a concern with writing, and this can be seen in the way that Derrida never explores in any depth, even (or especially) phenomenologically, what he calls 'vulgar' writing. Furthermore, just as metaphysics is always a semiotic problem, so the sign, for Derrida, is always a metaphysical problem. Derrida argues that the concept of the sign is itself so metaphysical, we should "reject even the concept and word 'sign' itself," although, he says, this is "precisely what cannot be done." But why can we not reject this particular metaphysical concept of the 'sign'? It is an understanding of literacy as a skilled practice, or a family of skilled practices, as a craft that needs to be learned through training and practice, that we will explore in this chapter. Derrida conceives of writing, not as a skill with which we might compose philosophical texts, but as the transcendental ‘warp and woof’ on which philosophy itself is woven. As he states in Of Grammatology: with writing, "we pass the very limits of phenomenology,” because, as “the phenomenology of the sign in general, a phenomenology of writing is impossible." But why is a phenomenology of writing impossible? Why should writing, of all activities, be so special? It is this question that hints at the limits of Derrida’s ‘post-phenomenological’ deconstructive project, which is, to a certain extent, it seems, hindered rather than liberated by its dependence on structuralist semiotics.

We will see how the 'logocentric' critique of writing, as well as the critique of this logocentrism from the perspective of différance, bears no resemblance to the practice of literacy in everyday life, and we will find a good resource for challenging this misconception of literacy in the field of 'Book History', which has been inspired by the work of 'practice theorists’ such as Bourdieu. We will also see how the argument that literacy

668 Writing and Difference, p. 281
669 Grammatology, p. 68.
caused an increase in metaphysical and technological ‘objectification’ in early modern society, is a completely unfounded idea if we examine the practices of literacy in this, and earlier periods. In fact, as we will find, the argument that late medieval literacy caused a shift to a more ‘visual’ society is totally ludicrous, in light of the fact that literacy has always been a ‘visual’ activity, and especially so in the earlier medieval period, where people relied on visual cues in order to make sense of the texts they both ‘viewed’ and ‘read’. Furthermore, the argument that literacy led to a shift from a religious to a more ‘secular’ society, as argued by Catherine Pickstock, is indefensible if we understand that medieval literacy was an indisputably spiritual exercise, an art of meditation and prayer that was understood as a ‘craft of thinking’. Medieval texts were themselves designed to be like ‘maps’ guiding the reader through a conceptual or narrative region, with pictorial ‘landmarks’ or symbolic ‘pointers’ along the way. The craft of finding one’s ‘way’ through the text, offers a helpful way of thinking about the ‘craft of thinking’ itself, as a wayfinding process in which we are engaged.

6.1. Objectification as a problem or practice? Some necessary clarifications

6.1.1. From Bourdieu to the History of the Book

It might seem strange to start a discussion of the ways in which we might apply a ‘practice approach’ to writing through the work of Pierre Bourdieu, who, as we saw in Chapter Two above, associates writing with the creation of ‘scholastic fallacies.’ The problem with books, says Bourdieu, is that they cannot give the scholar any familiarity with “the practical mode of existence of those who do not have the freedom to distance the world.” Nevertheless, it seems that, if we applied Bourdieu’s own ‘praxeological’ approach (as examined in the previous chapter) to the practice of writing, we would in fact see a conflict with his claim that literate people have “emerged from the silence of the ritual praxis which does not aim to be interpreted.” For although Bourdieu feels that books cannot give a scholar “familiarity with the practical mode of existence,” would it not be possible to see how

670 Logic of Practice, p. 15.
671 In Other Words, p. 99.
books could give someone ‘familiarity with the practical mode of existence’ required for the practice of reading’?

As we have already discussed, Bourdieu’s ‘praxeology’ rests on a reinterpretation of the Hegelian dialectic of ‘objectification’ (Entäusserung) and ‘incorporation’ (Aufhebung), and it is significant to note that he often uses the word writing as a metaphor for ‘externalised’ material culture that constitutes the field of our practices. Bourdieu, for example, uses the metaphor of the book to describe the major focus of his ethnographical study – the Kabyle house – which he sees as the “book from which the children learn their vision of the world,” and which is “read with the body, in and through the movements and displacements which make the space within which they are enacted as much as they are made by it.” But could we not see “writing”, more than in a metaphorical sense, as an ‘objective’ cultural artefact that plays a number of ‘practical roles in the perpetuation and construction of cultural identity and memory? Is the book, or more generally the written word, not also an ‘objective’ form of cultural expression? As Bourdieu has declared, the world of objects in which we live is “a kind of book in which each thing speaks metaphorically of all others and from which children learn to read the world, [and] is read with the whole body, in and through the movements and displacements which define the space of objects as much as they are defined by it.” Why should the book itself, of all things, be denied the status of being a ‘kind of book, read with the whole body’?

What is interesting is that Bourdieu’s use of the term habitus was in part inspired by his reading of the work of the art historian Erwin Panofsky, who famously argued that the development of linear perspective in the visual arts was a ‘symbolic form’ resulting from the new ‘mental habits’ and ‘ways of seeing’ that developed in the early Renaissance period. Bourdieu actually translated Panofsky’s Gothic Architecture and Scholasticism, in which it is argued that the builders of the Gothic cathedrals took their ideas of architectural organisation from models learnt from school in the analysis of written texts. Panofsky argues that the repetitive reading of texts divided into chapters, sections and subsections in the 12th century (a development of the later Middle Ages) encouraged certain kinds of mental habits (such as the ordering, spacing, and clarification of visual space), and that these habits shaped the modus operandi of the architects and craftsmen of the period. For

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672 Outline of a Theory of Practice, p. 90.
673 Ibid., p. 76.
Panofsky, many of the ‘spatial arts’, such as pictorial representation, architecture, and including graphic layout of the written text, are all evidence of the same habitus, the ‘mental habits’ of the age.\(^\text{675}\)

It is uncertain, then, how Bourdieu can make a distinction between writing as an ‘objectified’ product that causes a false sense of ‘objectivity,’ as opposed to all other material cultural ‘objectifications’ that constitute the objective world around us. As we have already seen, Bourdieu tends to conflate a number of different meanings of the word ‘objectification’, and this leads to some difficulties in his project. Bourdieu is critical of writing, for example, because he believes that, whereas in oral societies, “the body is thus constantly mingled with all the knowledge it reproduces,” this knowledge “never has the objectivity it derives from objectification in writing and the consequent freedom with respect to the body.”\(^\text{676}\) By admitting here that writing is a form of ‘objectification’, however, is Bourdieu not putting it in the same category as other ‘objectified’ cultural forms, such as material artefacts or the built environment?

It is significant that, despite his own problematic views about literacy, the relatively new field of ‘Book History’ is one that has been largely inspired by the work of Bourdieu. Arising out of cultural studies and the so-called ‘New History’ (which, after the French Annales school, studies historical and cultural episodes and artefacts other than politics or major ‘events’), Book History is essentially an inter-disciplinary subject: The history of the book is not only about books per se, but involves research into subjects as varied as “the social, cultural, and economic history of authorship; the history of the book trade, copyright, censorship, and underground publishing; the publishing histories of particular literary works, authors, editors, imprints, and literary agents; the spread of literacy and book distribution; canon formation and the politics of literary criticism; libraries, reading habits, and reader response.”\(^\text{677}\) One of the pioneering historians in the field of Book History is Roger Chartier, who feels that the “radical formulations” of structuralist and

\(^{675}\) Bourdieu’s appropriation of the term differs from Panofsky’s, however, in that Bourdieu is more concerned with ‘embodied habits’ than he is with specifically ‘mental’ ones. Panofsky’s work, unlike Bourdieu’s, is influenced by a post-Kantian tradition that includes philosophers such as Ernst Cassirer.

\(^{676}\) Logic of Practice, p. 72.

\(^{677}\) The Chronicle of Higher Education reported almost a decade ago that, “Book History has become a particularly hot topic in the humanities,” and this is a trend that has not changed much since; in fact, there is much evidence that Book History has established itself, not only as a ‘hot topic’ of research, but as a discipline in its own right, in many universities across Europe, North America, and the rest of the world. For an introduction to Book History and the aims of SHARP (Society for the History of Authorship, Reading, and Publication) see: http://www.sharpweb.org/intro.html. The website containing the most up-to-date listings of (international) seminars, conferences and colloquia related to the History of the Book is the HoBo site (formerly known as the ‘History of the Book @ Oxford’), which can be found at: http://www.english.ox.ac.uk/hobo/.
other more metaphysical theories of language have resulted in a “dangerous reduction of the social world to a purely discursive construction.” In his introduction to *A History of Reading in the West*, Chartier advocates a history of reading that recognises that:

> Texts are not deposited in objects – manuscripts or printed books – that contain them like receptacles, and they are not inscribed in readers as in soft wax. To consider reading to be a concrete act requires holding any process of the construction of meaning (hence, of interpretation) as situated at the crossroads between readers endowed with specific competences, identified by their positions and dispositions and characterised by their practice of reading, and texts whose meaning is always dependent on their particular discursive and formal mechanisms.

Inspired by his reading of Bourdieu, Chartier is keen to point out that structures of the social world “are not given, any more than intellectual and psychological categories. They are all produced historically by interconnected practices – political, social, discursive – that construct their figures.” It is such practices, says Chartier, that have become the “objects of a cultural history that has come to rethink completely the relation traditionally postulated between the social realm (identified with a very real sort of reality, existent in itself) and the representations that are supposed to reflect or distort it.” We must guard against losing sight, says Chartier, of “the practices, great or small,” that constitute the “visible indices of a proclaimed, desired, or demanded identity.”

For Chartier, as for other book and reading historians in the field, literacy is always a practice that cannot be understood through the wild generalisations or ‘radical formulations’ that reduce the social world, or the practices therein, to the structuralist idea of a ‘text’, that bears no resemblance to the actual practice of ‘textuality.’ Chartier therefore advocates a “return to the texts (or more generally to the works) that inscribes them within the places and milieus of their elaboration, situates them within the specific repertory of the genres, questions, and conventions proper to a given time, and concentrates on the forms of their circulation and their appropriation.” It is only through understanding literacy as a range of material and embodied practices, always ‘inscribed’ in particular historical and material situations, that we can come to understand a little more, not only about the communities engaging in certain activities, but also a little something of

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681 Ibid.
682 *On the Edge of the Cliff*, p. 6.
their *habitus* – their style of being – which would give us an insight into the nature of certain historical cultures. More than giving us an insight into historical communities, as is Chartier’s aim, this approach could give us an insight into the diverse ways of being that constitute the variety of cultures of the contemporary world in which we live.

**6.1.2. Picturing Vision: Exposing some theoretical ‘hallucinations’**

[It] was a struggle between seeing and hearing. Seeing won.\(^{683}\)

The idea that there is a metaphysical gulf dividing communication by visible gestures from communication by audible words, is fantasy without foundation, a hallucination rather than a theory.\(^{684}\)

As we have already discussed at various points in this thesis, there is a difference between ‘objectification’ in the sense of ‘external expression’, and ‘objectification’ in the pejorative sense of ‘a problematic way of doing or thinking about things.’ It is important to note, however, that it is not always helpful to turn to resources such as palaeography or Book History in order to understand literacy as a practice, and not as an ‘instrument of objectification’ in the latter, more negative sense. The confusion between the notions of ‘expressive objectification’ and ‘reductionistic theoretical objectification’ has infiltrated even apparently less ‘speculative’ disciplines, as can be seen in the widespread belief that it was the increase of literacy towards the end of the Middle Ages that led to the development of a more ‘visual’ society. There have been a number of theorists who argue that the ‘reified’ problems of modernity were a result of the shift to a more ‘visual’ relationship with the text; and that this occurred when reading became a silent activity. This assumption can be found, not only in the work of more ‘speculative’ media theorists such as Walter Ong, but also in the work of palaeographers and classics scholars such as Paul Saenger.

Walter Ong, like many critics of the ‘visual culture’ of modernity, believes that, whereas speaking to someone is dialogical, looking at someone is a ‘one-way operation,’ in which “the person being watched is downgraded to the level of a thing” and the “cold, cutting, silent stare has its effect because of the power of vision to reduce its object to a

\(^{683}\) Ong, *Presence of the Word*, p. 221.

thing-status when vision is not mollified by speech."685 The depersonalization of space in the modern world, he says, "has been due not merely to its dissociation with sound but also to its association with vision."686 It is this conception of the depersonalizing surveillant 'gaze' that leads Ong to associate vision with the birth of modern science and technology ("technological man is more addicted to sight than to sound,"687 he argues, while the reason for the development of modern science was "the shift from the oral-aural, conversational, disputatious, semianimistic, personalized feeling for knowledge, entailing a proclivity for auditory syntheses, to a feeling for knowledge as aligned with vision much more unequivocally than it had been in the past... the term 'observation,' which finally became the shibboleth of the new science, it should be noted, refers directly to vision and only to vision."688) Unlike sound, which apparently 'penetrates interiors,' vision, according to Ong, "manifests only surfaces, superficies, outsides," and it is this emphasis on the 'outside' that marks the "purely visual, neutral space of modern geometry and post-Newtonian physics," paving way for Descartes' "visually conceived cognitive enterprise."689

Ong sees the reason for the shift to the "visualist bent in the West,"690 as the increase of literacy in the modern world. Writing is problematic for Ong, not only because it is an 'objectified' technology, but because it is a form of visual objectification: writing, he says, involves "the reduction of dynamic sound to quiescent space," and "moves speech from the oral-aural to a new sensory world, that of vision."691 As we have already seen, Ong goes to great lengths to explain what he sees as the major differences between oral cultures and literate ones: it is evident, he says, that a "sound-dominated verbal economy is consonant with harmonizing tendencies rather than with analytic, dissecting tendencies (which come with the inscribed, visualised word: vision is a dissecting sense)."692 It was the introduction of writing, says Ong, that caused "a widespread reorganization of the sensorium favoring the visual in communication procedures, that is, favoring the visual in association with the use of words," while the invention fostered "many illusions and delusions deriving from associations of meaning with a visual field."693

685 Ong, Presence of the Word, p. 167.
686 Ibid., p. 166.
687 Ibid., p. 128.
688 Ibid., p. 219.
689 Ibid., pp. 146, 166 & 221.
690 Ibid., p. 127.
691 Orality and Literacy, pp. 81 & 84.
692 Ibid., pp. 12, 72, & 74.
693 Ibid., pp. 50 & 46.
One of the most famous theorists to link literacy to ‘visuality’ is the Canadian ‘media guru’ Marshall McLuhan. In his famous book The Gutenberg Galaxy, McLuhan argues that there was a shift during the Renaissance from a primarily oral way of perceiving the world to a primarily visual one, and he traces this shift in what he calls the “sense ratios” in the “human sensorium” to the apparently radical effect of typography. Although McLuhan believes that the phonetic alphabet itself “makes a break between the eye and the ear [and] has the power to translate man from the tribal to the civilised sphere, to give him an eye for an ear,” he believes that it was only really with the advent of the printed word that “the visual modalities of Western life increased beyond anything experienced in any previous society.” In “translating man out of tribal depth and resonance,” he says, “printing gave man an eye for an ear and ushered him into a visual world of specialized and divided consciousness.” McLuhan also sees this ‘visual’ world as linked to characteristics such as rationality: “The rational man in our Western culture is a visual man,” he says, while the book, as an “extension of the eye,” affirmed this shift to ‘rational visuality.’ McLuhan believes that “print stepped up the visual component in Western experience to extreme intensity,” resulting, not only in the “specialized visual space of Descartes and Newtonian physics,” but also in the “uniformly processed individuals of commercial society,” and the “uniform, centralizing forces of modern nationalism.” The kind of “ballet of mind choreographed by Gutenberg by means of the isolated visual sense,” according to McLuhan, like “the alphabet and kindred gimmicks,” has “long served man as a subliminal source of philosophical and religious assumptions.”

It is almost ironic, however, that, despite their association of Cartesian metaphysics with ‘vision’, these theorists have a rather ‘metaphysical’ notion of vision itself. As Tim Ingold has stated, the conception of ‘vision’ held by many critics of ‘visual culture’, actually “has its source in the very Cartesian epistemology that they seek to dethrone. What they offer, then, is not an account of visual practice, but a critique of modernity dressed up as a critique of the hegemony of vision.” It is as though vision had been compelled to take on the mantle of a particular cognitive style, and all the virtues and vices that go with it. We need to realise, he says, that “the primacy of vision cannot be held to account for the

695 Ibid., p. 27.
696 Ibid, p. 90.
698 Gutenberg Galaxy, pp. 28, 30, 212, & 199.
699 Ingold, Perception of the Environment, p. 248.
700 Ibid., p. 287.
objectification of the world. Rather the reverse; it is through its co-option in the service of a peculiarly modern project of objectification that vision has been reduced to a faculty of pure, disinterested reflection, whose role is merely to deliver up 'things' to a transcendent consciousness." This reduction of the problems of the West to vision, Ingold explains, "has been accomplished by a second reduction, namely the reduction of vision."\(^{701}\) One cannot escape this reduction inherent in the rhetoric of visualism, simply by erecting an antivisualism in its place, says Ingold; the problem does not have anything to do with hearing or vision, or any other sense at all, but perhaps with the certain 'cognitive style' of the Western philosopher. It is this 'style' of thinking, he says, that is likely to prejudice our understanding of all kinds of perceptual experience whether predominantly visual or not, although, when it is concerned with the visual, it "leads us to equate vision with visualisation – that is with the formation, in the mind, of images or representations of the world."\(^{702}\) Ingold believes that 'vision' has become a sort of sensorial scapegoat onto which a number of values and attributes are projected. For example, rather than understanding anything about 'vision' at all, even as a crucial part of empirical research or academic practice, it seems that Western culture has fastened on the experience of vision to signify the value of objective knowledge. According to Ingold, however, we cannot produce an academic discourse surrounding vision when the actual practices of looking, watching and seeing are neglected. This would, as the quote at the beginning of this section states, be nothing more than a 'fantasy without foundation, a hallucination rather than a theory.'

To show that the 'hegemony of vision' in modern society can be linked to a "will to power, technoscientific exploitation and political surveillance," Ingold suggests, one would have to show that seeing in actual practice, rather than as imagined by philosophers, harboured within itself a tendency towards reification.\(^{703}\) This conception of vision is itself one that is 'imagined' rather than tested, and is therefore neither helpful in theory nor in practice. W.J.T. Mitchell also has a problem with this idea of seeing as 'imagined by philosophers', and he expresses his discontent in an article reproduced rather bravely in Nicholas Mierzoeff's *Visual Culture Reader*.\(^{704}\) As Mitchell insists, it is a significant mistake to construct a grand binary model of history centred on the idea of 'media' or 'sensorial'

\(^{701}\) Ibid., p. 281.
\(^{702}\) Ibid., p. 282.
\(^{703}\) Ibid., p. 286.
\(^{704}\) *The Visual Culture Reader* (London : Routledge, 2002). This essay was originally published in the *Journal of Visual Culture*, Vol.1 (No.2), 2002, pp. 165-181, and it is this article we will be referencing here. This article is rather brave, in that the volume in which it is published contains a large number of articles expressing exactly the 'vision' of vision that Mitchell opposes.
revolutions, such as the idea that there is a single great divide between the age of ‘visuality’, and an age of ‘orality’, for instance. These kinds of narratives are beguiling, he says, and although handy for the purposes of presentist polemics, they are nevertheless useless for the purposes of genuine historical criticism. The whole idea that that the hegemony of the visible is a Western, modern invention, a product of new media technologies, and not a fundamental component of human cultures as such, says Mitchell, is what we could call the “fallacy of technical modernity.” We do not live in a uniquely visual era, says Mitchell; the ‘visual’ or ‘pictorial turn,’ is nothing more than a recurrent trope that displaces moral and political panic onto images and so-called visual media. It is only through a literal application of this trope, he says, that images become “convenient scapegoats,” while “the offensive eye is ritually plucked out by ruthless critique.” Mitchell insists that the supposed hegemony of the visible in our time is “a chimera that has outlived its usefulness.” The attribution of power to visual images, including their apparent efficacy as instruments or agents of domination, seduction, persuasion, and deception, merely exposes the motivation for a “wildly varying political and ethical estimation of images, their celebration as gateways to new consciousness, their denigration as hegemonic forces, the need for policing and thus reifying the differences between the visual media and the others, or between the realm of art and the wider domain of images.” While there is no doubt that visual media (like material, oral, or literary media) can be an instrument of domination, he says, it is hardly productive to single out visuality or images or spectacle or surveillance as the exclusive vehicle of political tyranny. Mitchell, like Ingold, believes that the idea that vision and visual images are expressions of power relations in which the spectator dominates the visual object and images and their producers exert power over viewers, is nothing more than a fallacy.

It seems that if we can consider that the idea of a ‘visual turn’ (with its resulting emphasis on ‘surveillance’ and ‘spectacle’), as based on the proliferation of ‘visual media’, is actually nothing more than a fallacy based on the literal interpretation of a rhetorical trope, then there is no way we can consider writing as an intrinsically oppressive

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605 Ibid., p. 172.  
606 Ibid.  
607 Ibid., p. 169. Mitchell notes that although the phrase ‘pictorial turn’ was in fact coined by him (in Picture Theory: Essays on Verbal and Visual Representation, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), it has somehow been misinterpreted to mean a greater ‘proliferation of images’ in the (post)modern world; when in fact he only meant it to refer to the noticeable increase in discourse about the ‘pictorial’ in contemporary theory.  
608 Ibid., p. 174.  
609 Ibid.
development, simply because it makes use of a visual medium. Just as vision has been singled out as a scapegoat on which to blame some of the problems of the modern West, so has writing come to fulfil a similar role. What is significant about a number of ‘visual culture’ studies, is that ‘visuality’ is either defended by a number of theorists because it is seen as an alternative to the ‘textuality’ associated with Enlightenment rationalism, or else ‘visuality’ is denigrated because it is seen as leading to a society based on ‘rational visuality’. These inconsistencies here are not problems to be solved, however, but merely show the ways in which writing, and vision, are themselves ‘pictured’ as perpetuating different political or social problems; even though the only real problem is the unchecked polemical demonisation of a certain sense that has infiltrated contemporary academic theory. In order to understand that this demonisation of sight is a merely ‘imagined’ critique, we need to look at visual practices – of which literacy is one example – in order to see the range of things we can do, with our eyes – and with our pens.

6.2. From visibility to legibility: Understanding literacy as a skilled practice

What is most problematic about the contemporary identification of advanced literacy with ‘visuality’ is that, in pre-modern medieval societies, ‘visuality’ was something associated with modes of knowledge and cultural acquisition employed by the most illiterate, i.e. the most extremely ‘oral’ members of society, if we agree to use that term for the time being. Hypatius, an archbishop of Ephesus in the 6th century wrote: "We permit simpler people, as they are less perfect, to learn... by the sense of sight, which is much more appropriate to their natural development."710 And of course we cannot forget that famous letter written by Pope Gregory I to Serenus of Marseilles around 600 AD, in which we read that: “Pictures are to be used in churches so that those who are ignorant of letters may at least read by seeing on the walls what they cannot read in books.”711 The art historian Franz Bäuml feels that Gregory’s statement "clearly demands the inclusion of the pictorial arts in any consideration of the function of literacy and illiteracy in the Middle Ages,” because, he argues, “given the close relationship of the function of the two types of communication,


the textual and the pictorial, during this period, an investigation of the one may benefit from a look at the other." 712 The historians who have discussed the issue of writing in relation to pictures – and there are too many to mention here – are all concerned with the following question: In what ways are pictures read, and texts viewed?

While some have tackled the question with the use of semiotic and linguistic theories as applied to pictorial space, others, such as Michael Camille, have pointed out that visual art of the Middle Ages was "not so much an expression of the visible world, as of the spoken word in a predominantly oral society,"713 and Lawrence Duggan is quite clear that, in this context, "even words such as 'books' and 'learning' would have meant something different to Gregory than they do to us."714 Some art historians are very concerned to investigate the possible graphic similarities between writing and painting. Mary Olson, for example, in her recent examination of the nature of visual textuality in medieval illuminated manuscripts,715 says that it is a viable project to try and narrow the gap between the written and the pictorial sign in the Middle Ages (or perhaps in general), because, she argues, "when any word or idea is written, it becomes at once spatial, and as such, separable from the pictorial only by degree."716 She therefore feels that, contrary to contemporary taxonomic categorisations such as text/image, verbal/visual, we must acknowledge that, given the highly decorated nature of written works in the Middle Ages, it is possible that the readers of medieval illuminated manuscripts would "have seen the boundaries between words and pictures to be far less marked than our culture does."717 In the manuscripts of this period, she notes, "the pictorial nature of letter forms themselves contributed to their reception and interpretation."718 Olson observes that the vocabulary for writing and painting actually began to be interchangeable in this period – something explicable if we remember that a number of scribes were also illustrators, which means that for these artisans the activities of painting and writing were not separate.719

Michael Camille notes how books were sometimes more like "display forms" that can be seen in the "hardly readable" labyrinthine patterns of Celto-Saxon illumination, which

714 Duggan, L, op. cit., p. 227.
716 Ibid, p. xx (Introduction)
717 Ibid., p. 31. Emphasis mine.
718 Ibid., p. 32.
719 Ibid., p. 32.
retain the status of "showpieces rather than language." \(^{720}\) Michael Clanchy too, in his book *From Memory to Written Record*, \(^{721}\) considers medieval writing as a form of artistic practice. *Writing* in this period, he notes, "was aimed at God's eye," and for this reason the skills of the scribe were primarily devoted to making illuminated manuscripts which were masterpieces of calligraphy, painting, jewellery, and metalwork. The main purpose of works such as the Book of Kells or the Lindisfarne Gospels, he notes, was to serve as an act of worship in itself by catching the words of God in sacred script and displaying them on the page "like butterflies in a showcase." The consequence of this, he says, is that, "because illuminated manuscripts appealed primarily to the eye, like pictures, they could be understood almost as well by the non-literate as by the literate." \(^{722}\) This can clearly be seen in the Opening Page of the Book of John as found in the Book of Kells, and in the Lindisfarne Gospels, which are reproduced in Figures 4 and 5 below.

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\(^{720}\) Camille, Michael. "Seeing and Reading", p. 29.


\(^{722}\) Ibid., p. 226.


\(^{724}\) The opening page of St John in the Lindisfarne Gospels, British Library, Cotton MS. Nero D.IV, f. 211r; Gospels, Lindisfarne, c. 698. This image can be found online at: [http://www.bl.uk/onlinegallery/themes/euromanuscripts/lindisfarne.html](http://www.bl.uk/onlinegallery/themes/euromanuscripts/lindisfarne.html).
If we had to follow to its conclusion the argument that ‘literacy’ and ‘visuality’ are two sides of the same coin, we would come up with something similar to what Suzanne Lewis has proposed in her study of the thirteenth century illuminated apocalypse, where she argues that the advent of silent reading marks the point at which letters effectively became as ‘visual’ as pictures: From the thirteenth century onwards, she argues, “lexical shapes on the page no longer functioned as triggers for sound patterns but as visual symbols for concepts.” Because suddenly “written words were seen rather than heard,” she argues, the advent of silent reading marks the point at which letters effectively became as ‘visual’ as pictures: from about the thirteenth century onwards, she argues, we could say that, “readers were spectators.”

But in what way could a ‘reader’ be, at the same time, a ‘spectator’? (In fact, in what cases would we use the word ‘spectating’? Would we ever say that we are ‘spectating’ a picture?) Obviously the act of reading is something different to viewing a text, although this is not to deny that reading is also a visual practice. Viewing, or observing, a text, is perhaps how the illiterate spectator of the Middle Ages – or indeed the illiterate ‘spectator’ of any age, or even a literate ‘spectator’ who is unfamiliar with a particular script or the language (that is, if we can use the word ‘spectating’ at all) – would have to ‘see’, not only pictures and images, but the written word itself. As the monk Aelfric of Eynsham wrote in the 10th century, “Often someone sees beautiful letters written, then praises the writer and the letters, but does not know what they mean. He who understands the art of the letters, praises their beauty, and reads the letters, and understands their meaning.” The greatest irony in this idea of readers as spectators is that we would be left with the situation where the silent reader, the most skilled practitioner of literacy, is apparently engaging with the text in the same way as an illiterate viewer would engage with the text.

For some reason, however, the argument that literacy can be linked to the development of a more ‘visual’ culture seems to have crept into the work of even the most sober palaeographers. Paul Saenger, for example, has employed vast amounts of palaeographic evidence to verify that silent reading, which developed during the long centuries of the script-based Middle Ages, led to the development of a more ‘visual’

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726 Ibid, p. 3.
society. In his oft-quoted article on silent reading, Saenger argues that the ability to read silently and rapidly was a result of the historical evolution of word separation that, beginning in the seventh century, changed the format of the written page, which previously had to be read orally and slowly in order to be comprehended. Before the seventh century, texts took the form of what is called scriptura continua (or scriptio continua), a form of writing with no interword space or interpunctuation. This lack of spacing made it very difficult to read a text without actually having to orally sound out the letters and syllables.

With the dominance of scriptura continua in antiquity and the early Middle Ages, Saenger is certain that books were highly unsuited to silent reading, simply because they were easier to read aloud. Saenger traces the ‘invention’ of word separation to seventh and eighth-century Saxon and Celtic priests, who, living on the fringes of what had been the Roman Empire, and who thus had a weak grasp of Latin, needed spaces between words to recognize them in order to pronounce liturgical texts correctly as they read aloud. It was the scribes of the Insular Christian world, Saenger believes, who made a major contribution to the history of reading, simply because they had to modify texts in order to make them more easy for a non-Latin audience to consult. Saenger is adamant, that word separation was probably the singular contribution of the early Middle Ages to the evolution of Western written communication, although, rather problematically, he believes that this insertion of spaces between words led to the ‘visualisation’ of the reading process: the advent of silent reading in the Middle Ages, says Saenger, caused “the transformation from an oral monastic culture to a visual scholastic one between the end of the twelfth and the beginning of the fourteenth centuries in the world of Latin letters.”

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729 Saenger, Paul. “Silent Reading: Its Impact on Late Medieval Script and Society” in Viator, p. 369
731 What the following sentence says is: “By way of example, you might find this sentence difficult to read without any spaces or punctuation; in fact, you might have to sound out the letters consecutively to make any sense of it at all – as ancient and medieval readers might have done.”
732 Ibid., p. 374. Other innovations devised for the purpose of increasing the legibility of texts include, according to Parkes, the early division of Scripture into paragraphs and chapters, the favouring of the codex text, as well as Saint Jerome’s introduction, in his Vulgate translation of the Bible, of the practice of presenting the text per cola et commata.
733 Ibid., p. 405.
But in what ways is the visual manipulation of the text connected to the creation of a ‘visual culture’? After all, is it not fairly obvious that the insertion of spaces between words facilitated an increased legibility of the text, rather than drawing attention to its ‘visuality’? And does not an increase of legibility mean that the ‘visuality’ of the text would, ironically, eventually be more ‘overlooked’? Although the written word is visual, we do not ‘view’ it as we would a pictorial image, unless, of course, we are illiterate, or if the written text self-consciously highlights its own ‘visuality’ at the expense of its legibility. Malcolm Parkes offers some interesting insights into the contribution that the early Middle Ages made to the history of the reading process. In his book, *Pause and Effect* Parkes explains the innovation of what he calls a ‘Grammar of Legibility’ by Insular scribes in the Middle Ages. Parkes feels that, in order to understand the transformations that occurred on the visual space of the page in the Middle Ages, we need to understand something of the cultural conditions and practices of the historical readers of these texts. Parkes suggests that graphic alterations – such as the insertion of spaces between words, as well as the invention of punctuation marks – did not cause, but were made to facilitate more rapid silent reading, which, he believes, was a form of reading employed for a number of practical religious considerations, and which can also be associated with a much more fundamental shift in attitudes to the role and function of texts in this period. Unlike Saenger, who believes that Insular Christians had a far more ‘oral’ relationship with the written word because they read aloud, Parkes observes that the readers who perceived the written medium as more distinctly ‘visual’ were those speakers of Celtic and Germanic languages for whom Latin was a foreign language. It was their poor grasp of Latin, and the near-illegibility of the written word, that forced these Insular readers to search for ways to make the texts more legible. Parkes’ theory is encapsulated in what he has dubbed a ‘Grammar of Legibility’, which he describes as “a complex of graphic conventions by which the written manifestation of language operates to facilitate access to the information it conveys.”

735 See Parkes, “Reading, Copying and Interpretation” in *History of Reading*, pp. 92-93. Parkes refers, for example, to the Rule of St Benedict, where we find references to private reading as well as the need to read to oneself so as not to disturb others; the fact that “such reading was to be supervised, to ensure that it was not an excuse for slackness or that the reader’s attention did not wander, the implication is that silent reading is not uncommon in such circumstances.”
736 Parkes, “Reading, Copying and Interpreting,” p. 94.
The graphic alterations that were applied to texts in this period were to facilitate, not the *visibility* of the text, but greater *legibility*. It should be fairly obvious that, for a group of people for whom Latin was a relatively unfamiliar language, a greater amount of effort was needed to make biblical and spiritual literature legible and accessible, and that legibility was first and foremost a practical consideration. Medieval readers must be seen as engaging in different *practices* of literacy, in order to meet different needs, and a number of aspects of reading practice in the Middle Ages – from the position of the reader’s body, to his mumbling or silent reading of the words on the page, to the actual physical presentation of the text itself – would have reflected these needs. It is only through a practice-based approach to literacy that we can grasp this idea of the difference between *viewing* and *reading* a text. Literacy is a skill that is learnt through much practice and repetition; although we might at first struggle to decipher the visual letters on a page, as when we are small children, we soon become so accustomed to reading that it becomes an ‘incorporated’ skill. If we look at medieval writing practices and consider how a young apprentice learns the craft of writing, we can see that it is a matter of developing a skill.

As with any skill, says Ingold, the art of handwriting emerges through a continuous process of bodily modification within the contexts of novices’ engagement with other persons and objects in their diverse environments. That writing is not merely added on, as a cultural supplement to a body that is naturally ready-made for speech is apparent, he says, “as soon as we pause to consider the demands, both postural and gestural, that it places on the developing human organism. The postures routinely adopted in writing are in fact very variable, depending in part on tools, raw materials and furniture, and in part on status and etiquette.” Writing is an *incorporating* as well as an *inscribing* practice: that is, it has an ‘irreducible bodily component’, not just in the controlled movement of the hand but in the way in which the hand together with the tool it holds is brought into a certain angular relation with the surface of the material to be inscribed, which in turn affects the writer’s entire comportment. We should not forget, says Ingold, “that there can be no inscription without incorporation – without, in other words, the building of habitual patterns of posture and gesture into the bodily *modus operandi* of the skilled practitioner.” Just like speech, he says, “writing is an achievement of the whole human organism-person in his or her environment.”

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739 Ibid., p. 401.
learned by the ‘organism-person’. Reading becomes such a habitual skill that we seldom have to think about the ‘visual’ aspects of texts, which are things we simply learn to read.

Michael Polanyi explains how, like a blind man with his stick, we sometimes become so familiar with the ‘tools’ that we use in everyday life, that they come to feel as though they are part of our own body; they become part of the ‘subsidiary awareness’ from which we can focus on other things. This is also something he applies to the practice of literacy: Even while listening to speech or reading a text, says Polanyi, “our focal attention is directed towards the meaning of the words, and not towards the words as sounds or marks on paper.” The aim of reading is to make a text “transparent in respect to its meaning,” says Polanyi, and this is what we mean, he says, “by saying we read a text, and why we do not say we observe it.”

It is precisely this distinction between reading a text and observing it, that has been overlooked by those theorists and scholars so eager to point out the ‘visual’ aspects of the written word that they seem to have taken leave of all common sense about the basic differences between the practices of ‘reading’ and ‘observing’ (furthermore, do we ‘observe’ pictures, or do we become ‘spectators’ in front of a picture? Here we see how words can mean different things depending on how they are used in different situations). Like any other practical skill, literacy involves techniques and the use of tools that draw less attention to their own inner mechanisms the more proficiently they are learnt, mastered, and applied. The ‘opacity’ of writing becomes more ‘transparent’ depending on a number of factors, including the skill of the reader, the legibility of the text, and extending to factors such as the reader’s eyesight, or her knowledge of a certain language, or a certain genre, and a range of other social, cultural, historical, material and hermeneutic (amongst other) considerations.

Nevertheless, the sense of the increased ‘transparency’ of a text, does certainly not mean that the visual aspects of texts cease to exist. Literacy is, amongst other things, a ‘visual’ practice, involving a corporeal engagement of the eyes, whether or not this is always consciously acknowledged (unless, of course, someone is ‘literate’ in Braille). As John of Salisbury wrote in the 12th century: “Letters represent things which they bring to the mind through the windows of the eyes,” although they can also “speak voicelessly the utterances of the absent.”

For letters to ‘speak voicelessly’, however, does not mean that they no longer require the ‘windows of the eyes’. It simply means that we learn to

\[240\] Personal Knowledge, p. 91.
\[241\] Quoted in From Memory to Written Record, p. 202 [from Metalogicon, bk I, Ch. 13, ed. C.C.J. Webb (1929)].
‘overlook’ the ‘visual’ aspects of texts, in order to read the letters that have been presented to us. Seeing letters as letters, and not as strange marks on a page, is achieved through learning and practice, and as Merleau-Ponty notes, if we ask someone “if he can read the letters inscribed on a panel or distinguish the details of a shape, he will not trust a vague ‘impression of legibility’. He will attempt to read or describe what is presented to him.”\textsuperscript{742} It is possible that a medieval reader would find what we regard as our highly ‘legible’ printed documents more difficult to decipher than his own reading material, simply because uniform rows of Size 12 Times New Roman typescript printed onto A4 paper would not be what he was accustomed to. The printed letters on this page might appear as strange and foreign to the medieval reader as an eighth century manuscript appears to the undergraduate palaeography student allowed into the archives for the first time, seeing how strange it is for a page to be made of vellum, smooth on one side and hairy on another, with letters written in home-made ink by a quill someone had fashioned himself. There is certainly a great amount of familiarity, says Wittgenstein, in the experience of reading a page of print: “the mere look of a printed line is itself extremely characteristic – it presents, that is, a quite special appearance, the letters all roughly the same size, akin in shape too, and always recurring; most of the words constantly repeated and enormously familiar to us, like well-known faces.”\textsuperscript{743} Think of the uneasiness we feel, he says, “when the spelling of a word is changed. This is because the look of a written word, becomes familiar to us in the same kind of way as its sound.”\textsuperscript{744}

As Wittgenstein further notes, however, even the word ‘reading’ is not something that can be understood outside of the particular ‘form of life’ that employs this word; we should realise, he says, that “the word ‘to read’ is applied differently when we are speaking of the beginner and of the practised reader.”\textsuperscript{745} According to Gilbert Ryle, the word ‘to read’, is often employed very differently depending on the context in which it is used: “A pupil, a proof-reader and an oculist’s patient might all be told, for example, to read carefully a certain paragraph; the pupil will be disobeying his instructions, if he notices the misprints but not the argument; the proof-reader will be disobeying his instructions if he attends to the arguments but does not detect the misprints; while the oculist’s patient is intended to report neither on the argument nor on the misprints, but only on the

\textsuperscript{743} \textit{Philosophical Investigations}, §167.
\textsuperscript{744} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{745} Ibid., §156.
blurredness or sharpness, the blackness or greyness, the slantingness or the uprightness of the printed letters.”746 Thus it seems that what we identify as ‘reading’ is not something that can be applied homogenously to a variety of situations; it refers, instead, we might say, to a family of practices that we have learnt to identify as practices of ‘reading.’

When we talk of ‘reading’, or even ‘literacy’ in the Middle Ages, it should be clear that these terms mean something in many ways different from what we think of as ‘reading’ or ‘literacy’ today. As Mary Carruthers explains, the ability to ‘write’ was not always the same thing as the ability to compose and comprehend in a fully textual way, so that the scribe was often simply a skilled copier, employed in a capacity akin to that of a professional typist today. The distinction between composing (or ‘making’ in Middle English) and writing-down continued to be honoured throughout the Middle Ages. It is also important to note, says Carruthers, that being ‘illiterate’, or illitteratus, in the Middle Ages, meant being “unable to compose fluently in Latin.”747 Furthermore, she notes, it is interesting that the ancient Greeks had no verb meaning ‘to read’ as such: the verb they used, ἀναγινώσκω, means ‘to know again,’ or ‘to recollect,’ which indicates something of the idea that ‘reading’ was very closely connected with memory processes. The Latin equivalent, lego, she notes, similarly means, ‘to collect,’ or ‘to gather,’ thus describing thought as a type of activity.748 Monastic literate activity itself consisted of an intensive, meditative reading of a small corpus of authoritative texts translated into Latin, including biblical scripture and the writings of the church fathers, most of which had already been memorized through a previous oral education. Monastic reading was an intensively spiritual practice, the purpose of which was to bring the monk closer to God. Reading was not practised in order to increase knowledge, but in order to reacquaint oneself with the authoritative voices of the past, in order to continue the tradition, and in order to find one’s way to God. This can be seen in the reading techniques themselves, which reflected the role of literacy as a spiritual rather than information-seeking practice. It is the relationship between literacy, memory, and the spiritual goals of medieval reading practices, that we will reflect on in the section that follows.

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746 Concept of Mind, p. 143.
748 Ibid., p. 30.
6.3. Literacy and the craft of thinking: praxeological reflections

6.3.1. The graven imagination? Wittgenstein’s ‘rule of thumb’

Mary Carruthers, in her remarkable study of medieval memory practices, explains that we can only understand medieval memory if we consider the art of memoria as constituted by a “rich complex of practices.”\footnote{Carruthers, Mary. The Craft of Thought: Meditation, Rhetoric, and the Making of Images, 400-1200 (Cambridge : Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 14.} It is a common mistake, she notes, to confuse the activity of remembering with the ‘things’ humans may use to locate and cue their memories, and to forget that ‘memory’ does not inhere directly in objects. A memory, by its very nature, requires a remembering person: it cannot be abstracted from particular times and places and people. The Craft of Thought is Carruthers’s examination of the techniques of medieval monastic meditation as a disciplined craft for making thoughts. Memoria was inextricably linked with meditatio, the monastic practice of meditation, which, Carruthers suggests, was more a case of orthopraxis than orthodoxy. She explains how orthopraxis, unlike orthodoxy, emphasises a set of experiences and techniques, conceived as a ‘way’ to be followed, leading one to re-live the founder’s path to enlightenment. Because it seeks an experience, “orthopraxis can never be completely articulate; instead of normative dogma, it relies upon patterns of oral formulae and ritualised behaviour.”\footnote{Ibid., p. 1.} Any craft develops an orthopraxis, says Carruthers, a craft ‘knowledge’ which is learned, and indeed can only be learned, through painstaking practical imitation and complete familiarization of exemplary masters’ techniques and experiences. Most of this knowledge cannot even be set down in words; it must be learned by practising, over and over again.\footnote{Ibid., p. 1.} Monastic education is thus best understood on this apprenticeship model, more like masonry or carpentry than anything to do with the modern academy. It is an apprenticeship to a craft that is also a way of life. It is ‘practice’ both in the sense of being ‘preparation’ for perfect craft mastery which can never be fully achieved, and the sense of ‘working in a particular way.’ In the idiom of monasticism, says Carruthers, people do not ‘have’ ideas, they ‘make’ them. The work – as both process and product – is no better than the skilful hand, or in this case the mind, of its user. An apprentice learned not only how to use his or her tools but how to
make them. Scribes prepared their parchments, made their pens, and mixed their inks; masons made their adzes, mallets, and files. And monks composing made their cognitive pictures and schemes. Tool-making is an essential part of the orthopraxis of the craft (and, we could add, also part of the 'orthodoxis').

It is important to note that the medieval craft of meditation was often linked to the written word, even the craft of making prayer continuously, says Carruthers, came to be called sacra pagina in Latin, the constant meditation based on reading and recollecting sacred texts. The Benedictine scholar Jean Leclerq, in his comprehensive study of monastic culture, notes that one of the principal occupations of the monk is the lectio divina, a very specific form of religious, or mystical reading, which consists of alternating periods of reading and meditation: legere aut meditare. The lectio of monastic reading, he notes, was a predominantly oral practice: in chapter 48 of the Rule of St Benedict monks are even warned that "reading might interfere with the silence necessary for meditation because it created unnecessary noise." Carruthers explains how reading in the Middle Ages was more like a dialogue between the reader and the text, so that the task of the medieval reader was to activate the voces paginorum – the ‘voices of the page’ – as though he was in conversation with the text, and so long as the reader, in meditation, read attentively in a murmur or a low voice, the voice of the other member of the dialogue would sound through the written letters. The lectio divina was necessarily an active reading, often accompanied by certain meditative postures and movements such as swaying and prostration, and usually requiring great physical exertion. As the medieval Englishman Orderic Vitalis noted, during the act of reading, "the whole body labours."

There have apparently been found some inscriptions in the margins of manuscripts wherein monks comment on the difficulty of their task: "my back is sore," says one; "my feet are cold," another. The goal of monastic reading practice was literally the ‘incorporation’ of the text into one’s own experience; and Leclerq notes how reading in monastic culture was usually referred to as ruminatio, a ‘rumination’ of the text which

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Footnotes:

752 Ibid., p. 5.
753 Ibid., p. 2.
755 Ibid., p. 15.
756 From Memory to Written Record, p. 90.
757 This was mentioned at the Palaeography Summer School I attended at University College, London, in July 2003.
Leclerq describes as the "mastication of the word." Carruthers explains that, in the monastic description of reading as ruminatio, we can see that the text was "to be digested, to be ruminated, like a cow chewing her cud" and "memorized with the aid of murmur, mouthing the words subvocally as one turned over the texts in one’s memory." A work was not truly read, she notes, until one [had] made it part of oneself.

Carruthers’ central argument in The Book of Memory is that, for readers in antiquity and the early Middle Ages, because books themselves were memorial cues and aids, memory itself was often referred to as a ‘book’, a ‘written page’ or a ‘wax tablet’ upon which something is written. She finds much evidence of the ways that memorial images had to be arranged in an order that was ‘readable’; visual coding allowed the memory to be organised securely for accurate recollection and manipulation of materials that required them to be internally ‘read’. Meditation, she notes, was the “interior reading of the book of one’s memory, in the richly ‘gathering’ way of medieval reading.” More than thinking of meditation as reading from an ‘internal’ book, however, we need to consider that the ‘external’ act of reading and writing was itself always an act of memory. As Carruthers explains, as a “craft of thinking,” the “tools of mnemotechnic (that is, the specific schemes an individual may use) are more like a chisel or a pen.” (This comment is similar to Wittgenstein’s observation that "I really do think with my pen, because my head often knows nothing about what my hand is writing.") Carruthers’ work on medieval memory practices is important in that it shows how impossible it is to think of ‘thinking’ as something that happens in the ‘head’ or the ‘mind’, rather than as something that is done through the use of different media and skills. By emphasising that medieval memory was a “craft of thinking”, involving the mastery of certain tools and techniques, it becomes impossible to think about thinking in a dualistic way.

This is precisely what influential philosophers such as Wittgenstein and Ryle (amongst others) have set out to show. Wittgenstein is keen to point out that ‘thought’ is not some queer experience that occurs alongside the things we do and say; thinking is a certain type of activity, not distinct from its expression in language, but that expression itself (that is,

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758 Ibid.
760 Ibid., p. 10.
761 Ibid., p. 16.
762 See especially Chapter One: "Models for the Memory", pp. 16-45.
763 Craft of Thought, p.84.
764 Ibid., p. 4.
of course, when thought is expressed in ‘language’, which is not always the case). As Wittgenstein notes: “Thinking is not an incorporeal process which lends life and sense to speaking, and which would be possible to detach from speaking,”

because the mental attitude “doesn’t ‘accompany’ what is said in the sense in which a gesture accompanies it.”

When I think in language, says Wittgenstein, there are not ‘meanings’ going through my mind in addition to the verbal expressions: rather, the language is the vehicle of thought. If we are to describe ‘thinking’ at all, we must consider it an activity that is “performed by the hand, when we think by writing; by the mouth and larynx, when we think by speaking; and if we think by imagining signs or pictures, I can give you no agent that thinks.”

Wittgenstein is not the only thinker to have pointed this out. A similar observation can be found in the work of Ryle, who notes that a ‘mental act’ is something that “may be done in silent soliloquy, but it may just as well be done aloud, or in ink.”

Similarly, Merleau-Ponty is aware that there is “a thought in speech the existence of which is unsuspected by intellectualism.” Merleau-Ponty actually applies this to the writing of philosophy, which, he emphasises, is not something that happens in the ‘head’ of the philosopher. In writing their work, many philosophers are unaware of what they want to say until they write it – it is in the writing itself that ideas are ‘formulated’ and expressed; they do not exist in any realm of ‘pure thought’ before their expression through writing. Philosophical papers (or indeed most written works) do not exist ‘in the head’ before they are written down: if writing presupposes thought, says Merleau-Ponty, then we could not understand why “the thinking subject himself is in a kind of ignorance of his thoughts so long as he has not formulated them for himself, or even spoken and written them, as is shown by the example of so many writers who begin a book without knowing exactly what they are going to put into it.”

In his earlier work, Wittgenstein defined the function of language as giving a ‘picture of reality’. In the Tractatus, for example, Wittgenstein attempted to show that the components of language have a one to one mapping on to the components of the world, as if language functions as a ‘mirror’ of the world. In his later work, however, Wittgenstein totally rejects this ‘picture theory’ of language. For the later Wittgenstein, it is not its

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766 Philosophical Investigations, §339
767 Ibid., §674.
769 Ibid., p. 301.
770 Phenomenology of Perception, p. 179.
771 Ibid., p. 177.
ability to 'represent' the world that gives language meaning, but the use of words in everyday life that makes them meaningful. The function of language is not to 'represent the world', in other words: the function of language can be seen in the way we use words to do a variety of things in the world. The meaning of words, according to this later view, can be understood by the way in which they are used within their social context. Meaning is not an act which accompanies a word or thought; rather, it is the use that a word gets put to in the context of a given situation. Furthermore, the content of a thought exists only in the expression of the thought, and meaning is defined purely in terms of dispositions. In other words, the meaning of a word is, more often than not, the role it plays in language. This is where Wittgenstein says that we need to apply his “rule of thumb”, which is a type of thought experiment especially useful if one is tempted to think of 'meaning' as something that happens through the production of an 'image' in the 'head'. Very well, says Wittgenstein: imagine that you have an ‘image’ in your head when you hear or read a certain word or phrase. Now imagine if this image was outside your head, say, on a piece of paper. Would this make sense of the phrase? "We could perfectly well,” says Wittgenstein, “replace every process of imagining by a process of looking at an object or a painting, drawing or modelling; and every process of speaking to oneself by speaking aloud or by writing.”

If it is not the ‘image’ in our heads that gives us meaning, then how does ‘meaning’ come about? According to Wittgenstein, "For a large class of cases – though not for all – in which we employ the word ‘meaning’ it can be defined thus: The meaning of a word is its use in the language." Linguistic signs, says Wittgenstein, are like instruments, like the tools in a toolbox, and these tools gain life, not through “something immaterial, with properties different from mere signs”, but through their use in everyday life: "if we had to name anything which is the life of the sign, we should have to say that it was its use."
Language only seems ‘mysterious’ because we do not usually need to explain our language use, a lot of our understanding of language-use is tacit: like Polanyi’s observation that “we know more than we can tell,” Wittgenstein acknowledges that we know what we are doing “without being able to say it.”\(^{776}\) As Wittgenstein says, “the teaching of a language is not explanation, but training,”\(^{777}\) and this has important implications for our understanding of what language is: “To understand a language,” he says, “means to be a master of a technique.”\(^{778}\) Wittgenstein’s conception of language and thought is oriented around an enquiry into the ‘form of life’ in which it is found: “to imagine a language,” he says, “is to imagine a form of life.”\(^{779}\) His famous term, ‘language-game’, is meant to bring into prominence the fact that languages are ‘played’ by people in certain situations, because “the *speaking* of language is part of an activity, or of a form of life.”\(^{780}\) We must remember, says Wittgenstein, that “Commanding, questioning, recounting, chatting, are as much a part of our natural history as walking, eating, drinking, playing.”\(^{781}\) ‘Meaning’, in other words, is not something determined by the correspondence between a text or a picture, or some other ‘representation’, and ‘reality’; rather, we understand the meaning, or the ‘truth’, of something, depending on the *way it is used* as part of a certain ‘form of life.’

Carruthers, like Wittgenstein and Ryle, is also sceptical of the understanding of language or images (whether ‘conceptual’ or not) as ‘representations’ that somehow ‘correspond to reality’. Even when the word ‘representation’ was used in the Middle Ages, she notes, the Latin verb *repraesentare* referred to the art of *remembering*, not imitating or copying ‘reality’. *Repraesentare*, she explains, is derived from the word meaning “present in time,” *praesens*, and it is in keeping with the traditions of both ancient and medieval philosophy and pedagogical practice, that letters and other images are signs not valued because of the ability to imitate an object, but because of their ability to recall something to memory. According to Carruthers, the questions raised about a work by *mneme* are different from those raised by *mimesis,* in that they stress cognitive uses and the instrumentality of art over questions of its ‘realism.’ *Mneme*, she argues, produced an art for ‘thinking about’ and for ‘meditating upon’ and for ‘gathering’ – the last deriving

\(^{776}\) *Philosophical Investigations*, §75
\(^{777}\) Ibid., §5.
\(^{778}\) Ibid., §199
\(^{779}\) Ibid., §19
\(^{780}\) Ibid., §23
\(^{781}\) Ibid., §25
from the pun in the Latin verb legere, ‘to read’ and also ‘to gather by picking.’\textsuperscript{782} It is only through understanding ‘representation’ in the Middle Ages, not as mimesis, but as memoria, she suggests, that we will understand that words and images were “two ‘ways’ of the same mental activity.”\textsuperscript{783} Both seeing a picture and reading letters in the Middles Ages ‘praestat,’ or ‘made present’ a story, says Carruthers, while both activities had as their goal, not simply the learning of a story, but learning it to familiarize and domesticate it, in that fully internalized, even physiological way that medieval reading required.\textsuperscript{784} Pictura and litteratura remain intimately linked in the later Middle Ages, says Carruthers: “Both are equal means of access to the ‘house of memory,’ which holds all human knowledge of the past, and each has cognitively the same effect.”\textsuperscript{785}

If both pictures and writing were employed for memory purposes, why was there such a fierce debate about the differences between them in the Middle Ages? The differences between them were not, as we have discussed throughout this thesis, dependent on certain metaphysical, pictures of these media, but on how these media were used. We must remember, says Carruthers, that a trained and well-provided memory was regarded throughout this long period “not as a primitive learning technique, but as the essential foundation of prudence, sapientia, ethical judgement.”\textsuperscript{786} This was precisely the point of Gregory the Great’s statement about pictures as ‘books of the illiterate,’ an argument that was appropriated during the ‘Byzantine Controversy’, where defenders of images such as John of Damascus were concerned to point out that God himself provided “the written image in books.”\textsuperscript{787} In monastic rhetoric, Carruthers notes, images, like the written word, have an effect that is both pedagogical and ethical. The first thing one should ask of such an image, she suggests, “is not ‘what does it mean?’ but ‘what is it good for?’”\textsuperscript{788} The ‘good’ of a picture, its underlying aesthetic principle, she says, must be understood “in terms of its role in cognitive function: a picture is for remembering, and its value is dependent on how it fulfils this function.”\textsuperscript{789} Of course, we could also say that, more than a ‘cognitive’ function, pictures were often used to tell stories that were intended to be life-shaping and person-forming, and pictures played an ethical, spiritual, and religious role in

\textsuperscript{782} The Craft of Thought, p. 3.
\textsuperscript{783} Ibid., p. 142.
\textsuperscript{784} The Book of Memory p. 222.
\textsuperscript{785} Ibid., p. 223.
\textsuperscript{786} Ibid., p. 176.
\textsuperscript{788} Craft of Thought, p. 118.
\textsuperscript{789} Ibid., p. 200.
medieval society. It is with this in mind that we can better understand Gregory's statement:

It is one thing to worship a picture, it is another by means of pictures to learn thoroughly [addiscere] the story that should be venerated. For what writing makes present to those reading, the same picturing makes present [praestat] to the uneducated, to those perceiving visually, because in it the ignorant see what they ought to follow, in it they read who do not know letters. Wherefore, and especially for the common people, picturing is the equivalent of [pro] reading.790

Gregory’s statement, according to Carruthers, shows that that picturae could be considered ‘textual’, not in what or how they ‘imitate’, but in the way that they function. It was the images’ auxiliary nature with respect to writing, says Carruthers, that kept them from being used idolatrously. Hence the problem with pictures was not that they were ‘representations’, but that they were used in the wrong way; the practices that revolved around them were wrong or sinful.

By understanding pictures and written texts as memorial cues and aids, it becomes understandable as to why it is problematic to consider any one medium as capable of leading to ‘idolatry’, while another medium is considered to be ‘inherently’ free of this problem. It is very helpful, then, to think of writing and images, not as ‘graven representations’ of ‘reality’, but as presentations with a memorial function. As Carruthers notes, words and images are important, not so much for what they are, as for what they do or rather, what we do to and with them.791 Of course, both writing and pictures can have any number of other functions, but it is important, when using the word ‘representation’ in relation to medieval reading practices, to think of this, not in terms of mimesis, but in terms of memoria. The consideration of representation in terms of memoria means that we are in less danger of thinking of either writing or pictures as ‘external’ representations of ‘inner’ thought (or the ‘outer’ world, or even an ‘ideal’ reality). As Carruthers has shown, medieval thinking practice was a craft, an ‘art’ of thinking, requiring the mastery of certain tools and skills. This is not something only applicable to the medieval period, however, it is a feature of thinking and writing practices in all historical periods and places. In this sense, then, writing can be described as a ‘graven image’ of thought, only to the extent that we often think through our writing practices. If we produce an imaginative piece of writing or a picture, this does not require an ‘act of the imagination’ prior to the inscription of our imaginative thoughts onto paper: the inscription

790 Carruthers’ translation, in Book of Memory, p. 222.
791 Ibid., p. 35.
itself is a form of ‘graven imagination’. Although this, of course, does not mean that this form of ‘graven imagination’ is necessarily sinful or idolatrous, even according to the most iconophobic cultures or religions. The meaning of any image, or piece of writing, as Wittgenstein would say, depends on its use in the context of different practices or situations. That is, an image can only be described as ‘idolatrous’ if it functions in an idolatrous way. Although it could also, of course, function in a number of other, far more positive ways, as many inscribed pictures and practices do.

6.3.2. Wayfinding vs. navigation: Writing, thinking and mapping

![Figure 6](image)

We have seen in the previous chapter how thinking becomes problematic when it forgets its practical situated and embodied nature. As Merleau-Ponty says, to return ‘to the things themselves’ is “to return to that world which precedes knowledge, of which knowledge always speaks, and in relation to which every scientific schematization is an abstract and derivative sign language, as is geography in relation to the countryside in which we have learnt beforehand what a forest, a prairie or a river is.” Tim Ingold thinks that it might be helpful to think about thinking as a type of inscriptive practice, that is also a type of

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792 “Mappamundi,” a schematic picture showing the hemisphere of terra surrounded by Occeanus; from the Beatus of Saint-Sever, in The Craft of Thought, Plate 1. Carruthers notes that the Red Sea was often painted red on a medieval map, intended, of course, as a rebus of its name. Pictorial clues were used as an immediately evident orientating devices, like ‘signposts’ along the ‘way’. In this sense, then, reading and remembering were ‘wayfinding’ activities.

793 *Phenomenology of Perception*, p. ix.
wayfinding activity, as he feels that this is a way in which we might overcome the dualistic conception of thought as something separate from its expression. All knowledge, including scientific knowledge, says Ingold, must "emerge from the total network of interplace relations constituting its field of practice."\(^794\)

Ingold is particularly critical of the idea that we do things by first having a ‘representation’ in our minds, as though, in order to move about, we need to refer to a ‘map’ in our heads to which we refer to make behavioural decisions. He contrasts this conception of human action as a form of ‘navigation’, with a more holistic idea of movement as ‘wayfinding’.\(^795\) Wayfinding is a movement, not between locations in space but between places in a network of coming and going that Ingold calls a region. In wayfinding, people do not traverse the surface of a world whose layout is fixed in advance – as represented on a cartographic map. Rather, they ‘feel their way’ through a world that is itself in motion, continually coming into being through the combined action of human and non-human agencies. ‘Finding one’s way’ is not a computational operation carried out prior to departure from a place, or at points along the way; rather, it is tantamount to one’s own movement through the world.

We know as we go, says Ingold, not before we go.\(^796\) People do not always need ‘maps’ in their heads in order to successfully move from one place to another, and even when they do need maps, these maps are used either more or less successfully as the journey commences and continues. Contrary to the model of living and moving about as a kind of ‘map-using’, says Ingold, ways of life are not therefore determined in advance, as routes to be followed, but have continually to be worked out anew. And these ways, far from being inscribed upon the surface of an inanimate world, are the very threads from which the living world is woven.\(^797\) Ingold is concerned to point out that there is a way in which wayfinding is at the same time a sort of ‘mapping’ practice, which leads to maps (or ‘mappings’) of various kinds. We could understand the practice of ‘mapping’, suggests Ingold, as the narrative re-enactment of journeys made, and of maps as the inscriptions to which such re-enactments may possibly give rise. Knowing is like mapping, says Ingold, not because knowledge is like a ‘map’, but because the products of mapping (graphic inscriptions), as those of knowing (stories), are fundamentally un-maplike. What Ingold

\(^{794}\) Ibid., p. 229.
\(^{796}\) Ibid., p. 239.
\(^{797}\) Ibid., p. 242.
means by this is that ‘knowing’ is not a *thing* like a ‘map’, but more like a *process* of ‘mapping.’ Ingold points out that mapping is “no more the externalisation of a map that already exists in the mapper’s head than is speaking the externalisation of a thought. Rather, both mapping and speaking are genres of performance that draw their meanings from the communicative contexts of their enactment.” Mapping could also be compared to an inscriptive activity like writing, although we cannot think of either of these activities as serving to transcribe pre-existent thoughts or mental representations onto paper. The map, like the written word, says Ingold, is not, in the first place, the transcription of anything, but rather an *inscription*.798

It is helpful to think of both maps and written documents as ‘representations’, not in the sense of ‘imitations’ of ‘reality’, but as memorial cues and aids, making things ‘present’ to our attention. Ingold points to medieval manuscripts as examples of how maps “served as memoranda of itineraries, providing directions and advice to the traveller who would undertake the same journey.”799 It seems that we could go further than providing an *analogy* between writing and mapping in the Middle Ages, however. The pages of medieval manuscripts were themselves often laid out like maps, and it was generally understood that reading and writing were ‘wayfinding’ activities in this period. According to Mary Carruthers, because memory work was often considered as a “process, like a journey,” the trope of ‘place’ became very important in medieval manuscript culture. The ‘craft of memory’, says Carruthers, involved the “task of ‘finding’ and of ‘getting from one place to another’ in your thinking mind.”800 Because some type of locational structure was a prerequisite for any thinking at all, there developed very early on in Christianity a *disciplina* or *via* of inventive meditation based on memorized-locational-inventory structures, and this was called by the monks *memoria spiritualis* or *sancta memoria*.801 *Sancta memoria* was an ‘art of thinking’, it was taught as a craft, a conscious discipline with principles and ‘rules’ and stages of mastery. The art of thinking, for the medieval monk, “is fundamentally an art of thinking with a well-furnished memory. Though the goal of spiritual life is the unmediated vision of God, divine *theoria*, one can only get there by travelling through one’s memory. A person’s entire memory is a composition among whose

798 Ibid., p. 231.
799 Ibid., p. 233.
800 Craft of Thought, p. 23.
801 Ibid., p. 12.
places, routes, and pathways one must move whenever one thinks about anything. The ‘wayfinding’ craft of memory involved the making of mental ‘locations’ for ‘gathering up’ (collocare) and ‘drawing in’ (tractare), which required structured ‘dispositions’ of ‘places’ in the mind – mental maps, in short – from which and into which collecting proceeds.

These ‘places’ can only be understood as part of a network of other ‘places’, as part of the journey of the memorial process. It is important to remember, however, when we speak of ‘place’ in memory, that “we refer not to a literal spot or space, but to location within a network, ‘memory’ distributed through a web of associations.” When medieval cognitive pattern-making ‘locates’ knowledge, this ‘knowledge’ is always within and in relation to other ‘things,’ or memorabilia. What is ‘truthful’ about these memorabilia (literally, something “that is able to be remembered”) is not their content, that is what they remember, but rather their form and especially their ability to find out things, that is how they cue memories using these locational networks. According to Carruthers, these memorabilia resemble “maps for thinking and responding.” These locational networks, “finer even than the filaments of a spider’s web – are rich devices for thinking, constructing patterns or ‘scenes’ within which ‘things’ are caught and into which they are ‘gathered’ and regathered, in innumerable ways, by individual human minds.”

We cannot forget too, says Carruthers, that the great vice of the art of memoria was not forgetting, but ‘disordered’ thinking, and it is interesting that the basic metaphors used to describe this order are often “locational: wandering against having a way or a route.” It is with this in mind that we can understand Bernard of Clairvaux’s criticism of the idolatry of ‘curiosity’ which is different to the word as we understand it today. Being curiosus for the medieval monk was the opposite of the state of being attentive, it was a vice of dilettantism, or, more generally, various forms of distraction, digression, or even ‘straying’ from the right path, such as “when we become so charmed by the play of our mental images that we lose our ‘place’ and cannot remember what ‘path’ they were supposed to mark.” Spiritual leaders such as Bernard therefore stressed the “ethical need to resist curiositas and to find one’s ‘stance’ or ‘ground’,” and developed memory

802 Ibid., p. 115.
803 Ibid., p. 33.
804 Ibid., p. 54.
805 Ibid., p. 71.
806 Ibid., p. 34.
807 Ibid., p. 82.
808 Ibid., p. 83.
809 Ibid., p. 94.
techniques that were designed to "keep the ever-restless mind on track, in the 'Way.'"\textsuperscript{810} It was a remembrance of this 'way' that was needed to "lift the mind and channel its movements, however variously, towards its destination."\textsuperscript{811} Meditation was thought of as the way, the road, or the d\textit{uctus}, from restlessness and distraction, to divine vision.\textsuperscript{812}

Of course, the d\textit{uctus} that needed to be remembered was the 'Way' prescribed in the Christian scriptures, and this is why memorial wayfinding was inextricably linked to the practice of \textit{reading} in the Middle Ages. The narrative of the Bible as a whole, says Carruthers, was conceived as a "'way' among 'places' – in short, as a map."\textsuperscript{813} The way of meditation, says Carruthers, was initiated, oriented, and marked out by the schemes and tropes of Scripture: "Like sites plotted on a map, these functioned as the stations of the way, to be stopped at and stayed in before continuing; or they could serve as route indicators, 'this way' or 'slow down' or 'skim this quickly' or 'note well.'"\textsuperscript{814} According to Carruthers, the medieval 'craft of thinking' was a navigational practice involving the placing of mental 'markers' to indicate 'locations' along the way, and this is implicitly tied to their use of books as providing 'memory maps'. Prolonged meditation on certain words in texts was intended to bring to mind a series of "associational chains"; medieval cognitive pattern making therefore 'located' knowledge, but within and in relation to other things. This mental 'location marker' for a cluster of readings usually took the form of an image. As the "places" on the "way", images were best understood as localizations, or 'nodes', of thought; what kept thinking from merely being 'noise' and structured it inventively.\textsuperscript{815} Images and imaginative flourishes were important as 'landmarks', or 'location markers,' in the text.\textsuperscript{816} The 'routes' of "a mind meditating its way through the sites (and 'sights') of Scripture," says Carruthers, became the essential conception of the mind thinking.\textsuperscript{817} This conception of d\textit{uctus} was important for both the composition and reading of texts. Compositional d\textit{uctus} was the 'route' in which one moves through a composition, it is what we might today call the 'flow' of a composition. As Carruthers explains, d\textit{uctus} "is the movement within and through a work's various parts. Indeed, d\textit{uctus} insists upon movement, the conduct of a thinking mind on its way through a

\begin{footnotesize}
\bibitem{810} Ibid., p. 263.
\bibitem{811} Ibid., p. 221.
\bibitem{812} Ibid., p. 222.
\bibitem{813} Ibid., p. 43.
\bibitem{814} Ibid., p. 116.
\bibitem{815} Ibid., p. 73.
\bibitem{816} Ibid., pp. 121 and 130.
\bibitem{817} Ibid., p. 61.
\end{footnotesize}
composition." It is through this idea of *ductus* that we can understand how "one 'sees' one's reading, and one 'walks' through it, not just to store it away conveniently and safely, in order to be able to reconstruct it as it was, but also in order to meditate on it, interpret it, and make it fully useful, ethically and compositionally." A reader, says Carruthers, "is constantly in motion, all senses continually in play, slowing down and speeding up, like a craftsman using his various instruments."  

It is by thinking about reading, and by extension, thinking about *thinking*, as a kind of *wayfinding activity*, that we can hopefully find a way out of the "kind of dichotomous and hierarchical thinking" that has plagued the Western tradition. As we have tried to argue throughout this thesis, it seems that our practical involvement in the world is something that has been overlooked in the promulgation of certain dualistic metaphysical pictures of the world. Rather than pointing to *différance* as the 'non-space' from where metaphysical distinctions apparently arise, we could simply look at the practices in which people are engaged, in order to see whether or not this is the case. As we have seen, the meaning of language does not depend on how well it 'represents' the world, thought, or 'reality'; rather, meaning is dependent on our use of words in certain situations. We can find an analogy here in modern cartography, which, according to Ingold, has the idea that it can achieve a perfect congruence between the world and its representation, and progress is measured by the degree of approximation towards it. In the work of the modern cartographer, movement through a region is presented as if it issued from a totalising vision above and beyond the world, that is, from "the imaginary 'bird's-eye view' of a transcendent consciousness," although, in order to create this illusion, the cartographer has to suppress, or to hide from view, the social labour involved in establishing equivalences and connections across places. The reality, says Ingold, is that no map, however 'modern' or sophisticated the techniques of its production, can be wholly divorced from the practices, interests and understandings of its makers and users. Or to put it another way, every map is necessarily embedded in a 'form of life.' The same could be said of reading (or writing) a text, which also relies on the practices, interests and understandings of its makers and users. Of course, we can make a judgement as to whether these 'practices' are more or less skilfully conducted, whether these 'interests' are

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818 Ibid., p. 77.
819 Ibid., p. 110.
820 Perception of the Environment, p. 230.
821 Ibid., p. 226.
more or less noble, or whether these ‘understandings’ are more or less intelligent. However, these judgements have nothing to do with whether or not a text is a more or less accurate ‘representation’ of reality. We do things with maps, as we do things with written texts, and it is what we do with these things, and how we do them, that is the important issue. It is to the question of ‘judgement’ that we now turn.
In Chapter 5 above, we argued that the enquiry into the nature of ‘reality’ is best understood from a praxeological perspective. The problem with many metaphysical accounts of reality, we saw, is that they tend to appeal to ideal structures or principles beyond human experience, which are used not only to provide an explanation or description of reality, but to name that which should be revered or valued as the ‘most real’ of all things. Our insistence on the ‘practical actuality’ of human existence, it should be emphasised, is not an appeal to practices as things that should be revered over other

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**Figure 7.**

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822 One of the cartoons (cropped by myself) published by the Danish newspaper Jyllands-Posten in September 2005. Published online by the Assyrian International News Agency, downloaded on 26 November 2006 from [http://www.aina.org/releases/20060201143237.htm](http://www.aina.org/releases/20060201143237.htm)
ideals or principles – although we might point out, from this perspective, that the holding of ideals (or even the belief in certain ‘metaphysical’ principles), is itself something done by human beings, who are practically involved in the world in which they are situated.

One of the features of the ‘iconoclastic chain’, which we examined in the first chapter of this thesis, is that an iconoclast’s work is often regarded as ‘idolatrous’ by an opponent, or by the next generation of iconoclasts. This is nowhere clearer than in the philosophical tradition, where iconoclastic thinkers set out to expose the ‘illusions’ or ‘idols’ in other philosophers’ work (although it is not always easy to distinguish ‘illusions’ from ‘idols’, in that illusions are often attributed an inappropriate amount of value). This ‘iconoclastic chain’, as we saw, has led to the shift from a critique of idols other than God, to a critique of the concept of “God” itself as an ‘idol’ of thought, as can be found in the work of writers such as Feuerbach, Marx, Nietzsche, Heidegger, Derrida, and even theologians such as Jean-Luc Marion, who argues that the so-called “death of God” is actually a positive move for religion, as it reminds us that our concept of God is never adequate to the God that believers worship. According to Marion, atheism is “only ever valid as far as the concept of ‘God’ that it mobilizes extends.” Marion’s insight is one that could be applied to the atheistic ‘iconoclasm’ of Richard Dawkins. Dawkins clearly has a very specific – and therefore, arguably limited – conception of God as a mythical (and no-doubt white-bearded) man who sits in the sky and metes out severe and unjustifiable punishment on his fearful subjects. For Dawkins, to believe in this God is as irrational as believing in aliens or the tooth fairy. Terry Eagleton is a critic for whom this conception of a “brutally vindictive God sacrificing his own child in recompense for being offended,” is highly problematic. It almost seems, says Eagleton, that Dawkins’ ‘God’ is “Satanic” (in the Hebrew sense of “accuser”) – a very nasty character meting out even nastier punishments. If it is only the belief in this sort of “vicious and obnoxious” God that could be described as ‘irrational,’ says Eagleton, then it is a safe bet that the Archbishop of Canterbury would agree with Dawkins’ claim.

Not only does Dawkins have a very specific idea of ‘God’, however; he also seems to hold a very specific idea about the nature of belief, or faith, in general. As Eagleton notes, “Dawkins considers that no religious belief, anytime or anywhere, is worthy of any respect whatsoever. This, one might note, is the opinion of a man deeply averse to dogmatism.

823 The Idol and Distance, p. 2.
Even moderate religious views, he insists, are to be ferociously contested, since they can always lead to fanaticism.” For Dawkins, ‘faith’ is something that must be understood as the opposite of ‘reason’, which is why any faith-commitment whatsoever is judged as by him as totally irrational. According to Eagleton, “Dawkins considers that all faith is blind faith, and that Christian and Muslim children are brought up to believe unquestioningly” (although this is a rather strange observation, given that Dawkins supposedly believes in doing the relevant empirical research as well as possible). The ‘irrationality’ of faith can be seen, according to Dawkins, in the reaction of Muslims to a series of cartoon images published in a Danish newspaper towards the end of 2005 (see Figure 1, above), which we will discuss in more detail in the section that follows.

The problem, however, is that Dawkins fails to think of ‘faith’ as anything other than a feature of dogmatic religion, although it is clear that ‘faith’ could be understood in a more extended sense; that is, not as a feature of fundamentalism, but as a fundamental feature of all human experience. It seems that faith, in general, is a feature of our situation in the world and in a particular form of life. This faith is not necessarily a ‘cognitive’ sort of commitment; instead, it includes our beliefs and evaluations that are often tacit, if not totally inarticulate. Even the holding of certain ideals, or the reverence for certain things over others, is not something that we can always (or ever) fully justify or explain. This tacit faith is a type of ‘practical’ faith; it is not something formulated into dogmatic religious terms – in fact, it is usually overlooked, because it is not an object experience, because it is a feature, or even a condition of experience in general. Nevertheless, this is not to say that this sort of ‘practical’ faith is totally separate from our more explicit faith commitments. It is simply to say that we have faith in more than we are explicitly aware of; as a variation of Polanyi’s slogan, we might say: "we believe more than we can tell."

We could also use a more extended notion of ‘faith’ to challenge the apparent distinction between ‘faith’ and ‘reason’ as two different approaches to life. Although this is a distinction that Dawkins seems to promote, he seems to have overlooked the fact that he has a great deal of faith in the ‘rationality’ of his own scientific and atheistic position. Indeed, every ‘iconoclast’, whether or not he professes to be ‘religious’ in any explicit way, has a great deal of faith in the righteousness (and perhaps even the ‘rationality’) of his own beliefs. Iconoclasm, as a critique of idolatry, is always at the same time the defence of something that the iconoclast identifies as ‘reality’, the ‘truth’, or as more worthy of reverence than the ‘idols’ of his opponents. We have seen how ‘idolatry’ is something that
is most helpfully approached from a praxeological perspective, and it is our belief that this approach might help us here again. By considering iconoclasm as a critical practice, we hope to highlight the fact that iconoclasts, as human beings who are involved in certain practices and forms of life, are not always (or ever) aware of the ultimate reasons for their defence or critique of certain beliefs or practices as being more ‘right’, or even more ‘rational’ than those of their opponents. It is the faith of the iconoclast – whether tacitly held or explicitly stated – that we will explore in this chapter.

Most of us feel a sense of righteousness, normativity, or even rationality, about the things we do and the way we do them, and this is a feature of our practical involvement in the world. Our actions and decisions cannot be ultimately justified, because we cannot ever get ‘outside’ our life situations in order to see the ‘whole picture’, as it were. Critical judgements, like other actions and decisions, are always made from ‘where we stand’, and it is this situatedness that limits our ability to provide an ultimate justification for what we do. Nevertheless, it is this situatedness that also provides us with the opportunity, not only to ‘get on’ with things, but also to defend what we feel is ‘right’, and it seems that this urge to defend our beliefs and practices is something that human beings simply do. Perhaps the most helpful question here, then, is not: “why do human beings feel the need to defend their beliefs and practices, against the beliefs and practices of others?” but, rather: “what can we do about it when different groups of human beings defend the ‘righteousness’ of completely different positions?” This is not, of course, a metaphysical question, but a pragmatic one. Our suggestion is that human interaction, even between people from completely different ‘forms of life’, is itself a skilled practice that is either more or less intelligently conducted. It seems that, just as we have a sense of normativity, or even ‘righteousness’, about our own practices and beliefs, so it seems that, most of the time, we have a sense of normativity about the best way to ‘get on’ with other people, even when these others do not necessarily share all of our practices or beliefs. We can only hope that one of the beliefs they do share with us, is to ‘get on’ with other people, as best they can. If they do not share this belief, then we are in tricky territory. However, it must be emphasised, that, even if this is not the case, this is not a metaphysical problem, but a practical one. It is through a praxeological approach that we hope to gain, if not a solution, then at least a better picture of this very complex and difficult issue.
7.1. Idolatry, beyond the image: Seeing with an eye of faith?

On 30 September 2005, the Danish newspaper *Jyllands-Posten* published twelve editorial cartoons portraying the prophet Muhammad. The cartoons were the result of the newspaper's extension of an invitation to a number of Danish cartoonists and artists to give their 'interpretations' of contemporary Islam, the publication of which was meant to highlight the difficulty experienced by Danish writer Kåre Bluitgen in finding artists to illustrate his children's book about the Qur'an and life of Muhammad. Bluitgen commented that the artists he had approached were unwilling to work with him for fear of violent attacks by extremist Muslims; a reaction it was feared might be provoked as a result of the proscription against images found in the Qur'an. That was, rather ironically, however, the exact effect that the cartoons themselves had, as can be seen in the fact that, by February 2006, 139 people had been killed in relation to the pictures, and their subsequent publication in newspapers around the world. What started as a public protest by Danish Muslim organizations very quickly turned into an international crisis. Muslims around the world started burning Danish flags; Iran announced that it was halting trade with Denmark, while protesters pelted the Danish embassy with petrol bombs. In Gaza, protesters threw stones at the EU office while burning tyres outside, and later that afternoon, armed gunmen entered the compound. Riot police in Delhi fired tear gas and water cannons to disperse hundreds of student protesters, and in Thailand, protesters shouted “God is great” as they stamped on Denmark's flag outside the country's embassy in Bangkok. The Danish and Norwegian embassies in Syria were set ablaze, as was the embassy in Beirut. The Danish Prime Minister, Anders Fogh Rasmussen, described the controversy as Denmark's worst international crisis since World War II.

As we saw in Chapter 1 above, iconoclasm is not usually a critique against images, but against *idolatry*, which is a complex category through which a judgement is made against another group's alien beliefs or ideas, or what might be regarded as their sinful or delusional practices. To call another group 'idolatrous' and to destroy their signs and symbols in light of this accusation, usually has as much, if not more, to do with questions of belief, or allegiance and identity with a particular group, than it does with the question of 'representation' per se, or even with biblical and dogmatic religious cautions against image-making. It should be clear that this reaction against the image of the prophet had
nothing to do with the problem of ‘representation’. It seems, in fact, that the Muslim world, which is professedly ‘aniconic’, is not free from images. Any scholar of the history of Islam will be aware of a range of images of the prophet that have been produced since the death of Muhammad, and that these are indeed still produced in Muslim countries today. As Terry Allen has pointed out in his study on Islamic Art,825 except for particularly repressive periods and the damage caused by the actions of zealots, figural representation has always been a part of the history of the Islamic world.

As Allen notes, it seems that, in the early period of the development of Islam, as well as in contemporary Muslim society, it has been understood as appropriate for figural representations to occur in the context of ordinary life and even in religious settings, if these representations are not meant for religious purposes (although, he notes, the extent of this tolerance is dependent on a number of factors, including the particular beliefs, the historical epoch and political or religious leadership, and even the geographical location, of the Muslim community dealing with the issue). The Umayyad palaces of the inland Levant, such as Mushattâ and Khirbat al-Mafjar, he notes, are just some examples of the way in which it can be shown that the art of the early Muslims was not entirely devoid of figural imagery,826 and the twentieth century is no exception, especially if we take into consideration how even the most reactionary religious regimes display in photographs religio-political leaders (as when a Persian mob sacked the Moroccan embassy in Tehran in 1986, and photographs of King Hasan were burned along with Moroccan flags while photographs of Persian leaders were brandished at the television news cameras).827 In Shi‘a communities, portraits of the major figures of Shi‘ite history are important elements of religious devotion, which can be bought in Iran around shrines and in the streets, to be hung in homes or carried with oneself. The Grand Ayatollah Sistani, the most senior cleric within Shi‘a Islam, has in fact given a fatwa declaring the depiction of Muhammad, the


826 As noted in the article “Aniconism in Islam,” in Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia: “as well as the statues of humans and animals that adorned palaces of the Ummayad era, frescoes were also common under the Ummayads, and later in many countries of Dar al-Islam, notably under the Safavids and various Central Asian dynasties. Figurative miniatures from Medieval Arabic countries, India, Persia and Turkey are one of the fleuron of Islamic Arts... During the 15th and 17th century representations of Muhammad and other prophets or Biblical characters (such as Adam, Abraham or even Jesus), became common in painted manuscripts from Persia, India and Turkey. Extreme rarities are an illustrated Qur’an depicting Muhammad and, in a Spanish-Muslim manuscript datable from the 16th century, five Ummayad and Abbasid caliphs, although there are not, however, any known figurative depictions of God.” [Downloaded on May 24, 2006, from: http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Aniconism_in_Islam&oldid=54607897]

827 We could add to this the portraits of secular and religious leaders found on banknotes and coins, Saddam Hussein’s statues in public places, and even photographic portraits of members of the Taliban, despite their prohibition against images of any kind.
Prophets and other holy characters, permissible if it is made with the utmost respect, while it is known that the prophet Muhammad himself, who destroyed 360 ‘idols’ at the Ka'ba when he took over the city of Mecca in 630 CE, nevertheless allowed, not only the Black Stone, but also a painting of the Virgin and Child, to remain untouched. Not only is this preservation of the painting of Virgin and Child a significant indication of a more liberal attitude to the Second Commandment, but it is probable that the destruction of the ‘idols’ was based on considerations other than the biblical proscription against images.

Allen notes that the apparently aniconic nature of Islam was to a large extent encouraged in order to distinguish the religious practices of the nascent Ummah from those of Christians, Jews, Zoroastrians and pagans. The emphasizing of calligraphy and abstract decoration over figurative painting and sculpture, says Allen, was a highly visible way of setting the Qur'an apart from the Bible, or the mosque from the church. We need to understand, he says, that Muslims would either have wanted to highlight their solidarity with the practices of other monotheistic faiths, or else have been making a statement in avoiding the plethora of figures that characterized Byzantine art. It is important to note that the Qur'an itself does not explicitly prohibit figurative inscription, and that the interdictions against ‘graven images’ upheld by many Muslims today are in fact found in the hadith, which are records of the words and deeds of the Islamic prophet Muhammad, regarded as important tools for determining the Sunnah, or Muslim way of life. The ways that these hadith are interpreted show a great deal of variety between the interpretive and religious practices of different Muslim groups. There are also often wide differences in practices on an individual level, where the Muslim's attitude towards images depends on a number of factors in relation to their personal religious practice.

The most extreme interpretations can be seen in the actions of the Taliban, who encouraged, for example, the destruction of ancient Buddha statues at Bamiyan in Afghanistan. David Morgan feels that the Taliban's destruction of images and statues was a “deliberately calculated political gesture,” and that, rather than the result of a theological interpretation

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828 The problem with the Jyllands-Posten cartoons, according to many Muslim protesters, was that they were not made with very much respect at all.
830 Ibid.
831 For example, see the hadith narrated by Abd Allah ibn Umar; in Bukhari, Sahih, vol. 7, book 62, no. 110: ”Allah's Apostle said, 'The makers of these pictures will be punished on the Day of Resurrection, and it will be said to them, 'Give life to what you have created (i.e., these pictures).’ The Prophet added, 'The Angels of (Mercy) do not enter a house in which there are pictures (of animals).’” For this reference, see the University of Southern California’s online “Compendium of Muslim Texts”: http://www.usc.edu/dept/MSA/fundamentals/hadithsunnah/bukhari/062.sbt.html#007.062.110.
832 “Aniconism in Islam,” Wikipedia.
of the Second Commandment, their destruction of images and statues was “a strategy of purified thinking and ideological opposition.”

It seems, then, that the ‘average’ Westerner’s response of disbelief at this “irrational” overreaction to the Jyllands-Posten cartoons, is missing the point entirely about the complexity and gravity of the issue. Although it seems that not many Muslim protesters were concerned with the biblical prohibition against ‘graven images’, a number of protesters were genuinely concerned with what they saw as a disrespectful portrayal of a figure considered very holy to them, and saw it as their responsibility as devout believers to defend the ‘honour’ of the prophet (which is a concept perhaps not very sympathetically understood by many Westerners). The BBC Arab Affairs analyst Magdi Abdelhadi noted during the event: “There seems to be a confusion between two issues: the Islamic ban on any pictorial representation and respect for the character of Muhammad.” More than a defence of the sanctity of the prophet, then, it is also possible to see how the pictures also quickly became the site of an ideological struggle highlighting the different values upheld by two very different groups of ‘believers.’ The cartoons became, beyond the issue of the biblical prohibition against images as found in the Second Commandment, a symbol of the values (or lack thereof) of ‘Western civilisation,’ in the eyes of both their defenders, and their enemies. The cartoonists’ defence of their work, for example, was based on a strong belief in the idea of ‘freedom of expression’, a phrase intended to summon the support of one of the most ‘essential’ values of the liberal, secular, and supposedly ‘tolerant’ Western world. It is no surprise that the Muslim reaction also became a more highly charged ideological and political issue – one that highlighted the Muslim values of austerity and faith against the amoral ‘extravagances’ of the ‘secular’ West. The protesters’ characterisation of the ‘infidels’ as evil idolaters, was one way of affirming their own allegiance and identity as holy ‘defenders of the faith.’

Dawkins refers to the cartoon controversy as an example of the ‘irrationalism’ of religion, and as an indicator of how the eradication of religion might lead to a more peaceful world. The theologian Alister McGrath, however, feels that Dawkins’ simplistic assertion that the elimination of religion would lead to the ending of violence, social tension, or discrimination is sociologically naïve, in that it “fails to take account of the way in which human beings create values and norms, and make sense of their identity and

833 Sacred Gaze, p. 136.
834 (BBC Arab Affairs analyst) “Cartoon row highlights deep divisions,” published on 4 February 2006: http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/4678220.stm
their surroundings." As we saw in our discussion of idolatry in the first chapter of this thesis, there seems to be a human need to ‘create divisions’, and this is not something so easily overcome; it is ‘simply the way things are.’ McGrath feels that even a preliminary study of how individuals and societies function, casts serious doubt on one of the most fundamental assertions of Dawkins’ analysis. As he states, there is a “fundamental sociological need for communities to self-define, and identify those who are ‘in’ and those who are ‘out’; those who are ‘friends’, and those who are ‘foes’.” The problem, says McGrath, is not why this tends to happens, but that it does, which means that we should focus our attention on trying to figure out what to do about it.

This “fundamental sociological need for communities to self-define” themselves against their “foes” is clearly evident in the Jyllands-Posten cartoon controversy. The defenders of not only different ideologies, but different ‘forms of life’, on both sides, it seems, were more concerned to distinguish ‘friend’ from ‘foe’ than they were interested in the biblical ban on graven images per se. The real issue was not one that revolved around the prohibitions of the Second Commandment, although it seems, as David Morgan argues, that episodes of iconoclasm never really are. Both sides in this situation felt a sense of righteousness, or even normativity about their positions in relation to the issue, and it was their norms that were at stake, more than the nature of ‘images’ per se. As Morgan points out, religious practice is itself one way in which a group’s ‘inner’ and ‘outer’ are defined and maintained, and in the history of Western civilization, this defence of the ‘inner’ against the ‘outer’ has often been configured as attitudes towards images, pivoting on ‘our’ images and ‘theirs’, or ‘our’ proper avoidance of images and ‘their’ surfeit of idols. Morgan is very concerned to point out that the word ‘idol’ is not a neutral term but one that is embedded in the history of Jewish, Christian, and Islamic thought and practice, and he feels that we can only understand the meaning of idolatry if we see the way the word is used in the context of various religious practices. As Morgan has noted, iconoclasm always involves more than the destruction of images. Abuse or elimination of images, he says, is typically part of a larger task of discrediting a rival, where images “readily become the site of conflicting ideologies or identities.”

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836 The Sacred Gaze, p, 119.
837 Ibid., p. 71.
We always see images, says Morgan, in one sense or another, with an “eye of faith.”\textsuperscript{838} It is our tendency to see with an “eye of faith” that is a feature of our situatedness as embodied human beings within a particular form of life. As Morgan notes, what we call “vision”, always happens “in and as culture, as tools, artefacts, assumptions, learned behaviours, and unconscious promptings,” and it is only through a comprehension of this that we will understand how seeing itself is an “operation that relies on an apparatus of assumptions and inclinations, habits and routines, historical associations and cultural practices.”\textsuperscript{839} To this extent our engagement with images is “a complex assemblage of seeing what is there, seeing by virtue of habit what one expects to be there, seeing what one desires to be there, and seeing what one is told to see there.”\textsuperscript{840} The judgement as to whether an image is ‘idolatrous’ or not, depends on how we use and interpret images from the perspective of the faith-based forms of life, in which we are immersed. It is this form of life, and the way that we do things within it, to which we must ultimately appeal if we wish to justify our decisions and actions. We have faith in the ‘way that we do things’, there is a certain amount of normativity that accompanies our everyday practical involvement in the world, although this does not necessarily prevent us from being personally responsible, or even challenging these norms. It is simply to say that, when we challenge the norms of another group or culture, or even the norms of our own groups or cultures, we cannot appeal to a ‘metaphysical’ ground of righteousness in order to justify our critique. This is because our decisions and actions can never ultimately be justified; and this does not mean that this means that ‘anything goes’, but that, try as we might, we will never get to the ‘bottom of things’. The ‘bottom of things’ is our exceedingly complex practical engagement in the world as embodied human beings, who are situated within a particular form (or forms) of life. There comes a point where reasons end, and we must say: “because this is what we do” – and, we could add, because we have faith that this is the right way of doing things.

\textsuperscript{838} Ibid., p. 75.
\textsuperscript{839} Ibid., p. 3.
\textsuperscript{840} Ibid., p. 74.
7.2. The fiduciary grounds of judgement: Praxeological considerations

To avoid believing one must stop thinking.\footnote{Polanyi, \textit{Personal Knowledge}, p. 314}

7.2.1. A messianic leap? Derrida’s hyperbolic fiduciary claims

Although we might recognise that we always see, to a greater or lesser extent, with an “eye of faith”, does this mean that this faith is always to some extent linked with faith of the explicitly religious kind? It should be clear that it is this more general faith that is a general feature of experience; it is a different sort of faith to that held by the devout religious believer, whose faith is directed towards God, or a divinity of another name, that might be worshipped in a variety of ways. From a praxeological perspective, we would have to say that \textit{religious} faith, or faith in a particular divinity, is not possible without a more \textit{extended} type of faith experience, which is our faith in the form of life in which we find ourselves, and through which we engage in a number of different practices (including those practices that might be described as ‘religious’).

We have seen in preceding chapters how Derrida’s deconstruction is geared towards an engagement with the “impossible”, or the “messianic”. We argued that, as a counter to the problem of metaphysics (in the form of what Derrida describes as ‘logocentrism’ or the ‘metaphysics of presence’), this emphasis on the “impossible” is itself problematic, as it overlooks the practical nature of the human being who is engaged in everyday practices (including practices of the religious and philosophical variety). Derrida’s emphasis on the “impossible” has led to a rather hyperbolic understanding of the faith that is a feature of our experience, as Derrida conceives this faith in explicitly religious (or perhaps, rather dramatic ‘existentialist’) terms. For Derrida, our faith is directed towards the “impossible”, or what he terms the “messianic”. This rather hyperbolic conception of the “messianic” faith as a feature of human existence is developed in some of Derrida’s later work, such as \textit{The Gift of Death}. In this book, Derrida draws on Kierkegaard’s discussion of Abraham’s call to sacrifice his son, in order to deconstruct the distinction between the ‘ultimate’ faith required in the face of God’s demands, and the responsibility required by one’s community and human companions. Derrida notes how the events on Mount Moriah show how God, as \textit{tout autre}, demands absolute obedience, which requires Abraham to transcend, or even
transgress, his notion of moral or ethical behaviour, as he has learnt through his upbringing in a particular society. Abraham’s ‘radically singular’ decision, according to Derrida, is a moment of madness that must move beyond ‘calculative’ reasoning, even though this response might be considered irrational, or even irresponsible, in the eyes of his community. As Derrida says, “Abraham is at the same time, the most moral and the most immoral, the most responsible and the most irresponsible.”

Derrida is concerned to point out, however, that, rather than considering this extreme call of faith an anomalous experience, we should realise that all decisions can only be justified according to a similar ‘leap of faith.’ Derrida seems to think that we can level out all differences between different sorts of decisions and actions, in order to see them as variations of a rather extreme existential or religious experience. Yet although we might concede that a decision involves something of a ‘leap’ beyond the sum of total facts, do we necessarily always need to see this process as analogous to Abraham’s call to sacrifice his son, or the process of religious conversion in general? According to Derrida, this certainly is the case: the instant of a decision, he feels, must invoke that which is beyond a person’s control, and this is the ‘aporia’ that cannot be comprehended. The decision, like différance, is a process of difference and deferring, although eventually a ‘leap of faith’ must be made. What is always necessary, says Derrida, is a “movement of faith in the face of that which exceeds the limits of experience, knowledge, science, economy — and even philosophy.”

But why do we need think of our decisions and actions as requiring a religious or existentialist sort of ‘leap’? According to Derrida: “the concepts of responsibility, of decision, or of duty, are condemned a priori to paradox, scandal, and aporia. Paradox, scandal, and aporia are themselves nothing other than sacrifice, the revelation of conceptual thinking at its limit, at its death and finitude.” But what if we considered ‘faith’, not as the ‘paradox, scandal, and aporia’ of sacrifice, but rather as a more mundane faith in the form of life that is the horizon of our life experience, in which all decisions are made? This is a challenge that we will explore further below.

Despite the problems involved with his conception of the decision-making process, however, it is Derrida’s insistence on the “messianic” structure of existence that has led to the enthusiastic appropriation of his work by a number of theologians and religious believers, to the extent that it seems plausible for many of these believers to argue that

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842 The Gift of Death, p. 72.
843 Ibid., p. 30.
844 Ibid., p. 68.
the only way that ‘post-metaphysical’ philosophy can move forward, is to adopt an explicitly theological agenda – that is, an appeal to the “messianic” as the divine God of the Christian, or perhaps Jewish faiths. John Caputo and Richard Scanlon, for example, feel that Derrida’s appeal to the “messianic”, or to the “impossible”, means that “deconstruction is structured like a religion. Like a prayer... for the coming of the wholly other (tout autre), for something impossible, like a messianic prayer in a messianic religion... like a faith in the coming of something we cannot quite make out, a blind faith where knowledge fails.”

Caputo explains in an earlier work, how deconstruction, “turns on faith,” although this is “faith as non-knowing, on a certain delimitation of the power to determine cognitively a program or an ideal.” Derrida has found it necessary, he says, “to limit knowledge, to delimit and deconstruct any determinate philosophical or religious vision, any messianism, in order to make room for faith, for an open-ended messianic faith in the coming of something unforeseeable and undeconstructible.”

Deconstruction, he says, is “driven by a faith in the impossible and undeconstructible.” Truth itself, according to Caputo, “has been delimited in the name of faith, of a messianic faith in a nameless, unpresentable, undeconstructible justice, or gift.”

Although a consideration of ‘faith’ could provide a corrective to some rather problematic metaphysical pictures of ‘rationality’ as the grounds of justification; Derrida seems to have done himself a disservice in providing a very hyperbolic view of what this ‘faith’ looks like. Although Caputo believes that Derrida is concerned, not with the “determinable faiths of the various messianisms,” but with “the very structure of faith that inhabits everything we say and do... lying at the root of our most everyday practices,” it does not seem that this is the case. Derrida’s emphasis on the “text” of existence seems to overlook our situation in the world as embodied and practical human beings. Derrida fails to think the situatedness of thinking, the fact that all judgements, decisions etc, are not things that can be justified on the ‘non-grounds’ of ‘aporia’ (whatever this might mean), but on the actual grounds of our practical and material involvement in the world. It seems that, although Derrida is concerned to challenge the ‘logocentric’ idea that we can appeal to “Reason” as the grounds of our actions or decisions, he ends up providing us with a rather metaphysical alternative. Kevin Hart claims that Derrida’s work should be

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845 God, the Gift, and Postmodernism, p. 5.
846 Deconstruction in a Nutshell, p. 165.
847 Ibid., p. 166.
848 Ibid., p. 167.
understood as a "meta-philosophical remark about the nature of grounds,"\(^{849}\) because his work, says Hart, "is not an attack against reason or a systematic doubting of reason's claim upon us; but it is a questioning of the limits of reason from the viewpoint of the nature of reason, and its upshot is that a ground can be posited only if we acknowledge that it must be linked to a non-ground. Whether Derrida fastens upon 'reason', 'truth', 'arche' or 'ground', his point is the same: a discourse's condition of possibility is also, and at the same time, its condition of impossibility for being totalised.\(^{850}\) But what is this 'non-ground'? As we have already seen, Derrida critiques the 'grounds' of 'practical actuality' appealed to by Marx, as well as the 'grounds' of 'being-in-the-world' as appealed to by Heidegger. We argued, however, that the fact of our 'practical actuality' or our 'being-in-the-world', is not a 'metaphysical' description of human existence. It seems that Derrida's appeal to the 'non-grounds' of \textit{diff{é}rance} is far more metaphysical than what Heidegger or Marx (or Wittgesstein, Ryle, Bourdieu, etc.) are trying to show.

The rather metaphysical nature of Derrida's appeal to 'non-grounds' can be seen in his notion of \textit{khora}. While \textit{diff{é}rance} is the 'non-grounds' of metaphysical concepts (including concepts such as 'reason'), \textit{khora} is the 'non-grounds' of human interaction. As we will see, however, this is as metaphysical as its logocentrically 'grounded' predecessor. According to Derrida, \textit{khora} is the place – or the 'non-place' – of human interaction. Unlike Habermas, for example, who sees a faith in normative reason at work in human interaction, Derrida sees human interaction as characterised by a mutual faith in \textit{khora}. During his debate with Marion at the Villanova conference, Derrida explains: "I am trying to find a place where a new discourse and a new politics could be possible," and it is this 'place' that he calls \textit{khora}. He describes \textit{khora} as:

\begin{quote}
this place of resistance, this absolute heterogeneity to philosophy and the Judeo-Christian history of revelation, even to the concept of history, which is a Christian concept, is not simply at war with what it resists. It is also, if I may use this terrible word, a condition of possibility which makes history possible by resisting it. It is also a place of non-gift which makes the gift possible by resisting it. It is the place of non-desire. The \textit{khora} does not desire anything, does not give anything. It is what makes taking place or an event possible. But the \textit{khora} does not happen, does not give, does not desire. It is a spacing and absolutely indifferent.\(^{851}\)
\end{quote}

\(^{849}\) \textit{Trespass of the Sign}, p. 48.  
\(^{850}\) Ibid., p. 132.  
\(^{851}\) \textit{God, the Gift, and Postmodernism}, p. 76.
For Derrida, it is not ‘rationality’ that all people have in common, it is the khora that is the "absolutely universal place, so to speak, is what is irreducible to what we call revelation, revealability, history, religion, philosophy, Bible, Europe, and so forth." It is the khora, he says, that is the "condition for a universal politics, for the possibility of crossing the borders of our common context – European, Jewish, Christian, Muslim, and philosophical.” This ‘non-space’, says Derrida, is not something that can be “retranslated after the fact into Jewish discourse or Christian discourse or Muslim discourse”; what we need to ‘locate’, he says, is “another place for questions, in fact, the question of the place.”

But to what extent is Derrida really concerned with the question of place? That is, with place as the actual, material situation where we live out our daily lives? While Derrida sees our faith in transcendental différance, or khora, as the ‘condition of possibility which makes history’, a number of other philosophers consider the much more ‘mundane’ faith we have in our situatedness in a particular form of life, as the ‘bedrock’ of all our actions and decisions. For Wittgenstein, for example, the ultimately unjustifiable nature of our decisions does not require faith in khora, or the messianic possibility always to come. Far less hyperbolically, Wittgenstein points out that we have faith in the fact that there are some things that we simply do. It is not khora, or the messianic, that is the bedrock of our decisions, then; it is our practices as human beings situated in a certain form of life. It is to the far less ‘metaphysical’ proscriptions of those who have adopted an arguably more ‘sober’ praxeological approach to the problem, that we now turn.

7.2.2. The fiduciary grounds of reason: praxeological considerations

You must bear in mind that the language-game... is not based on grounds. It is not reasonable (or unreasonable). It is there – like our life.

Merleau-Ponty, like Derrida, also challenges the positing of ‘Reason’, seen as a sort of metaphysical ‘ground’; however, as we have seen in Chapter 5 above, it seems that Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenological work offers a helpful corrective to Derrida’s rather ‘metaphysical’ pictures of the way things are. As he states in his early Primacy of

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852 Ibid.
Perception, we cannot deny that there is something like ‘reason’, but this ‘reason’ must be studied as a phenomenon of human experience: there is still “a privilege of reason,” says Merleau-Ponty, “but precisely in order to understand it properly, we must begin by replacing thought amongst the phenomena of perception.”854 Like Derrida, Merleau-Ponty contrasts this metaphysical ground of ‘Reason’ to the ‘faith’ that is a feature of existence, although unlike Derrida, he does not see this faith in hyperbolic religious terms. For Merleau-Ponty, our inherence in the world is experienced through a ‘perceptual faith’, a faith that is perhaps the very opposite of the agonized Kierkegaardian ‘leap of faith’ that has been appropriated and defended by Derrida. Merleau-Ponty’s ‘perceptual faith’ is a type of commitment that is ‘always already’ made, it is part of our situation in the world, and, rather than requiring any existential ‘leap’, this faith is one that we are not in much danger of losing. Furthermore, although Merleau-Ponty is against the metaphysical pictures of ‘rationalism’, his emphasis on the fiduciary aspects of experience does not preclude ‘rational’ activities such as philosophical reflection: “It is a question not of putting the perceptual faith in place of reflection,” he says, “but on the contrary of taking into account the total situation, which involves reference from the one to the other. What is given is not a massive and opaque world, or a universe of adequate thought; it is a reflection which turns back over the density of the world in order to clarify it, but which, coming second, reflects back to it only its own light.”855 (This ‘clarifying’ function is one that we have identified with the praxeological approach, which seems to do a better job than its metaphysical predecessors).

In light of Wittgenstein’s work, too, it seems that Derrida holds a very peculiar picture of the fiduciary ‘non-grounds’ of human experience. While Wittgenstein is also aware of the limits of justifying our actions by appealing to a transcendent metaphysical ground such as ‘Reason,’ or even ‘God’, Wittgenstein would protest the “deconstruction of reason” through an appeal to what is essentially yet another metaphysical ground – that is, différence (or even khora). As Wittgenstein might say, both ‘Reason’, and Derrida’s challenge to reason, are as metaphysical as each other. For Wittgenstein, we do not need to appeal to something transcendent, or even transcendental, in order to justify our actions. As Wittgenstein explains: “Nothing we do can be defended absolutely and finally. But only by reference to something else that is not questioned. I.e. no reason can be given

855 *The Visible and the Invisible*, p. 35.
why you should act (or should have acted) like this, except that by doing so you bring about such and such a situation, which again has to be an aim you accept."\textsuperscript{856}

The only thing to which we can ultimately appeal in order to justify our actions or judgements, according to Wittgenstein, is the \textit{way we do things} within the ‘form of life’ in which we are situated and practically involved. As Wittgenstein notes: “justifying the evidence, comes to an end; – but the end is not certain propositions striking us immediately as true;” instead, he says, “it is our acting, which lies at the bottom of the language-game.”\textsuperscript{857} While someone like Marion, as we have seen, wants us to have faith in the “unthinkable Gift” as the condition of our thought and actions, Wittgenstein says we already have faith in the “given”, which is the forms of life in which we are always (already) situated and engaged: “What has to be accepted, the given,” says Wittgenstein, “is – so one could say – forms of life.”\textsuperscript{858} This form of life is not something that can be ‘doubted’, or declared ‘true’ or ‘false’, because it is the very condition of \textit{knowing} (or even doubting) anything at all. This form of life is the “inherited background against which I distinguish between true and false,”\textsuperscript{859} it is the ‘river-bed’ of my thoughts and actions; although Wittgenstein is loath to describe this ‘river-bed’ in metaphysical terms.

This ground of ‘certainty’ is not a certain foundational metaphysical principle; rather, “the end is not an ungrounded presupposition: it is an ungrounded way of \textit{acting}.”\textsuperscript{860} At the ‘bottom’, then, according to Wittgenstein, is not a metaphysical principle, or some sort of transcendent entity, but our \textit{practices} as living sociable human beings. It is at this point that we can say: “I have reached bedrock, then my spade is turned.”\textsuperscript{861} This ‘bedrock’ is that in which we have an implicit \textit{faith}, as human beings who are incarnately involved in a certain form of life. In \textit{On Certainty}, for example, Wittgenstein questions Moore’s statement that he \textit{knows} that these are his hands he is holding up in front of him. Wittgenstein does not challenge that this is knowledge that cannot be doubted; rather, he challenges that this is a form of \textit{knowledge} at all. Seeing one’s hands as \textit{hands}, for Wittgenstein, is not a matter of ‘knowledge’ – it is more like a \textit{background} against which we come to \textit{know} other things (although Polanyi might say that perhaps it is a form of “tacit knowledge”). Wittgenstein compares this background to the bed of a river, which

\textsuperscript{856} Wittgenstein, Ludwig. \textit{Culture and Value} (Oxford: Blackwell, 1980), 16e.
\textsuperscript{857} \textit{On Certainty}, §204
\textsuperscript{858} \textit{Philosophical Investigations}, §226e
\textsuperscript{859} \textit{On Certainty}, §94.
\textsuperscript{860} Ibid., §110.
\textsuperscript{861} \textit{Philosophical Investigations}, §217.
provides the support, and the context, in which claims to know various things have meaning, while it is important that the bed itself is not something we can know or doubt. In normal circumstances no sane person doubts how many hands he or she has. To even ask the question: "is this a hand?" presupposes that we know what a 'hand' is, which means that there is something that is not doubted in our enquiry into what we know: "the questions that we raise and our doubts depend on the fact that some propositions are exempt from doubt, are as it were like hinges on which those turn."\footnote{On Certainty, §341.} We give ourselves a false picture of doubt, says Wittgenstein, if we think that everything can be doubted, because "a doubt that doubted everything would not be a doubt."\footnote{Ibid., §249 and §450.}

There are certain things that we take for granted, in order to doubt anything at all, and we must be content with the assumption, says Wittgenstein, that, "if I want the door to turn, the hinges must stay put."\footnote{Ibid., §307.} Although it is possible to doubt certain things, and this is a necessary part of our daily life, we nevertheless hold certain 'fundamental' beliefs, or certain 'pictures of the world', that either we are not aware of, or else are so intrinsic a part of life, that they cannot be discarded lightly: "It is true that we can compare a picture that is firmly rooted in us to a superstition; but it is also equally true that we always eventually have to reach some firm ground, either a picture or something else, so that a picture which is at the root of our thinking is to be respected and not treated as a superstition."\footnote{Culture and Value, 83e.} Even beliefs which can be exposed as 'superstitious', in other words, exist only against a general background of other tacit beliefs and practices, that cannot themselves be judged as 'superstitious.' There comes a time, says Wittgenstein, when "I have arrived at the rock bottom of my convictions. And one might almost say that these foundation-walls are carried by the whole house," or the "scaffolding of our thoughts."\footnote{On Certainty, §248, & 211.}

For Wittgenstein, like Merleau-Ponty, there is no 'leap' of faith to be made, no 'paradox, scandal, or aporia' at the bottom of convictions, but simply a realisation that we can never surpass our involvement in practices and our situatedness in a particular form of life.

Michael Polanyi is also keen to point out the indispensable role that belief plays in our everyday life, as well as in our search for knowledge and truth. As he states in \textbf{Personal Knowledge}, we must "recognize belief once more as the source of all knowledge. Tacit assent and intellectual passions, the sharing of an idiom and of a cultural heritage,
affiliation to a like-minded community: such are the impulses which shape our vision of the nature of things on which we rely for our mastery of things. No intelligence, however critical or original, can operate outside such a fiduciary framework. According to Polanyi, then, we cannot deny the "fiduciary rootedness of all rationality." The subtitle of Polanyi’s work, “Towards a post-critical philosophy”, is intended to highlight the target of his critique as that type of 'critical philosophy' that has tried to eliminate, not only the personal dimension of knowledge, but also the fiduciary element of 'objective' practices such as science, which have tried to 'eliminate' the tacit aspects of knowledge, in order to appear more 'impersonal'. These two components are inextricably interconnected, as the tacit dimension of knowledge is both personal and fiduciary.

As Wittgenstein has pointed out, even the rationalist philosopher’s doubt of everything, is based on faith in something: "If you tried to doubt everything you would not get as far as doubting anything. The game of doubting itself presupposes certainty," and it is for this reason that the "reasonable man does not have certain doubts." Of course "learning is based on believing," says Wittgenstein; we learn things from the day we are born that we can never doubt, and these things constitute the form of life in which we are immersed. We need to realise the "groundlessness of our believing," says Wittgenstein, because, even at "the foundation of well-founded belief lies belief that is not founded." Even doubt, says Wittgenstein, "only works in a language-game," and learning a language-game is "only possible if one trusts something." Language-games are practices that consist of interwoven utterances and actions that find their home within a form of life. Even the 'language-game' of doubt, for example, relies on a faith, not only in the meanings of certain terms or words, but in language-games in general, as things that people do. Children trust the authority and guidance of their teachers and other elders, they do not even consider doubting their inculcation into certain language games, because "the child learns by believing the adult. Doubt comes after belief." How can a child, Wittgenstein asks, "immediately doubt what it is taught? That could mean only that he was

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867 Personal Knowledge, p. 266.
868 Ibid., p. 294.
869 Ibid., §115, & §20.
870 Ibid., §170.
871 Ibid., §166.
872 Ibid., §253.
873 Ibid., §24.
874 Ibid., §509.
875 Ibid., §160.
incapable of learning certain language games.” If a child were incapable of learning a language-game, in other words, we would not think him precociously intelligent, we would, instead, think that he might be suffering from some sort of disability.

It is this insight that is helpfully expressed in Wittgenstein’s discussion of rules and rule-following. Although we might be able to justify certain practices, at certain points, through an appeal to norms or rules, Wittgenstein points out that the practice of rule-following is something that cannot itself be taught by way of rules, since whoever is being trained to follow rules does not yet know what this involves. Why do I follow rules at all? Human beings are very good at ‘taking up’ practices and following them, this is just something that we do. Following or even obeying a rule, says Wittgenstein is a practice. We agree to follow certain rules because they are part of the ‘form of life’ that grounds our way of doing what we do. As Wittgenstein explains:

"How am I able to obey a rule?" – if this is not a question about causes, then it is about my justification for my following the rule in the way I do. If I have exhausted my justifications I have reached bedrock, and my spade is turned. Then I am inclined to say: "this is simply what I do."

The ‘rules’ that govern the ways we do things are very seldom written down: they are a feature of our involvement in particular practices within particular forms of life.

This understanding of ‘rules’ can be extended to a discussion of norms. The norms that guide our understandings of appropriate and inappropriate values, beliefs, attitudes and behaviours, are often ‘tacit’, rather than explicit. Even when norms or rules are explicit, then, Wittgenstein’s point is that this does not immediately explain why we follow them. There is no ‘rule’ in other words, to which we can appeal to explain ‘why we follow rules’ in the first place. As Wittgenstein states: "the game can be learned purely practically, without learning any explicit rules." Since we cannot get ‘behind’ a rule in order to explain it with another rule, we must settle on the notion that following a rule is not a matter of understanding or interpreting a rule, but is simply a way of proceeding. To teach someone to follow a rule means that examples must be employed to show the practice of rule-following. As Wittgenstein points out, "not only rules, but also examples are needed for establishing a practice. Our rules leave loop-holes open, and the practice

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876 Ibid., §283.
877 Ibid., §217
878 Philosophical Investigations, §202
879 On Certainty, §95.
has to speak for itself.\textsuperscript{880} We do not always follow rules or norms due to the threat of social disapproval or punishment; normative behaviour is usually what we understand as ‘proper’ or ‘correct’ conduct in certain situations, it has a feeling of ‘rightness’ about it. More often than not, we feel guilty if our behaviour deviates from the norm (unless we were deliberately challenging this norm), and this can be seen, for example, in the embarrassment experienced by someone who realises that he or she has committed a faux pas. It is our involvement in a certain form of life, then, that determines, not only what (and how) we know things, but also what (and how) we do things. We learn how to do the things we do through a process of learning that does not always involve being ‘taught’ in any explicit way. We are usually not usually explicitly aware of the reasons why we act the way we do. It just seems ‘right’, or the ‘way we do things’, and this is due to what Polanyi calls "tacit knowledge", or what Bourdieu would refer to as the habitus, that is, our manner of doing things in certain ways when we are engaged in certain practices. There is an element of normativity to the practices in which we are involved in everyday life, although we cannot always (or ever) fully explain why (or how) we do the things we do.

Polanyi, as we saw in Chapter 5 above, is concerned to point out that, "into every act of knowing there enters a tacit and passionate contribution of the person knowing what is being known, and that this coefficient is no mere imperfection, but a necessary component of all knowledge."\textsuperscript{881} This ‘tacit’ component is everything we have learnt and ‘incorporated’ since childhood, it is that “set of convictions acquired by our particular upbringing,” that decides “our adherence to a particular culture and sustains our intellectual, artistic, civic and religious deployment within its framework."\textsuperscript{882} It is this tacit component that allows us to ‘feel our way forward’, although it is the unspecifiability of the process by which we do this ‘forward-feeling’ that accounts for the possession by humanity “of an immense mental domain, not only of knowledge but of manners, of laws and of the many different arts which man knows how to use, comply with, enjoy or live by, without specifiably knowing their contents.”\textsuperscript{883} Our tacit beliefs “are not asserted and cannot be asserted, for assertion can only be made within a framework with which we have identified ourselves for the time being; as they are themselves our ultimate framework, they are

\textsuperscript{880} Ibid., §137.
\textsuperscript{881} Personal Knowledge, p. 312.
\textsuperscript{882} Ibid., pp. 203 & 264.
\textsuperscript{883} Ibid., p. 62.
essentially inarticulable.” As Polanyi notes: “In learning to speak, every child accepts a culture constructed on the premises of the traditional interpretation of the universe, rooted in the idiom of the group to which it was born, and every intellectual effort of the educated mind will be made within this frame of reference.”

But does this mean that, because we are all involved in different forms of life, and located in different situations, that any behaviour can therefore be justified by an appeal to the ‘form of life’ in which we are involved? This is an important and difficult question. However, it seems that the forms of life in which human beings are involved have their own structures of normativity, so that the involvement in any form of life would be accompanied by an implicit understanding of the ‘right’ or ‘wrong’ way of doing things. All ‘forms of life’ have a sense of ‘rationality’ or even ‘righteousness’ about the things they do and the way they do them, and we can only hope that this sense of ‘rationality’, which emerges from our attempts to skilfully cope in the world (which is a feature of all human existence), is something that all forms of life have in common. We are, after all, all situated in a world that is, amongst other things, natural and social, and we all attempt to ‘cope’ (or, more than this, to achieve certain things) in this world as proficiently as we can.

Our interaction with the social and natural environments, or the ‘fields’ in which our life activities take place, produces, as we have seen, a ‘logic’ that Bourdieu has called the “logic of practice.” As Bourdieu has noted, belief is an inherent part of belonging to a field; it is “the condition of entry that every field tacitly imposes, such as to obtain from them that undisputed, pre-reflexive, naïve, native compliance with the fundamental presuppositions of the field.” Belief, for Bourdieu, is necessary in the relationship of “immediate adherence that is established between a habitus and the field to which it is attuned, the pre-verbal taking-for-granted of the world that flows from practical sense.” There is thus a feeling of ‘logic’ to our beliefs, a feeling of ‘reasonableness’ to them in that they play an important part in our attempts to adeptly cope in the world in which we live our everyday lives. What Bourdieu calls “enacted belief” is that sort of belief that is ‘incorporated’, and “instilled by the childhood learning that treats the body as a living memory pad, an automaton that ‘leads the mind unconsciously along with it’, as a repository for the most precious values.” One could almost endlessly, says Bourdieu, “enumerate the values given body, made body, by the implicit pedagogy which can instil a

884 Ibid., p. 59.
885 Ibid., p. 112.
886 Logic of Practice, p. 68.
whole cosmology.” Because this ‘cosmology’ is tacit, however, we are often not aware of the beliefs and values we hold most dear (at least until these beliefs are challenged, when we encounter someone who has grown up subject to a different ‘implicit pedagogy’).

For the most part, we seem to have a sense of normativity about how to get on with other people; this is also a skill that we develop, or even a belief that we hold, that we do not need to question in our everyday dealings with people who are involved in different ‘forms of life’ to our own. ‘Getting on’ with other people is, in other words, part of our skilful coping in the world, and it is something that we either do more or less successfully. It seems that people from different ‘forms of life’ do manage to interact peacefully with each other, and it is a wonder that we have to refer to a certain metaphysical picture of ‘rationality’, or even khora, in order to explain this fact. For most of us, it is part of our everyday life, not only to encounter, but also to get on with, other people who are very different to ourselves. What seems strange and mysterious to philosophers, is something that just ‘happens’ in daily life.

Nevertheless, it is also a fact that sometimes people get on less well with each other than at other times. If we consider that our ability to get on with other people is itself a form of ‘tacit knowledge’ that we incorporate through our upbringing and our involvement with different people and practices, however, then it is equally possible that our opposition to another group or culture has also become a form of ‘tacit knowledge’. This incorporation of deeply-held beliefs in opposition to another group or culture, has been well-documented in modern times, as in the interaction between different groups in Northern Ireland, or the current situation in the Middle East. (Growing up in South Africa, a deeply incorporated negative attitude towards the ‘other’ was something I experienced – or at least witnessed – on a daily basis). The practices we engage in, the beliefs we hold, and the languages we speak, might not necessarily have been our choice (in the first instance), but if we consider how these are connected to a number of important beliefs, they often prove to be

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887 Ibid., p. 69.
888 On a personal note: Having worked in a tourist hostel for the past four years, this is something I have experienced on a daily basis. It is not unusual to have, for example, a Peruvian and an American sharing a room with a Korean and an Australian. While trying to think about questions such as the ‘relativism’ of cultures in this environment, it struck me what a false picture of human interaction many disciplines have provided us with. Regarding all the conversations I have witnessed (or been part of) between people from very different walks of life, it seems that such people manage quite well to get along; this is simply what people do, it is an aspect of our daily lives, and we can do it either more or less successfully.
a "matter of truth or error, of right or wrong – of life or death." This simple fact has profound implications:

Different vocabularies for the interpretation of things divide men into groups which cannot understand each other's way of seeing things and acting upon them. For different idioms determine different patterns of possible emotions and actions. If, and only if, we believe in witches may we burn people as witches; if, and only if we believe in God will we build churches; if we believe in master races we may exterminate Jews and Poles; if in class war, we may join the Communist Party; if in guilt, we may feel remorse and punish offenders.

Therefore, while "truth is something that can be thought of only by believing it," says Polanyi, our believing, "is conditioned at its source by our belonging." And our 'belonging', we could add, is articulated through the way we do things, or the practices in which we are involved. Furthermore, as Wittgenstein reminds us, even words such as 'wrong' or 'sinful', used against the practices or beliefs of another person or group, are words that we have learnt within our own particular form of life, which means that we are "using our language-game as a base from which to combat theirs." Of course, Wittgenstein notes, "there are all sorts of slogans which will be used to support our proceedings", but we cannot forget how often in history it happens that, where two principles really do meet which cannot be reconciled with one another, "then each man declares the other a fool and heretic.

This can be connected to the concerns of this thesis: the judgement against another community as 'idolatrous', for example, is based on the accuser's sense of righteousness, or faith in his form of life, and accompanied by a feeling of distaste for (or even hatred of!) the beliefs and practices of another group. No doubt the 'idolatrous' community would probably have a similar sense of righteousness about their own beliefs and practices. Nevertheless, this is not a 'metaphysical' problem, but a practical one, and it is one that is best pictured in a praxeological way. As Halbertal and Margalit have pointed out, the "boundary drawn by the prohibition against idolatry marks different territories, which depend simultaneously on different ideas of God and on different ideas of idolatry." And these different 'territories', as we have seen, are articulated by the practices of iconoclasts, and the so-called 'idolaters' that these iconoclasts have identified as deserving of their

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889 Personal Knowledge, p. 113.
890 Ibid.
891 Ibid., pp. 305 and 322.
892 Ibid., §609.
893 On Certainty, §610 and §611.
894 Idolatry, p. 241.
criticism. It is possible, say Halbertal and Margalit, to think of idolatrous (as well as iconoclastic) discourse as a 'language game'. Rather than trying to understand the different meanings of a word such as ‘God’, they say, we should see how the word ‘God’ is used in different situations or by different groups of people: “It is not a semantic investigation that is needed here,” they argue, “but a sociological investigation.”

Following some of Richard Rorty’s pragmatic suggestions, for example, Halbertal and Margalit observe that the question is not what religious speech, whether monotheistic or ‘pagan’, is about, but what sort of dialogue believers in one religion can conduct with believers in another religion, and especially “what are considered legitimate and illegitimate moves in such dialogues.” Thus, for example, Catholics can conduct dialogues with members of the High Anglican church more easily than with members of the Low Protestant church, and only with great difficulty can they conduct dialogues with Shi’ite Moslems. The contrasts between the types of understanding embodied in the two types of dialogue, they note, are based on different conventions, as things we have learnt to do:

There are dialogues that create a feeling of solidarity and commonality within a community and others that create a feeling of division and alienation. If the use of the names "Zeus" and "Jupiter" does not hinder the flow of discourse between Greek and Roman believers, then there is no reason not to identify them or consider them fully parallel to each other. In contrast, one would expect an absolute barrier in a dialogue between a monotheist and a pagan believer: “Allah” and “Ahriman” are names that create a division between Shiites and Zoroastrians in Iran. “There's no such thing”, is an expression of alienation, and not necessarily an ontological declaration.

It is this sort of insight: that is, that certain expressions can be attempts at ‘alienation’, rather than ‘ontological declarations’, that we can gain from a praxeological approach to things. For Wittgenstein, too, there are no ultimate (or ‘metaphysical’) reasons for having faith in one form of life over another; we are born into a social and historical situation that provides the grounds of everything we say and do, including the language games and practices through which we learn to make sense of this situation, and from where we make judgements against the 'forms of life' of others. This is equally applicable to our religious beliefs, which are not necessarily universal metaphysical truths, but are only understood as part of the form of life in which we have learned to believe certain things. Is this not,

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895 Ibid., p. 160.
896 They refer especially to his essay: “Is There a Problem about Fictional Discourse?” in Consequences of Pragmatism (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982, pp. 110-139)
897 Ibid.
898 Ibid.
asks Wittgenstein, "like the way one can instruct a child to believe in a God, or that none
exists, and it will accordingly be able to produce apparently telling grounds for the one or
the other?" According to Wittgenstein, then, even concepts such as 'God' rely on the
practices in which they are articulated, in order to make sense: "How do I know that two
people mean the same thing when each says he believes in God?" he asks, only to come to
the conclusion that: "It is only practice gives the words their sense."

According to a praxeological approach, then, there is no 'ideal rational' position to
which we can compare conflicting opinions. We also cannot forget, says Wittgenstein, that,
"what men consider reasonable or unreasonable alters. At certain periods men find
reasonable what at other periods they found unreasonable. And vice-versa." This is not
to say, however, that critical judgements cannot be made against things that we believe
are unreasonable. Sometimes it is altogether necessary to make a judgement against
'unreasonable' actions: to avoid 'irrational' behaviour is, after all, also an important part of
our skilful coping in everyday life. Nevertheless, we cannot forget that to call something or
someone 'irrational' is a judgement that is made from 'where we stand', as it were, and
from this perspective, we cannot appeal to some metaphysical ground of "Reason" that
somehow transcends human reality. It is this appeal to a transcendent 'Reason', conceived
in metaphysical terms, that has resulted in the arrogant view that some cultures have a
more privileged access to this 'Reason' than others (and hence are in a position to make
judgements about the 'rationality' of others). The only way to see whether or not the idea
of 'reason' is universal is to see whether other cultures have similar concepts that we
might use to translate this idea. We might find that there are a family of concepts that
mean something like 'rationality', although each of these concepts might be employed
differently depending on the form of life in which it is found. It is possible, however, that
people from most cultures are able to judge whether or not a certain action or practice is
' rational', as we understand the word, in that there seems to be a normativity to our
practical involvement in the world, and this is a 'universal' feature of being human.

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900 Culture and Value, 85e. We can see a significant difference here between Wittgenstein's and
Derrida's conception of religious difference, in that, while, for Derrida, our concept of "God" is subject
to différance, for Wittgenstein, our concept of "God" is something we learn through our involvement in
specific religious practices, or our involvement in a certain 'form of life' in general.
901 On Certainty, §336.
7.3. An iconoclastic critique of 'faith': the Dawkins delusion?

We have seen throughout this thesis how iconoclasm, originally understood as a reaction against the idolatry of pagans, has been appropriated as a category of critique by philosophers and other social and cultural critics, in order to judge what could be described as ‘idolatrous’ ways of thinking, or ‘idolatrous’ ways of engaging in a number of other activities or practices. We have also seen how religion itself has been accused of fostering some rather ‘idolatrous’ pictures of the human condition. It is this iconoclastic critique of religion, or the concept of “God” in particular, that connects Dawkins to some other famous ‘atheists’, such as Feuerbach, Nietzsche, and even Marx. As we have seen, however, Marx is not critical of religion, so much as he is critical of the alienation that characterises an economic system based on misguided ideologies and the exploitation of other human beings. Terry Eagleton actually believes that “Marx, who describes religion as the ‘heart of a heartless world, the soul of soulless conditions’, was rather more judicious and dialectical in his judgment on it than the lunging, flailing, mispunching Dawkins.”

As we have hopefully made clear in previous chapters, there are some similarities between Marx’s iconoclasm and the attitude towards idolatry found in the Hebrew scriptures, even though Marx’s critique of religion is executed from a supposedly ‘atheistic’ perspective.

Eagleton has lambasted Dawkins for understanding the religious concepts he is attacking insufficiently to engage with them effectively. “Card-carrying rationalists like Dawkins,” says Eagleton, are probably the “least well-equipped to understand what they castigate, since they don’t believe there is anything there to be understood, or at least anything worth understanding. This is why they invariably come up with vulgar caricatures of religious faith that would make a first-year theology student wince.” Although we do not want to do away with the notion of ‘rationality’ altogether, it is important not to see ‘rationality’ as an ideal state or ground which justifies our actions and decisions. Our judgements against things or practices as either more or less ‘reasonable’, as we have discussed, depends on ‘where we stand’ as human beings who are situated in particular groups or forms of life. Of course, we can appeal to certain ideals, or certain ideal pictures

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902 Eagleton, op. cit.
903 Ibid. Eagleton actually compares Dawkins’ attack on religion as being “rather like those right-wing Cambridge dons who filed eagerly into the Senate House some years ago to non-placet Jacques Derrida for an honorary degree. Very few of them, one suspects, had read more than a few pages of his work, and even that judgment might be excessively charitable.”
of ‘how things ultimately are’, or ‘how things ultimately should be’, but we should realise that different ideals work in different ways for different people.

Saying that, however, it seems that having, or defending ideals, is itself a fundamental feature of being human. Not only do we have an implicit faith in the ‘bedrock’ of our activities, that is, the form of life in which we are involved; but our faith in the norms and values of this form of life is extended to include our faith in more explicit ideological systems, including religious ones. The particular ideals and ideologies we have faith in might differ, but the fact that we have faith in ideals or ideologies, is something that we all have in common. This is a feature of our lived experience: we attempt to configure and make sense of our experiences through the stories we tell and the pictures we paint, whether through philosophy, religion, science, art, literature, and a host of other cultural pursuits. We all have different pictures that are produced through our practical engagement in the world and that have a meaning-making function. The praxeological approach itself has the function of providing a better picture of reality, as well as pointing out that living human beings produce stories and pictures in order to make sense of their experiences. As Andrew Rawnsley explains:

> With the turn to life as it is lived, with the Lebenswelt of Husserl, or the Lebensformen of Wittgenstein, the flux of human lived experience is for the first time taken as a fundamental. Moreover, what is ‘fundamental’ is not a singular, closed structure or principle, but a complex that is plural, diverse and open-ended. One of the ramifications of this is that although we may appear to know from science that physical matter is really made up of atoms, molecules and particles, or that the universe is a vast and indifferent vessel in which human beings are an inconsequent, accidental and minor element, what is of significance is that our lived experience is not of this kind. The microscopic levels of biology and physics, the macroscopic levels of astronomy and cosmology are, in the end, abstract views of reality which may serve to explain underlying causes and factors of matter and biological life, or the vast matrix of modern cosmology, but they do not explain our experiential or lived life.\textsuperscript{904}

This is something that we might say in reply to Dawkins: although his scientific view might offer us a certain abstract picture of the universe and our place in it, this picture does not, at the end of the day, describe our experiential or lived life; that is, the very complex and complicated life which human beings try to make sense of in a number of different ways. The massive paradox at the heart of the formulation of microscopic and macroscopic explanations of reality, says Rawnsley, “is that these explanatory frameworks are themselves posited within another framework, that of the… common world in which we live

\textsuperscript{904} Roots to Rites, p. 190.
our lives, the world of our *environment* as we *experience* it, the character of our *localities*, something which we encounter in our everyday intercourse and involvements.\footnote{Ibid., p. 191.}

It is this ‘common world’ of our ‘environment as we experience it’, that the praxeological approach hopes to bring to light. It is this world that ‘macroscopic’ and ‘microscopic’ explanations of reality seem to have overlooked. This is something that Ingold has also picked up from a ‘dwelling perspective’. Drawing on Heidegger, Ingold explains how science seeks to describe and explain a world which the rest of us are preoccupied with living in, although the scientist, like everyone else, is a being-in-the-world, and scientific practice, as any other skilled activity, draws unselfconsciously upon the available. Thus even science, says Ingold, “however detached and theoretical it may be, takes place against a background of involved activity,” and in this sense, the idea that a scientist is totally disengaged from the world is nothing more than “a pure fiction.”\footnote{Perception of the Environment, p. 169.}

There are a multitude of ways and means through which people make sense of their life experiences, and it is important to note that this sense-making process does not necessarily rely on ‘scientific evidence’ in order to be declared ‘true’ or ‘false’. What scientific explanations often overlook, is that there are a *variety of ways* of making sense of our experiences, and that there is no one explanation that will fulfil this sense-making function successfully for every single person on the planet. Dawkins is therefore rather arrogant to think that his particular scientific account of reality is the *only* way that we can meaningfully configure our experiences as human beings. This is not to say that religious believers do not rely on ‘evidence’ or ‘factual proof’ of any sort to justify their beliefs, it is simply to say that an appeal to scientific evidence is only one very particular form of ‘justification’, and our existential beliefs about who we are might not require this sort of justification in order to be significant or meaningful. ‘Justification’ is a complex concept, and there is a large family of cases about which we might say that we are “justifying” something (think of the difference, for example, between ‘justifying’ one’s actions in a moral sense, and ‘justifying’ a scientific theory through an appeal to evidence). This is something that is picked up by Eagleton, who points out that “we hold many beliefs that have no unimpeachably rational justification, but are nonetheless reasonable to entertain.”\footnote{Eagleton, op. cit.}

Only positivists, says Eagleton, think that ‘rational’ means ‘scientific’. To claim that science and religion pose different questions to the world, “is not to suggest that
if the bones of Jesus were discovered in Palestine, the pope should get himself down to the
dole queue as fast as possible,” says Eagleton; rather, it is “to claim that while faith,
rather like love, must involve factual knowledge, it is not reducible to it.”

By understanding faith as something irreducible to factual knowledge, says Eagleton, we can
see how, “even Richard Dawkins lives more by faith than by reason.”

The theologian Alister McGrath is very critical of Dawkins’ belief that the elimination
of religion would provide us with a perfectly ‘rational’ society. As McGrath asks: “Suppose
Dawkins were to have his way, and that religion were to be eradicated. Would that end the
divisions within humanity? Certainly not.”

When a society rejects the idea of God, says
McGrath, it “merely transcendentalizes alternatives – such as the ideals of liberty or
equality. These now become quasi-divine authorities, which none are permitted to
challenge.”

We cannot forget, says McGrath, the way in which ‘God’ was replaced by
transcendentalised human values during the French Revolution, or, we could add, the
atrocities that have been committed in the name of Marxism. What we need to remember,
he says, is that all ideals, whether “divine, transcendent, human, or invented – are capable
of being abused.”

Yet, just because ideals are capable of being abused, this does not
mean that they always are abused. The belief in ideals, as we have already discussed, is a
feature of being human, and as McGrath states, “we need to work out what to do about it
when ideals are abused, “rather than lashing out uncritically at religion.”

It seems that one ideal that is ‘capable of being abused’ is the scientific view of the
universe that Dawkins himself defends. Eagleton points out, for example, that it is
‘rationalist’ critics of religion who usually end up being “devotees of that bright-eyed
superstition known as infinite human progress, for which Dawkins is a full-blooded
apologist.” (Does this mean, Eagleton asks, that, “aside from a few local, temporary
hiccups like ecological disasters, famine, ethnic wars and nuclear wastelands, History is
perpetually on the up?”) Dawkins’ polemic, says Eagleton, would come rather more
convincingly from a man who was “a little less arrogantly triumphalistic about science.”

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( Michael Polanyi is also particularly astute on this point: It is clear, he says, that those who
advocate science as a general solvent of error and a cure for all fanaticism, “want their

908 Ibid.
909 Ibid.
911 Ibid.
912 Ibid.
913 Ibid.
914 Eagleton, op. cit.
own beliefs to be taught to children and accepted by everybody, for they are convinced that this would save the world from error and strife."915) If Dawkins really wants us to question everything, says Eagleton, then why not question "science, objectivity, liberalism, atheism and the like?" The questioning of 'science' and the notion of 'objectivity' is something that Polanyi has done at length. The attempt to free science from 'belief', says Polanyi, has had devastating consequences, especially since belief has been so thoroughly discredited that, "apart from specially privileged opportunities, such as may be still granted to the holding and profession of religious beliefs, modern man lost his capacity to accept any explicit statement as his own belief."916 It has been taken for granted, says Polanyi, that the acceptance of unproven beliefs is the "broad road to darkness," and that the elimination of such belief will "leave behind unassailed a residue of knowledge that is completely determined by the objective evidence."917 Rather than leading to 'truth', however, Polanyi feels that the objectivist attitude to science has in fact disregarded the faith-based grounds of our being able to know anything at all. The objectivist attitude has, to a large extent, "totally falsified our conception of truth, by exalting what we can know and prove, while covering up with ambiguous utterances all that we know and cannot prove, even though the latter knowledge underlies, and must ultimately set its seal to, all that we can prove."918

The objectivist attitude does not liberate us from the constraints of 'belief', says Polanyi; rather, it seeks to "relieve us from all responsibility for the holding of our beliefs. That is why it can be logically expanded to systems of thought in which the responsibility of the human person is eliminated from the life and society of man."919 This scientific approach has, he feels, eliminated the personal element in scientific knowledge, and failed to realise that 'knowledge' is something that is important for human beings. Instead of 'liberating' man from the shackles of 'religion', then, Polanyi feels that "modern scientism fetters thought as cruelly as ever the churches had done. It offers no scope for our most vital beliefs and it forces us to disguise them in farcically inadequate terms. Ideologies framed in these terms have enlisted man's highest aspirations in the service of soul-destroying tyrannies."920 Of course, it is not only science, or religion for that matter, that is

915 Personal Knowledge, p. 297.
916 Ibid., p. 267.
917 Ibid.
918 Ibid., p. 286.
919 Ibid.
920 Ibid., p. 265.
responsible for fostering ‘soul-destroying tyrannies.’ There are a number of ideological candidates for this crime, and it is our task as iconoclastic thinkers to be aware of the dangers of any unchecked belief becoming a ‘soul-destroying tyranny’ (or having some slightly less dramatic outcome, which we are nevertheless called to criticise). It should be noted that it is not the human need for ideals that is problematic; it is when certain ideals function in a ‘soul destroying’ way, that we have a major problem on our hands.

Once again, then, it seems that we come to the idea of idolatry as a wrong or sinful practice. Even idolatry of the ‘conceptual’ variety is something that cannot be detached from the practices of the human being who holds certain troublesome beliefs. Beliefs, in other words, do not exist ‘in the head’ of the believer: beliefs are articulated through our behaviour and the things we do in everyday life. If we believe that forms of life, as ways of living that have developed as part of our attempts to skilfully cope in the world, have a sense of ‘normativity’, or even ‘rationality’ about them, however, then we must realise that the same applies to the forms of life in which other people are engaged. Just as our own sense of ‘righteousness’ is ‘in-formed’ by our involvement in a certain form of life, so we find a similar sense of righteousness in the lives of others, who might live in a totally different way to us. This is not to say that we cannot criticise the actions of others – on the contrary, it seems that this is something that we are very skilled at doing. Just as we are predisposed to value certain things (or even worship certain things), so it seems we are predisposed to challenge the values and beliefs of others. For the most part, we are convinced of the rationality of our own actions, and we are quite skilled, if pushed, to justify why we see ourselves as rational human beings. It is only when we encounter a sense of ‘rationality’ different to our own, that we are forced to question whether or not there is a ‘common ground’ for people to be able to get along.

The fact is that, in tricky ethical situations, there can be a great deal of ‘reasonableness’ in totally different positions, although this does not mean that a ‘reasonable’ solution cannot be found. In situations such as this, however, the attempt to find this ‘solution’ can be a slow and painstaking process (and even then, there is no guarantee that all members of each party will think that the solution is totally ‘reasonable’). Nevertheless, as human beings who share a living environment (whether on a local and global scale), it seems ‘reasonable’ to want to get on as best we can. And this ‘getting on’ is not a metaphysical, but a pragmatic issue, concerning our ability, as well as our need, to cope as skilfully as we can in a world that we share with other people. Our
faith in our form of life, in certain people, and in certain beliefs, values, and ways of doing things, ‘comes with the territory,’ as it were, although the important fact is that this is something that everyone has in common. Although we might be saying somewhat different things, what we all have in common is that our beliefs and values are heavily influenced by the ‘form of life’ into which we are born, or in which we choose to become involved. We all speak from ‘where we stand’, and there is nothing much we can do about this, as it is a fundamental feature of being human. Polanyi feels, for example, that, rather than being an impediment to personal responsibility, we should consider these “accidents of personal existence as the concrete opportunities for exercising our personal responsibility.”

It is not a constraint, says Polanyi, but a liberation, "to realize that we can voice our ultimate convictions only from within our convictions – from within the whole system of acceptances that are logically prior to any particular assertion of our own, prior to the holding of any particular piece of knowledge." Although we might all be situated in different locations, and engaged in different forms of life, what is nevertheless common to all human beings is the fact that we are situated in locations, and engaged in certain forms of life. To ask how I would think if I were brought up outside any particular society, says Polanyi, "is as meaningless as to ask how I would think if I were born in no particular body, relying on no particular sensory and nervous organs." Nevertheless, we should never forget that this ‘embodiment’ (both cultural and physical) is something that we all have in common, and it perhaps here, as one place amongst others, that we might find some ‘common ground’ – in a totally non-metaphysical sense – between ourselves, and everyone else involved in the very complex and variegated practices of being human. It is by remembering that we always ‘speak’ from ‘where we stand’ that we might avoid the idolatrous attempts to impose ourselves, our words, our beliefs, or our practices, onto those who ‘speak’ from places different to our own. It is, after all, the attempt to make, not only God, but also other people, in our own image, that could be described as a form of ‘idolatry’. And this is something we must avoid at all costs.

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921 Ibid., p. 322.
922 Ibid., p. 267.
923 Ibid., p. 323.
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