

Article

Desire for Purity and Inevitable Contamination: Derrida and Prayer

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Abstract: The aim of this paper is to understand the reasons underlying Derrida's interest in the phenomenon of prayer. The article traces the different directions taken by the topic in the over forty-year long reflection of the philosopher. I start off by highlighting the dichotomic structure around which Derrida lays out his entire analysis of prayer, describing it, in general terms, as an opposition between determination and indetermination: on the one side, the multiple concrete manifestations of prayer; on the other, the possibility of a pure address to the other as other, not marked by metaphysics. I proceed by examining the qualities of what Derrida calls the "pure prayer", or "prayer in itself", in direct contrast with the praising prayer. The issue concerning the autonomy and the specificity of this indeterminate act of addressing is especially taken into consideration. The fundamental question remains whether a pure prayer is truly conceivable, or whether its contamination is as inevitable as necessary for the actual possibility of religion, theology, and prayer itself.

Keywords: prayer; Derrida; metaphysics; ontotheology; praise; Heidegger



Citation: Pietrogrande, Filippo. 2022. Desire for Purity and Inevitable Contamination: Derrida and Prayer. *Religions* 13: 1133. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel13121133>

Academic Editor: Olga Louchakova-Schwartz

Received: 17 October 2022
Accepted: 21 November 2022
Published: 23 November 2022

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1. Dichotomies of Prayer

The emergence of Derrida's interest in the phenomenon of prayer can be traced in the debate concerning the affinity between what the tradition has called "negative theology" and what the philosopher calls "*différance*". This is confronted in texts such as "How to Avoid Speaking: Denials" (Derrida 1992a) and "Post-Scriptum: Aporias, Ways and Voices" (Derrida 1992b). Different reasons justify the suspicion of this affinity: the deployment of the same rhetoric strategy recurring to a series of negative locutions in order to break down the apparent solidity of propositional language (Derrida [1972] 1982, p. 6); the shared risk of a metaphysical re-appropriation of the two discourses, because of the necessary recourse to a language that inevitably remains immersed in the element of the logic and the grammar of onto-theology (Derrida [1972] 1982, p. 26; 1992a, p. 79); the enigmatic character of the heading "negative theology" and the unknown resources that it may hide, which could put it in contact with the equally enigmatic "*différance*" (Derrida 1992a, pp. 82, 131; 1992b, pp. 288, 311). Only one element, instead, seems to justify a clear distinction between the two discourses: prayer. One does not pray to *différance*, whereas one needs to invoke the divinity in order to be uplifted to the mystical summits. The deconstructionist rhetoric lacks a devotional horizon within its procedures; the apophatic rhetoric, on the contrary, must be guided by a prayer which gives purpose to the otherwise empty raving of its mechanical negations (Derrida 1992a, pp. 81, 103, 110). Starting from this rather specific indication, the problem of prayer gains space in the reflection of Derrida. It progressively takes different directions and comes to assume a certain autonomy with respect to its point of emergence. The aim of this paper is to trace these different paths and understand the underlying reasons and purposes supporting this interest in the phenomenon of prayer.

One of these directions falls within the context of a certain religious fervor of Derrida and is of particular interest to us, insofar as it appears as the symptomatic expression of a fundamental problem for his entire reflection on prayer. Especially in the last years

of Derrida's academic activity, the theme of prayer has frequently been tied to details of biographical character. Following, in particular, some rather enigmatic statements in "Circumfession" (Derrida 1999), questions have multiplied with regard to the philosopher's private experience of prayers and tears (Derrida 1999, p. 188), as an Arab-Jew who, in his own admission, may quite rightly pass for an atheist (Derrida 1999, p. 155). On different occasions, Derrida was then asked to elaborate on whether, in his prayers, he referred to someone in particular or no one at all, whether he demanded and expected anything (Caputo et al. 2005, p. 28), and whether he used or simply mentioned the name of God (Dooley 2003, pp. 29–31).

This biographical declination of the subject, with all the curiosity that it has fomented within and outside the academic world, hides a rather essential issue for our analysis. At a strictly textual level, this issue initially imposes itself as the difficulty of identifying, within Derrida's production, a clear boundary between what relates to his *personal practice* of prayer and what, instead, relates to his *theoretical account* of prayer. By generally treating the two accounts separately, scholars have at least tacitly assumed a clear-cut distinction between practice and theory: on the one side, Derrida's practice of prayer in "Circumfession" (Derrida 1999, p. 188), on the other, Derrida's philosophical account of prayer in "How to Avoid Speaking" (Derrida 1992a, pp. 110–11) and in *The Beast and the Sovereign* (Derrida 2011, pp. 202–30). Rightly so, at least inasmuch as one can maintain that there is no strict relation between the "personal" and the "philosophical"; that the biographical context of Derrida as a man of prayers and the philosophical context of an analysis on the nature of the phenomenon do not, in any straightforward way, influence each other. The insistence on this divergence might be at least partially founded on the fear of falling into some sort of biographical fallacy, that is to say, of misguidedly tracing a link between the ensemble of empirical accidents which come to constitute the author's life and the meaning of his written production.

This fallacy, however, might find in the figure of the Algerian philosopher quite a strong opponent. For, at a deeper analysis, it is not always evident where exactly one should or could draw this dividing line. Throughout most of his texts and public responses, Derrida tends to often conflate autobiographical details and philosophical reflections. For instance, in responding publicly to questions related to his personal experience of prayer, he clearly refers to some features of what, in his theoretical analysis in "How to Avoid Speaking", he describes as "prayer in itself" or "pure prayer" (Caputo et al. 2005, pp. 29–31; Derrida 1992a, pp. 110–11). At the same time, however, in the midst of "How to Avoid Speaking" he cares to point out how this lecture might indeed represent "the most 'autobiographical' speech [he has] ever risked" (Derrida 1992a, p. 135).

Upon a closer look, in fact, it would seem that, in Derrida's analysis of prayer, a clear-cut divergence between his personal practice (*his own* prayer) and his philosophical gesture (prayer *in itself*) is very hard to maintain. This does not mean in any way that Derrida is proposing a theory on which one could or should model a practice; or, on the contrary, that he is extrapolating a theory from his own personal practice. Certainly, the two aspects are frequently weaved together in his texts, to the point where it is often hard to distinguish one from the other. Nevertheless, upon a closer look, it is not a matter of an absolute juxtaposition of theory and practice, according to a simplistic overturning of a sharp divergence. It is rather a matter of a tension, a mutual contamination—or, in Derrida's words, of a *mobile border* that cuts through the two "bodies" (the works, "*le corpus*", and the body, "*le corps*") without the possibility of any suture (Derrida 1984, pp. 40–41).

Something important is at stake here. We have highlighted this tension starting from the difficulty of tracing a line, within Derrida's written production, between the personal practice of prayer and the theoretical account of prayer. However, to what extent does this mixture of practice and theory remain restricted to the "superficial" level of a textual analysis of the philosopher's body of work? To be more precise: to what extent is this tension interpretable as the simple by-product of the philosophical style he employs (with its typical textual swerves, its plurality of voices, its performative character, its lack of any

systematic intent, and its increasingly deconstructive gesture)? To what extent, instead, does not this mutual contamination of biography and philosophy, practice and theory—or, in other words, determination and indeterminateness, empirical and ideal—perhaps invade the whole territory of the question on prayer?

Indeed, much like the proverbial tip of the iceberg, the purely textual problematic we have just exposed seems to represent solely the more noticeable part of the issue. On closer scrutiny, the entire Derridean discourse on prayer is built around a set of apparent dichotomies. These can be interpreted as nothing more than a series of variations on the overarching theme of the practice-theory binary opposition. Let us list them right away: Derrida's own private experience of prayer, and prayer in its essence; the predicative character of the praising prayer, and the pragmatic apostrophe of prayer in itself (Derrida 1992a, pp. 110–11); prayer to “you as . . .”, and prayer to “you” (Derrida 1992a, p. 110); prayers quoted by Dionysius (Derrida 1992a, pp. 116–17), Robinson Crusoe and Pascal (Derrida 2011, pp. 70–82, 209–14), and the pure prayer on the edge of silence (Derrida 1992a, p. 130); inauthentic prayer, and authentic prayer (Derrida 2011, pp. 80, 204); prayer in a strong sense, and prayer in a weak sense (Derrida 2011, p. 203). Far from constituting the simple outcome of a stylistic choice, these dichotomies rather seem to signal that “the immense and undelimitable question of prayer” (Derrida 2011, p. 231) is always already inscribed within a seemingly irresolvable tension.

The issue that on the surface manifests itself as the limit between Derrida's biography and Derrida's philosophical insight, thus, seems to impose itself in more radical terms. On the one hand, *a* prayer (or the different prayers) which, according to the philosopher, remains inevitably entangled in the onto-theological grammar of language: this prayer is a form of articulate discourse which cannot avoid speaking *of* the other to whom it turns. On the other hand, *the* pure prayer (or prayer *in itself*), in whose essentially pre-predicative structure Derrida, at times, sees the possibility of overcoming the boundary imposed by the metaphysical regime of discourse: this prayer is a pre-discursive moment of pure address *to* the other as other.

However, what do these dichotomies of prayer actually represent? Once again, one needs to comprehend whether it is possible to trace a clear distinguishing line between these two prayers. That is to say, whether one can really imagine a pure experience of prayer devoid of any singular determinations, capable of respecting the absolute alterity of the other. Could there actually be something like a *pure* prayer, a prayer *in itself*, *in its essence*, separate from its multiple determinations? Or, on the contrary, could not the essence of prayer be an unavoidable slippage into determination (prayer of this or that human being, with these or those words, according to this or that rite)? Following the issue of textual analysis from which we have started this reflection, one could even risk this question: would not prayer always be contaminated by the factuality of a biography? Derrida himself seems to acknowledge as much when, at the end of “How to Avoid Speaking”, calling into question his previous analysis of what he denominated as a “pure experience of prayer”, he asks:

Are there criteria external to the event itself to decide whether Dionysius, for example, distorted or rather accomplished the essence of prayer by quoting it, and first of all by writing it to Timothy? Does one have the right to think that, as a pure address, on the edge of silence, alien to every code and to every rite, hence to every repetition, prayer should never be turned away from its part by a notation or by the movement of an apostrophe, by a multiplication of addresses? That each time it takes place only once and should never be recorded? But perhaps the contrary is the case. Perhaps there would be no prayer, no pure possibility of prayer, without what we glimpse as a menace or as a contamination: writing, the code, repetition, analogy or the—at least apparent—multiplicity of addresses, initiation. (Derrida 1992a, pp. 130–31)

We shall, for now, keep these questions open and comprehend them in their depth while exploring Derrida's analysis of prayer. In any case, the conclusion of “How to Avoid

Speaking" looks as much cautious as straightforward, insofar as it does nothing more than reiterate the fundamental justification of the deconstructive gesture: where there appears to be a contrast, an opposition, a divergence, it is necessary to unveil an interdependence. The dichotomies of prayer do not express a dualistic exclusion; on the contrary, they reveal an essential complementarity.

2. The Apostrophe of Prayer

Derrida's analysis of prayer develops from and constantly revolves around a seemingly undecidable play between two kinds of prayer: one more determinate, as a practiced and lived act; the other more indeterminate, as a pure form of addressing. The consistency and the autonomy of the second is briefly questioned at the end of "How to Avoid Speaking". At first, however, Derrida seems at least persuaded by the possibility of a pure and exclusive experience of prayer, uncontaminated by any theological or metaphysical determinations. According to this possibility, the dichotomies of prayer would not result in a dialectic complementarity, but rather in some sort of privilege assigned to an "idealistic" form of the discourse. The undecidable play would then be resolved at the very moment of its manifestation. Prayer, in its essence, by way of a pure address to the other as other, would represent a form of pragmatic discourse capable of overcoming the limits imposed by the metaphysical grammar. Only an improper contamination would make this pure address stray from the right path.

This privilege is fairly evident in the way Derrida introduces the topic of prayer halfway through the lecture "How to Avoid Speaking". At this moment, the examination of the subject is described as an attempt to distinguish and isolate two traits "in the experiences and in the so manifold determinations of what one calls prayer" (Derrida 1992a, p. 110). However, it soon becomes clear that these two traits belong to radically different levels or moments. Derrida introduces the first one as follows: "In every prayer there must be an address to the other as other [. . .]. The act of addressing oneself to the other as other must, of course, mean praying" (Derrida 1992a, p. 110). On the one hand, then, the multiple determinations of what one generally calls "prayer": prayer of this or that person, to this or that deity, with this or that purpose, accompanied by these or those words, inscribed within this or that rite, enriched with these or those acts. On the other hand, before or beyond these determinations, the core of prayer, the address to the other as other that characterizes every prayer: what Derrida calls "pure prayer", "prayer in itself", "prayer in its essence" (*euché* in Greek), or simply, "prayer". Strictly speaking, then, it is not really a matter of distinguishing between traits. Or better, one can distinguish between traits—portions, features, elements—only from a perspective of manifold determinations of prayer. A trait of prayer would then be the singular qualification differentiating one prayer from the other. At this moment, however, it is exactly this perspective that Derrida is attempting to abandon. The first "trait", in fact, characterizes not just one prayer or the other, but rather every prayer. The address to the other as other is identified with prayer in itself: it is prayer *as such*. It is then evident that if this act of addressing oneself to the other is the matrix of every prayer, only what will supplement it and determine it can rightly be called a trait of prayer. Accordingly, the second trait, which is identified with the praise or encomium (*hymnein*) exemplarily found in Dionysius' *The Mystical Theology*, will be defined by Derrida as an addendum of prayer in itself.

Before delving into the peculiar determination of the encomium, let us first try to understand what characterizes "prayer in itself". Derrida briefly describes it as the unmediated linguistic act of "addressing oneself to the other as other [. . .], that is, asking, supplicating, searching out" (Derrida 1992a, p. 110); the condition of this outward movement being solely the possibility of a receptiveness on the side of the addressee. Perhaps—he claims—even beyond all that can be begged for, prayer in itself only asks for the giving of the other's presence and transcendence: "The pure prayer demands only that the other hear it, receive it, be present to it, be the other as such, a gift, call, and even cause of prayer" (Derrida 1992a, p. 110). As such, this act of language—whether prayer is uttered or kept silent—is purely

pragmatic and, thus, exempted from any theoretical (true or false, affirmative or negative), or theological conditions of discourse. This pure experience of prayer is, thus, defined by three tightly intertwined constitutive features: an address to the other as other; a demand for the other's presence and transcendence; and the character of pure performativity of the act.

At a first glance, the element of demand of the other's presence and transcendence might appear contradictory. In other instances, in fact, Derrida maintains that prayer does not actually request or ask for anything, that it "remains foreign to the question properly speaking" (Derrida 2011, p. 231). He even stresses that prayer is absolutely heterogeneous with regard to the calculation, evaluation, and instrumentalization that a petition would more or less explicitly imply (Caputo et al. 2005, p. 31; Schwartz 2001, pp. 230–31). This contradiction, however, is only apparent. For Derrida, prayer, in its essence, does not in fact ask for anything. The demand of presence is not to be interpreted as a precise petitionary content which could or could not, like some sort of unessential appendix, supplement the sheer act of addressing that prayer is. In other words, this request is not a trait that would determine the scope of prayer, making it, in this case, petitionary. If it is a matter of understanding what prayer is at the bottom, then the demand of presence and transcendence which Derrida is referring to cannot be associated to a heterogeneous element which would complement the core of prayer. Instead, this needs to be comprehended as an articulation internal to the pure act of addressing. That the other gives his presence as other and the transcendence of his otherness itself is what any act of prayer asks in its simple turning to the other through an apostrophic movement. This movement represents the actual condition of possibility of any further determinate requests. To pray—says Derrida—means addressing the other as other; addressing the other as other means demanding the other's presence and transcendence.

For a better comprehension of the specificity of this peculiar demanding address, one needs to look beyond Derrida's theoretical production. Particularly elucidating is a brief response to Regina Schwartz's contribution to the 1999 conference at Villanova University, entitled "Questioning God":

Of course, there is instrumentalization in a prayer, obviously. But there is something in a prayer that gives up any usefulness. I pray not to ask for something, not to request, but just simply to address the other in an apostrophe without even being sure that there is a responsiveness. To pray, you must, of course [. . .] presuppose a responsiveness, but you cannot be sure that there is someone on the other side. So you may pray without asking for anything, just calling the other, and without describing the other. (Schwartz 2001, p. 231)

Still reflecting around two opposed views of the meaning of prayer, this comment confirms what we have just pointed out. Prayer, if strictly intended as a specific form of petition, undoubtedly exposes itself to instrumentalization insofar as one prays *for* something. Nonetheless, Derrida insists that there is "something" in a prayer which, contrary to its multiple determinations, renounces any economy of needs or desires. This "something", which he identifies with the figure of the apostrophe, does not ask for anything in particular, but simply calls the other. Calling the other means exactly this: asking the other to give his presence and transcendence as other; an invitation rather than an order, a hope rather than a certainty. This call, being "absolutely heterogeneous to the minimal description, evaluation or narration" (Schwartz 2001, p. 231), has little to do with the instrumental petitionary contents which can, in a secondary moment, supplement the pure movement of addressing. That the other is present to one's prayer, that the other gives himself to be prayed, this is what the apostrophe of prayer asks before any other requests. Prayer in its essence is, for Derrida, *petition of presence*.

This gesture of calling the other is here directly associated by Derrida to the presupposition of a responsiveness assumed by the act of prayer. The conditions of this assumption are to be linked to the anteriority of the call of the other which, despite its indeterminateness, still compels one to speak, pray, call (Derrida 1992a, p. 97). The apostrophic address to

“you” bears this presupposition of responsiveness. I pray “you”, and by doing this I must presuppose the existence of the second person to whom I address myself. Without this assumption, one would not begin to utter any prayer, one would not apostrophize the other. Nonetheless, for Derrida, this postulated presence remains unassured; it is never the “being in front of”, “being next to”, “being at hand” (*prae-esse, para-ousia*) of the metaphysical present being. For this reason, he maintains that one can never be sure, in prayer, of a responsiveness on the other side: “Were I sure that when I call there is someone, someone real, at the other end, I wouldn’t call [. . .]. If God were really present to me, as a certain, as a sure, presence, I wouldn’t call” (Caputo et al. 2005, p. 38).

The apostrophe that turns oneself to the other, to “you”, bears both a presupposition of presence and a call for presence. In this sense, prayer, as Derrida describes it, dwells right in the space between the sheer emptiness of pure solipsism and the metaphysical certitude of a full presence. Furthermore, the uncertainty concerning the referent of the act clearly differentiates prayer from the order or the command: “If I knew or were simply expecting an answer, that would be the end of prayer. That would be an order” (Caputo et al. 2005, p. 31). The distinction is quite significant: while the command *requires* a presence and an immediate fulfilment, prayer *calls* for a presence and a fulfilment. One could even extend this insight beyond the circumscribed character of Derrida’s prayer, and the uncertainty of the addressee’s presence that characterizes it. Prayer is not the command or the order exactly because it is essentially petition. Even when the presence of a referent is assumed, the petition of prayer is always exposed to the risk of not being fulfilled (Nédoncelle 1962, p. 18). Prayer’s first steps are *precarious*¹—they lack the audacity and the insolence of the command.

As the presupposition of the other’s presence lacks the metaphysical assurance of a present being, so the subsequent call for presence is determined by a certain skepticism. This can be linked to what Derrida, in comments more closely related to his personal experience of prayer, has determined as the character of *hopelessness* or *epoché* of prayer: a suspension of any certainty, knowledge, expectation, economy, and calculation which is necessary in order for prayer to be authentic (Caputo et al. 2005, p. 31).² Prayer, in its manifold determinations, is certainly not foreign to calculation. Derrida himself, while talking of this suspension of the calculative thought, admits that “in praying something happens [. . .] a therapy might be taking place” (Caputo et al. 2005, p. 31). Simply put, the performance of the act is not devoid of effects. Even when the effect obtained by praying is just feeling good about oneself, a calculation might have already taken place. Nonetheless, there is “something” in a prayer that remains heterogeneous to all the calculation, knowledge, and science which condition its singular determinations. This “something” is, once again, the address, the apostrophe, or, simply, prayer in itself.

Let us sum up Derrida’s analysis. Prayer is a pure act of addressing that does no more than this: starting from a presupposition of the other’s presence, it then calls the other, it attempts to recognize and affirm the presence of the addressee to whom it turns. It does not matter *what* it specifically asks, insofar as the act of prayer, in its essence, barely contains anything more than an apostrophe, an address to “you”. In addition, it does not matter to *whom* it turns, insofar as the “you” who is addressed is not, at this point, circumscribable. Prayer in itself is not addressed to the singularity of a “who”: “prayer, at bottom, is addressed to nobody—one does not know to whom it is addressed” (Derrida 2011, p. 78).

Naturally, Derrida’s argument cannot but sound shrill, as it inevitably involves a deep reconsideration of our most common idea of prayer as a form of discourse asking something to someone. We are here facing a conception of prayer that is emptied both of a determinate content and a determinate referent. This reduction to the apostrophic address is certainly instrumental for Derrida, as it allows him to exempt prayer from any kind of theoretical and theological determination of the discourse. What is questionable, however, is the ultimate outcome of this reduction. Once deprived of its content and referent, can what remains of prayer still be called “prayer”? Does not this pure address on the edge of

silence lack the characteristics which would actually make it a *praying* address and not just simply any other address?

The question is one of specificity. Different qualities make up the singularity of the phenomenon of prayer. At the very least, a certain degree of determinateness and reachability of the recipient; some form of more or less determinate petition which acknowledges the addressee as a “center of activity and responsibility” (Nédoncelle 1962, p. 18); and a specific attitude and style (bodily movements, reverential gestures, facial expressions), a practice generally shared by a community. Resolute in finding a way to overcome metaphysics through a particular modulation of language, Derrida exclusively turns his attention to the linguistic element of prayer. By doing this, he appears to forget that—as the poet wrote—“prayer is more/Than an order of words, the conscious occupation/Of the praying mind, or the sound of the voice praying” (Eliot 1944, p. 40). Nevertheless, even the linguistic qualities of prayer are rarefied in Derrida’s analysis. What remains is the implication of presence and petition. This character, however, assumes a strongly agnostic tone, as the petition asks for the very presence that it first needs to presuppose. However, the presence of whom? The availability of the other’s presence is presupposed and called, but never determined. As Caputo writes, “Derrida pursues the way of *non-knowing*, of invoking without knowing, of praying without truth” (Caputo 2005, p. 97). This way, however, is so rigorously indeterminate that it appears to suffocate the contemplative act of prayer right in the moment of its opening. Prayer remains suspended on the indeterminate space opened by a simple apostrophe.

3. The Determination of Praise

Insofar as it is nothing more than the simple movement of apostrophizing the other as other, asking and hoping for his presence, prayer—in Derrida’s view—takes place right before the discourse falls into predication. Its belonging to a performative dimension of language exceeds the borders of a purely propositional analysis on the truth value of assertions. This is pointed out by Aristotle in a well-known passage of *De interpretatione*, which constitutes a constant point of reference for contemporary philosophers dealing with the topic of prayer.

After having established that all *logos*, as a set of independent elements (names and verbs), is significant (*semantikos*) by convention and not by nature, Aristotle observes that only a verbal enunciation whose peculiar prerogative is to be either true or false is apophantic (*apophantikos*)—that is, declarative, attributive, assertive, predicative. Then, he writes: “thus prayer [*euché*] is a discourse [*logos*], but is neither true nor false” (*De Interpretatione* 4, 17a 1–6). The apophanticity, as a particular species of the genre “*logos semantikos*”, allows for a verification on the base of truth or falsehood. In other terms, truth and falsehood occupy a specific area of the significance of *logos*. Nevertheless, there are certain peculiar *logoi* which, despite being significant, are not apophantic. Their enunciation exceeds the competence of a logical science concerning the theoretical value of inferences, whence their dismissal from the analysis in *De interpretatione* and the relegation to rhetoric or poetic.

Among these neither-true-nor-false discourses, prayer might certainly be one of the most evident representatives. *Euché*, in fact, is certainly a *logos* (that is, in Aristotelian terms, a correlation of semantic elements). However, it does not assert anything which can be verified as true or false according to its correspondence in the extra-psychoic real. This is because the intra-locutionary relation of this discourse is released from a purely propositional intention of the affirmative or negative type “*S is/is not P*”. Simply put, the purpose at the base of this act of language is not communicative or informative; property of this discourse is not to speak of or about this or that. For these reasons, Aristotle maintains that only a different kind of analysis, one that pertains more properly to poetic or rhetoric, would be able to shed some light on the particular form of discourse that prayer is.

“But would Aristotle have said that the encomium (*hymnein*) is not apophantic? That it is neither true nor false? That it has no relationship to the distinction between the true and

the false? One may doubt this. One may even doubt it in the case of Dionysius" (Derrida 1992a, p. 136). According to Derrida, the praise, encomium or celebration (*hymnein*), is another trait that often accompanies what one generally calls "prayer", to the point of being frequently associated with it. It is the case, for instance, of the main polemic object of his analysis in "How to Avoid Speaking": namely, Dionysius' invocation of the Trinity at the beginning of *The Mystical Theology* (I, 1, 997a). In this passage, the apostrophic movement of the address to "you" seamlessly flows into a praise of the Trinity beyond being. In other words, Dionysius addresses the other as other ("you") through praise ("you as Trinity higher than any being and guide of the Christians"). This gesture makes the apostrophe and the encomium appear as homogeneous elements of one single hymnic act.

In criticizing the overlapping of what he believes to be two entirely heterogeneous elements, Derrida directly collides with Jean-Luc Marion. The latter, in *The Idol and Distance*, has designated this passage to the praise of the Trinity as the passage to prayer itself: "Denys tends to substitute for the *to say* of predicative language another verb, *hymnein*, to praise. What does this substitution signify? It no doubt indicates the passage from discourse to prayer, for 'prayer is a *logos* but neither true nor false' (Aristotle)" (Marion [1979] 2001, p. 184). Here, Marion echoes the Swiss theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar who, in a meticulous analysis, has identified within the *Corpus Areopagiticum* no less than 108 recurrences of the verb "to praise" and its derivatives, thus concluding that "when it is a question of God and of the divine, the word *hymnein* nearly replaces the word 'to say'" (von Balthasar [1962] 1984, p. 173). Even though the "nearly" seems to invite some cautiousness (Derrida 1992a, p. 111), this might certainly be true. In fact, for what concerns the exemplary case of Dionysius, Balthasar highlights how the "hymnic" encompasses the Areopagite's entire theological discourse to such a degree, that it comes to constitute as much a theoretical methodology as the sheer purpose of all his thinking (von Balthasar [1962] 1984, p. 160).

Nevertheless, the overall celebrative character of Dionysian theology, as well as the formal proof of this terminological substitution within the texts, is not sufficient to demonstrate an exemption of the encomium from the propositional regime of discourse. One still needs to understand, at a theoretical level, whether the language of praise, in attempting to speak to rather than of God, actually succeeds in avoiding any form of onto-theological predication. In the terms employed by Derrida, one needs to understand whether the language of praise constitutes another form of denegation: that is to say, whether in claiming not to speak of God, it actually does speak of God.

Despite his admiration for Marion's reflection in *The Idol and Distance*, Derrida stresses that the two "traits" of prayer and praise should not be deemed identical and confused with each other. Prayer in itself (*euché*)—he claims—requires nothing more than an apostrophe to the other as other, without any kind of further narration or description, both at the level of the content and of the addressee; praise (*hymnein*), on the contrary, while it surely shares the belonging to a performative rather than predicative dimension of language, maintains an undoubtable relationship to predication.

How can one deny that the encomium qualifies God and *determines* prayer, *determines* the other, Him to whom it addresses itself, refers, invoking Him even as the source of prayer? How can one deny that, in this movement of determination (which is no longer the pure address of the prayer to the other), the appointment of the *trinitary* and hyperessential God distinguishes Dionysius' *Christian* prayer from all other prayer? To reject this doubtless subtle distinction, inadmissible for Dionysius and perhaps for a Christian in general, is to deny the essential quality of prayer to every invocation that is not Christian. (Derrida 1992a, p. 111)

It is clear what Derrida wants to convey in this passage. The encomium, by naming God as Trinity and hyperessential, determines the apostrophe of prayer and delimits its absolute indeterminateness: the pure address to "you" becomes the praise to "you as Trinity". This designation functions as a discerning element between a Christian prayer and all the other singular determinations of prayer which do not belong to the realm of the

Christian faith. The distinction between prayer in itself and praise proposed by Derrida is then inadmissible for a Christian. The latter, in fact, cannot but ultimately refuse the authenticity of a prayer addressed to an indeterminate “you” (or he can accept it only at the cost of glimpsing in this *pro-nomen* at least the shadow of a *nomen* more or less adequately referring to God, thereby annulling the sheer indeterminateness of the apostrophe). As a matter of fact, a Christian cannot but refuse the authenticity of any prayers addressed to a deity different from the Christian God. In this sense, praise refutes the essential quality of the apostrophe to every other determinate, non-Christian prayer. It is exactly the necessity of respecting the possibility of other, non-Christian prayers that pushes Derrida to affirm an essential indeterminateness of the apostrophic address.

This subtle distinction between *euché* and *hymnein* can become clearer by briefly returning to the Aristotelian analysis in *De interpretatione*. As we have seen, Aristotle excludes certain peculiar discourses from a purely theoretical analysis, among which prayer (*euché*). Nonetheless, this does not necessarily exclude the possibility of a logical verification of a proposition as a component of a neither-true-nor-false discourse. In other words, the proposition, isolated from the overall purpose of the discourse, can still be submitted to verification in accordance with truth and falsehood. This is what Derrida seems to be alluding to when he stresses that the encomium, while certainly maintaining a performative character, entertains a close relation with the predicative character of logos: “Even if it is not a predicative affirmation of the current type, the encomium preserves the style and the structure of a predicative affirmation. It says something about someone” (Derrida 1992a, p. 137).

The sheer performative character of the encomium is then insufficient to demonstrate an exemption of Dionysian discourse and the language of praise from predication. The performance, in fact, does not always exclude predicative attributions (Derrida 1992a, p. 137). This is evident in the Dionysian praise at the outset of *The Mystical Theology*, which celebrates its addressee by qualifying it *as* Trinity, beyond being, beyond divinity, beyond goodness and guide of the Christians. Even if the reference of this encomium belongs to a higher—hyperessential—order of truth, this does not prevent Dionysius from maintaining the theoretical form of predication of the kind “*S is P*”. Between the *as* (language of praise) and the *is* (ontological language), the difference seems, indeed, minimal. When Dionysius invokes God *as* Trinity, it is hard not to read in it a predicative statement (God *is* Trinity), and, thus, the reflection of a rather explicit theology attributing to the addressee all the positive, dogmatic contents that distinguish the Christian praise from all the other forms of praise.

Perhaps more significantly than all this, elsewhere, Derrida remarks that praise always includes a constative structure, insofar as it implies a recognition of the other’s worthiness of being praised: “In the praise there is already some constative structure, that is, the other is worthy of being praised. It is not a pure performative; it implies some knowledge or implied knowledge, some supposed knowledge, a description of who God is or who you are, and so on” (Schwartz 2001, p. 231). Beyond all the possible determinations of logos, then, praising someone always brings about a more or less implicit form of predication. The essence itself of praise is, for Derrida, dogmatic.

4. Specificity as Indeterminateness

This refusal of praise as a language unable to detach itself from the metaphysical conditions of logos allows us to better comprehend Derrida’s radical philosophical gesture. The reduction of prayer to its apostrophic essence appears to him as a necessary move to avoid any onto-theological contamination. As we have pointed out, however, in responding to the rationalistic excesses of metaphysics, Derrida seems to have fallen victim to a specular form of excess. Not much can be said of prayer in itself, which is reduced to an apostrophe. This is a simple outward movement of addressing, of turning oneself to the other and calling the other; a linguistic act devoid of any clear content and referent.

Scholars have raised multiple objections to this rather peculiar account of prayer. Regina Schwartz, referring specifically to the passages in “How to Avoid Speaking”, has contested Derrida’s insistence on the absence of any determinate requests in prayer. In her opinion, prayer essentially maintains a petitionary character, inasmuch as one always prays for something: “I fear the instrumentality of prayer [. . .]. Too many prayers sound instrumental to my ears, asking, as they do, for something” (Schwartz 2001, p. 230). Significantly, Schwartz takes a position that is very close to the one taken by Marion, insofar as she admits that what Derrida calls prayer is exactly how she would define praise: “Demands only that the other hear it, receive it, be present to it, be the other as such, a gift, a call, and even cause of [praise]” (Schwartz 2001, p. 233). The inversion is striking, as she goes on to say that praise is actually prior to prayer, linking this choice to a biblical understanding of praise which, in her opinion, escapes the instrumentality that characterizes prayer (Schwartz 2001, pp. 224, 233).

Schwartz’s concern certainly captures an important issue: is not prayer petitionary in its essence? Does not prayer always mean requesting something, asking for something more than just the presence of the addressee? However, by insisting on the petitionary character of prayer, her objection to Derrida misses the mark. The dissociation that Derrida is inviting us to make in the pages of “How to Avoid Speaking” is not between petitionary prayer and praise, but rather, more radically, between the multiple determinations of prayer (among which are petitionary prayer and praise) and the pure prayer, prayer in itself. Simply put, Schwartz is contesting at the level of the determinations of prayer, what Derrida instead poses on a level prior to or beyond that. For Schwartz, prayer means “petitionary prayer”; for Derrida, prayer means “prayer in itself”. The confusion comes from the fact that Derrida still calls “prayer” the pre-predicative apostrophe that founds and opens the possibility of every common determination of prayer, including petitionary prayer and praise. Not coincidentally, in his brief response to Schwartz, Derrida reiterates the dissociation of prayer and instrumentalization and stresses the essentially constative structure of praise (Schwartz 2001, pp. 230–32).

Caputo and Marion, instead, have raised some questions in connection to the absence of a determinate referent of the prayerful act as described by Derrida. The former, in relation to Derrida’s admission of rightly passing for an atheist while at the same time living in prayers and tears, has candidly asked him to whom he turns these prayers and whom he expects to answer them (Caputo et al. 2005, p. 28). In a more radical fashion, the latter, in reaction to Derrida’s disqualification of the praising prayer as a disguised form of predication, has strongly contested the possibility of an anonymous prayer. What would it mean, in fact, to pray without praying to anyone, to demand without demanding from anyone? (Marion 1999, pp. 28–30).

Notwithstanding the different contexts and motives that prompted them, these questions raise again the crucial issues concerning the *what* and the *who* of prayer. As we have seen, Derrida seems at times persuaded to identify prayer with a peculiar linguistic act which, being absolutely foreign to onto-theological determinations, would be capable of respecting the absolute alterity of the other to whom it turns. This act, which he calls in different ways (pure prayer, prayer in itself, the address, the apostrophe, prayer), is absolutely pre-predicative insofar as it is not determined by any kind of contents or singular referents. The pure prayer does not demand anything to anyone, but simply calls the other through an apostrophe; it is turned to no one in particular, as it lacks the metaphysical assurance of a present being with a series of names or accidents.

Now, it would be too easy to dispense with these objections by simply returning to Derrida’s analysis and pointing out, once again, the motives that guide his choice of reducing prayer to the minimal structure of the apostrophic address. The truth is that these questions regarding the content and the referent of the prayerful act, in their rather innocent simplicity, are not easily dismissible. One must then take these concerns seriously and not underestimate the issues that they raise.

The insistence of these objections has the merit of allowing us to grasp a fundamental problem. Derrida's account inevitably involves a profound reconsideration of what one generally understands as "prayer". Insofar as he insists on calling "prayer" a minimal addressing act which does not resemble the rich and multifaceted phenomenon of prayer, his argument cannot but remain exposed to misunderstandings and objections. Overall, these come down to one simple question: can this minimal apostrophe, this pure address to the other on the edge of silence, still be called *prayer*? This question touches upon the problem of the specificity of this pure act of prayer. We have seen how the philosophical gesture of reducing prayer to the apostrophe is somehow felt as necessary by Derrida. In general, this affirmation of an essential indeterminateness of the address responds to onto-theological concerns, to the risk of a re-inscription of the discourse of prayer in the metaphysical regime of logos. Moreover, in particular, this indeterminateness is demanded by the respect of the possibility of multiple experiences of prayer which cannot be restricted to just one confession or the other. Nonetheless, one could argue that, in responding to these concerns, Derrida went too far; that the reduction to the apostrophe comes at the cost of a loss of specificity of what one commonly denominates as "prayer". It is in fact not clear what exactly would distinguish the apostrophe of prayer from any other kind of apostrophe. Perhaps its sceptic and hopeless qualification? Derrida does not delve much into this. When he cursorily points to this issue, he actually maintains that there might be no specificity whatsoever, at least at the level of the structure of the linguistic act. Or, better, that the specificity of prayer is its very indeterminateness and universality; that the act of calling God in prayer or calling Kevin Hart, who is sitting next to him, bear the same structure. For faith—he claims—"is at once an exceptional, unique experience and something very common, universal in a certain way" (Caputo et al. 2005, p. 38).

5. Solemnity and Triviality

This brief comment on the commonality of faith allows us to delve deeper into the problem relating to the specificity of prayer. Further references to the indeterminateness of prayer can be found in Derrida's latest reflections on the topic within the seminar *The Beast and the Sovereign*. Turning our focus to this seminar will allow us to retrieve the questions which we have previously anticipated without, however, facing them directly. Let us recall them.

As we have seen, Derrida's analysis of prayer revolves around a series of dichotomies. At first, it would seem that these dichotomies express a dialogical opposition between two forms of prayer, one more indeterminate and the other more determinate. On different occasions, Derrida appears to assign a priority to the more idealistic side of these dichotomies. The idea is that prayer is some sort of pure address without content and reference. This purely pragmatic act of addressing the other as other would constitute a form of language beyond the limits of onto-theology. Nonetheless, the brief ending remarks in "How to Avoid Speaking" resound as a wake-up call. They seem to point towards a radically different direction, certainly more appropriate to Derrida's thought, always preoccupied with a "fluidification" of the dichotomies of the tradition. The question is rather straightforward: can prayer actually remain an apostrophe on the edge of silence, or is it not always on the verge of determining itself (in a particular code, form, gesture, tradition, theology)? Perhaps, suggests Derrida, without this inevitable contamination there would not be any prayer, nor any theology.

A particular opposition opens the eighth session of the second year of the seminar *The Beast and the Sovereign*, on 5 March 2003: the one between *prayer in a strong sense* and *prayer in an ordinary sense*. Within the thematic horizon of this seminar, which is explicitly concerned with the relation between the animal (the beast) and the human (the sovereign), the topic of prayer would seem to occupy a rather strange position. The sudden introduction of this theme in the second session and its more thorough elaboration in the third, give to the whole seminar a different, unexpected orientation. In these early sessions, Derrida is mainly concerned with reading Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* as a book of prayer: "The

whole of *Robinson Crusoe*—he argues—“can be read as a rhythmic series of attempts to learn how to pray properly, authentically, in the Bible, on the Bible” (Derrida 2011, p. 48). Derrida goes into details to trace the whole process of Robinson’s apprenticeship of prayer: beginning with a first, still irreligious prayer, “the precursory plaintive breath of a distress call which, during the earthquake that threatens to bury him alive, is not yet truly and religiously addressed to God, to the Other as God” (Derrida 2011, pp. 77–78); up until what, according to Robinson Crusoe, is his first *true* and *authentic* prayer, that is, a prayer on the New Testament, to God in the person of his son (Derrida 2011, p. 80).

After these couple of sessions, however, the topic of prayer goes underground for about five weeks. When it resurfaces in the eighth session, Derrida gives to the whole analysis a wider scope. The more general questions on the nature and the possibility of prayer that inaugurate the session are already indicative of a clear change of pace: “What is to pray? How to pray? How not to pray?” (Derrida 2011, p. 202). The philosopher goes on to evoke once again the opposition between the pure performativity of the linguistic act of prayer and the *logos* as articulate language or enunciative proposition. By doing this, he reiterates the foundation of his interest for the topic, while at the same time indicating a new direction of analysis. This will investigate Heidegger’s outline of *logos apophantikos* in the 1929–30 seminar *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics*, and his rather cursory references to prayer in this seminar (Heidegger [1983] 1995, pp. 304–33), as well as in the 1957 lecture “The Onto-theo-logical Constitution of Metaphysics” (Heidegger [1957] 1969, p. 72). Before dealing with the German philosopher, however, Derrida raises some further questions, which in his previous accounts of prayer he had not raised explicitly:

What is one doing when one says to someone “I pray you,” “*Je vous en prie*”, “I pray you to”? Can one pray without praying *to someone*, i.e., without “addressing” one’s prayer to the singularity of a “who”? Can one pray without praying to . . . ? Can one pray without asking or expecting something in return? Is there a link between the quotidian and trivial “*je vous en prie*” and the orison or chant of religious and sacred prayer that rises and lifts itself above the quotidian, even if it lifts itself every day, at fixed times, or, solemnly, once a year [is there a link and an analogy] between the anemic and mechanical “*je vous en prie*” and, on the other hand, prayer in the strong sense, with or without active faith, which grips one, and brings with it a sort of ecstasy beyond automatic triviality? (Derrida 2011, p. 203)

Once again, Derrida works on an apparent dichotomy between two kinds of prayers. On the one hand, the quotidian and trivial “*je vous en prie*”, the common interjection that punctuates different Western languages.³ This is an inchoate, mechanical, almost frivolous prayer, in a way like the first one Robinson Crusoe utters out of fear, which lasts only for the brief moment of his anguish. On the other hand, the solemn, sacred prayer that one turns to a deity and transcends, to a certain measure, the order of trivial factuality. This opposition is initially linked to the two key problems concerning the possibility of praying without asking or expecting anything in return, and of praying without addressing anyone in particular. Derrida is then simply reiterating, with a slightly different accent, what he has already indicated in “How to Avoid Speaking” with the opposition between *euché* and *hymnein*. The trivial “*je vous en prie*” would constitute a restricted form of prayer, that apostrophic address which simply turns to the other as other without demanding anything; the solemn prayer would be a more determinate form of prayer, uttered in fixed instances and places, with a specific religious attitude and even determinate words. Right after these questions, Derrida seems to suggest that the difference between the trivial prayer and the solemn prayer might be one of empirical intensity. Both would be prayers; that is to say, they would bear the same essential linguistic structure. However, the first would be quotidian, frivolous, machine-like, anemic; the other solemn, liturgical, more elaborated. The similarity or dissimilarity that links “the most insignificant ‘pardon’ from someone who steps on your toe” and “the guilty and repentant gravity of ‘I ask your pardon’ for the most criminal offence” (Derrida 2011, p. 203), would perhaps represent a similar instance.

The more profound reasons behind the exposition of this distinction are revealed right in the following passage:

More radically, [. . .] can one address oneself to someone or indeed to any living being at all—or even something not living—without some implicit prayer coming to bend, to inflect the discourse, or even the simple silent look which, addressing itself to the other, cannot fail to ask of him or her “listen to me, please [*je t’en prie*], listen, I pray you, look at me looking at you, please, turn toward me, turn your attention toward what I’m saying or doing to you, be present to what is coming from me” [. . .]. One always prays the other to be present to one’s own presence. Can, then, this experience of prayer be limited, circumscribed? Or else does it invade the whole field of experience from the moment the other enters into it, i.e., without ever waiting, since the other is what *is* already, whether I’m expecting it or not, whether I want it or not, etc.? (Derrida 2011, pp. 203–4)

The ordinary character of prayer is, then, the sign of something quite more profound: a form of implicit prayer, an elementary “I pray you”, invades the whole territory of experience, anticipating every possible utterance. This experience of prayer, says Derrida, cannot be delimited. When turning one’s words to the other, an originary prayer has already taken place; when the other enters the empirical space, one has already started to pray. Not only, then, there is a pure prayer that precedes every determinate prayer; there is also—and more significantly—an implicit prayer that precedes every utterance in general: “a silent prayer or plea [that] precedes every constative, every statement of fact, every assertion, even the most coolly and confidently scientific protocol sentence” (Krell 2013, p. 162).

There is then no specificity of prayer. Or differently—as we have previously suggested—the specificity of prayer is to have no specificity whatsoever, but rather to anticipate, with an imperceptible movement, every sentence that is turned to the other: “I cannot speak to someone without praying him or her, at least implicitly, not only to pay attention, but by that very fact to retain the memory of what I am saying to him or her, be it only from the beginning to the end of the sentence” (Derrida 2011, p. 204). While Aristotle argued that prayer (*euché*) is a form of non-apophantic, neither-true-nor-false discourse, Derrida goes one step further: every true or false proposition implies prayer; the non-apophantic tacitly marks every apophantic discourse. Then, everyone prays, believers and atheists alike; indeed, everyone prays without ceasing, as the Apostle asked (1 Thessalonians 5:16–18) and as Derrida claims to do (Caputo et al. 2005, p. 30). The apostrophe of prayer is not just the premise of every prayer, it is the spring moment of logos itself.

6. The Respect for Prayer

Every proposition presupposes an elementary “I pray you”. This argument provides the criticism that Derrida directs to Heidegger during the eighth session of the seminar. The German philosopher—Derrida stresses on multiple occasions—does not pray, does not apostrophize anyone in his writings; the theoretical, constative mode of discourse governs the ensemble of his philosophical project. At the same time, Heidegger curiously alludes to prayer on at least two occasions, at a distance of almost thirty years: first, in the 1929–30 seminar *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics* (Heidegger [1983] 1995, p. 309); then, in the 1957 conference “The Onto-theo-logical Constitution of Metaphysics” (Heidegger [1957] 1969, p. 72).⁴ In both, however, he avoids plumbing the depths of the topic. What are the reasons behind this exclusion?

Derrida begins from the latest and most famous of these instances: Heidegger’s conference, held in Todtnauberg on 24 February 1957 and published in *Identity and Difference*. Let us recall the main argument presented in this conference. Concerned to explain the appearance of God in philosophy, Heidegger argues that metaphysics, forgetful of the ontological difference between Being (*Sein*) and beings (*Seiende*), founds the latter on the former: Being appears as the fundament and beings as the founded. In order to think beings in their totality, metaphysics becomes a logic as theo-logic insofar as it conceives God as the

supreme and ultimate ground of beings (as first cause, *causa sui*, *Ursache*). However, this God of metaphysical onto-theology—says Heidegger re-evoking the Pascalian distinction between the God of the philosophers and the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob—remains extraneous to the most common acts of devotion, such as praying: “This [*causa sui*] is the right name for god in philosophy. Man can neither pray [*beten*] 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” (Heidegger [1957] 1969, p. 72, trans. modified).

There are essentially two ways to read Heidegger’s statement, depending on whether one lets the accent fall on the act (prayer) or the referent of the act (God). A first interpretation would focus on the necessity of learning again to address prayers and sacrifices to God: if one wishes to withdraw God from onto-theology, one must learn to “pray in addressing oneself beyond the sovereignty of God or independently of his supposed sovereignty, of his ontic sovereignty in any case, as fundamental cause, *causa sui* or supreme principle” (Derrida 2011, p. 207). A second interpretation would instead suggest that one must think a “divine God”, a God deprived of his ontic sovereignty, if one wishes to pray and sacrifice to him: in fact, “the God of the philosophers (Aristotle’s *noesis noesos* or pure act, Spinoza’s *causa sui*, etc.) is not, in essence, a being who receives prayers and sacrifices and chants and praises and hymns, etc.” (Derrida 2011, p. 208).

Heidegger then speaks of prayer, without, however, praying; he speaks of God, without, however, addressing any God; he stresses that one cannot pray to the God of the philosophers, without, however, explicitly enjoining anyone to pray. As Derrida highlights, “Heidegger says what he says about prayer in a text the discursivity of which remains theoretical or constative, which in any case is not of the order of performative address, and certainly not of prayer in the strict sense” (Derrida 2011, p. 208). In Derrida’s eyes, this is the most striking difference between Heidegger’s discourse on prayer and the one of Dionysius, Robinson Crusoe, or Pascal. Heidegger discusses prayer, but he neither prays nor addresses anyone. His whole discourse is exposed in the third person, even when he refers to the God whom one would fall on one’s knees to and pray, dance and sing. Dionysius, Robinson Crusoe, and Pascal, on the contrary, insistently quote their prayers, thus reiterating them in their writings and letting one know of their link to Christian revelation. Dionysius quotes his prayer to the Trinity and invites Timothy (and, thus, the reader) to abandon perception and knowledge, and to reach the mystical summits and union with the God beyond being (The Mystical Theology I, 1, 997b); Robinson Crusoe narrates his apprenticeship of prayer, he writes down his prayers and, in a way, he learns to pray by quoting and retelling his prayers (Defoe [1719] 2001, pp. 75, 81, 84–85); Pascal writes his prayer on a little piece of paper (Pascal 1946, p. 142), which is destined “if not for someone, at least to remain, to survive the moment of its inscription, to remain legible in the exteriority of a trace, of a document, even if it were readable only for Pascal himself” (Derrida 2011, p. 212).

Right after this cursory reference to prayer, Heidegger adds a remark that appears as an explanation or a justification of the impossibility to pray: “The god-less thinking which must abandon the god of philosophy, god as *causa sui*, is thus *perhaps* closer to the divine God. Here this means only: god-less thinking is more open to Him than onto-theologic would like to admit” (Heidegger [1957] 1969, p. 72, emphasis added). According to Heidegger, then, philosophical atheism (*das gott-lose Denken*) would *perhaps* be closer to the divinity of God (*der göttliche Gott*); it would be—comments Derrida—“more respectful and more open, better prepared for a God to whom one would pray and sacrifice, than is onto-theology when it refers to God as supreme Being and *causa sui*” (Derrida 2011, p. 215). One could then say that Heidegger is neither praying nor delving into the topic of prayer for the precise reason that philosophical atheism is closer to the divine God. In addition, as he points out right after, only this thought of a non-onto-theological divinity can “throw a little light on the path to which thinking is on its way, that thinking which accomplishes the step back, back out of metaphysics into the active essence of metaphysics” (Heidegger [1957] 1969, p. 72). Not prayer, then, at least not the one turned to the god of

onto-theology, but rather a god-less thinking would be able to accomplish the overcoming of metaphysics.

It remains, however, the ambiguity of a “perhaps” (*vielleicht*) that wounds the usual rigorousness of the German philosopher’s discourse. It remains also the uncertainty regarding the possibility and the modality of the prayer that one would turn to the divine God who is no longer the sovereign god of onto-theology. What instead remains clear, in Derrida’s view, is the recurrent exclusion of prayer within the Heideggerian theoretical exposition. The second occasion of this avoidance is the 1929–30 seminar *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics*. In the section §72b, Heidegger deals with the apophantic logos according to Aristotle. He describes it as the discourse that, “in the manner in which it gives something to be understood, has the specific tendency merely to exhibit as such whatever it is referring to” (Heidegger [1983] 1995, p. 309). Only the apophantic logos is an enunciative proposition (*Aussagesatz*), that is, a discourse that points out, informs, makes something known. Then, right after, he writes:

Prayer [*das Bitten*], εὐκλή, for example, is a non-apophantic λόγος. If my discourse is a prayer [*Wenn ich bittend rede*], then it is not attempting to inform the other person about something in the sense of increasing his or her knowledge. Nor, however, is the prayer [*die Bitte*] a communicating of the fact that I desire something or am filled with a desire. Nor is this discourse a mere desiring, but rather the concrete act of “praying another [*einen anderen Bittens*]”. (Heidegger [1983] 1995, p. 309, trans. modified)⁵

This observation conveniently highlights two intertwined qualities of prayer on which Derrida has insisted on different occasions: its “uninformative” purpose and its essentially performative character. After this interesting remark, however, Heidegger avoids any further reflection on the topic. By doing this, he diligently follows Aristotle’s path, relegating the analysis of the non-apophantic logoi to poetics or rhetoric: “The examination of these kinds of discourse which do not have the character of a pointing out [. . .] belongs to rhetoric and poetics” (Heidegger [1983] 1995, p. 310). Questioning once again this surprising exclusion, Derrida argues that Heidegger ignores the pervasiveness of prayer. In the overwhelming dominion of the theoretical regime, he forgets that the enunciative proposition, insofar as it is addressed to someone, always implies *the concrete act of praying another*. Some sort of elementary address, an “I pray you to listen to me”, punctuates even the most rational assertion (Derrida 2011, p. 217).

This “brutal exclusion” of prayer obviously must be taken seriously. However, does it suffice to interpret it exclusively as the outcome of the constative perseverance of Heidegger’s discourse? Could not this avoidance, on the contrary, indicate the deepest respect for prayer and for the divine God (*der göttliche Gott*) to whom it should address itself? These questions allow us to reach the conclusion of our analysis by linking Heidegger’s exclusion of prayer to Derrida’s conclusive remarks in the last pages of “How to Avoid Speaking”. Derrida laments that Heidegger does not leave any space to this neither-true-nor-false discourse that prayer is; that he neither prays, nor quotes prayers or enjoins anyone to pray. At first glance, this can undoubtedly imply the dominion of the theoretical mode of discourse within his texts and, therefore, the rejection of theology and of performativity. A different reading remains nonetheless possible and is briefly alluded to in the last passages of “How to Avoid Speaking”: by not quoting prayer, by not inscribing it in a text, by not inviting anyone to pray, Heidegger actually saves prayer from reification, determination, contamination. If prayer, as Derrida suggested, is a pure apostrophe on the edge of silence, always endangered by a possible onto-theological determination, then silence could represent the most respectful sign for the essence of prayer. Heidegger—Derrida seems to suggest—manages to avoid speaking *of* prayer and *of* the divine God to whom it should be turned. This avoidance of the topic represents the sign of the most profound respect for prayer.

Respectful or disrespectful as it may be towards the essence of prayer, Heidegger’s avoidance does not help us in grasping the actual consistency of this pure act of addressing

the other as other. There is, *perhaps*, an uncontaminated prayer, a purely performative moment that anticipates every predication and that, finally, allows us to speak *to* the other. However, what are the conditions that actually make this prayerful moment graspable, possible, attainable? The autonomy of this pre-predicative prayer is questionable and the attraction offered by its possibility must be mitigated by a different realization.

Perhaps there would be no prayer, no pure possibility of prayer, without what we glimpse as a menace or as a contamination: writing, the code, repetition, analogy or the—at least apparent—multiplicity of addresses, initiation. If there were a purely pure experience of prayer, would one need religion and affirmative or negative theologies? Would one need a supplement of prayer? But if there were no supplement, if quotation did not bend prayer, if prayer did not bend, if it did not submit to writing, would a theiology be possible? Would a theology be possible? (Derrida 1992a, p. 131)

In his conclusion, Derrida leaves no doubt that a reduction of prayer to a pure essence is actually impossible. Prayer may certainly be pre-predicative in the way it apostrophizes the other as other. This simple apostrophe, however, is an all too fleeting moment whose condition of possibility depends on its very determination. If prayer were indeed pure and nothing else, in fact, one would not need religions and theologies, invocations and petitions. The relation is complementary: there is no pure possibility of prayer without this perpetual slippage into contamination; and, at the same time, there is no determinate prayer without a pure possibility of prayer. This genuine apostrophe remains indeed a possibility, perhaps even a teleological principle; in any case, a moment that can be grasped only within its alteration. Ultimately, it is this inevitable failure of the pure apostrophe that makes religion, theology, and prayer itself possible.

In the end, prayer does not allow us to accomplish the step out of metaphysics. The silent address preceding every prayer and every discourse is nothing more than a tangential moment, between the “unnameable glimmer beyond the closure” (Derrida [1967] 1976, p. 14) and the closure itself of metaphysics. In Derrida’s discourse, prayer manifests itself at once as the symptom of a desire and of the unfulfillment of this desire. We remain in some sort of convalescent state, neither entirely inside nor entirely outside of the metaphysical system: in our prayers continues to resound the echo of the irrepressible metaphysics.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

Notes

- ¹ From the Latin *precarius*, from *præx*, “prayer”, literally expressing what is obtained with prayers, granted by grace, hence, provisory, unstable, unassured.
- ² Starting from this priority of scepticism over knowledge, John Caputo has drawn a comparison between Derrida’s and Augustine’s account of prayer, which instead prioritizes knowledge over scepticism (Caputo 2005, pp. 97–98).
- ³ The semantic attenuation or emptying of terms and expressions belonging to the religious sphere is a well-documented phenomenon. In the case of “prayer”, the acceptance of the term loses the sacred character that distinguishes the appeal to the divinity. The French “*je vous en prie*” or “*je t’en prie*” (literally, “I pray you for it”) is the polite response to a thanks, as in the English “you are welcome”. Similar expressions of courtesy can be identified in the German “*bitte*” (first person singular of the present indicative of the verb “*beten*”, to pray, and contracted form of “*Ich bitte Sie*”, “I pray you”) and in the Italian “*prego*” (from the verb “*pregare*”, and contracted form of “*io ti prego*”, “I pray you”). This phenomenon of semantic attenuation, of which Derrida does not highlight the amplitude, is not exclusively limited to interjections which, being spontaneous expressions of feeling, are essentially devoid of conceptual reference. It also includes entire verbal locutions: “*je te prie de . . .*”, “*ich bitte dich . . .*”, “*ti prego di . . .*” (“I pray you to . . .”). Other ordinary uses of the verb recur in the reflexive locutions such as “*se faire prier*”, “*se laisser prier*”, “*sich bitten lassen*”, “*farsi pregare*”, “*lasciarsi pregare*” (literally, “to let oneself be prayed”, used to indicate a reluctance to do or concede something); or, in the negative form, “*ne se faire pas prier*”, “*sich nicht bitten lassen*”, “*non farsi pregare*” (“do not let oneself be prayed”, that is, of someone who easily or promptly gives his or her consent).
- ⁴ We can here point to a third instance, in the section §7B of *Being and Time* dedicated to the concept of logos (Heidegger [1927] 1962, p. 56), of which the section §72 of *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics* constitutes an expansion.

- ⁵ In the different terminology (*beten, bitten*) used by Heidegger in “The Onto-theo-logical Constitution of Metaphysics” and in *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics* to refer to “prayer”, Derrida identifies once again the distinction between a general or trivial prayer (*bitten*) and a religious prayer (*beten*). However, as Derrida precises right away, “the nearness of the two remains troubling and equivocal, as the always possible passage from *bitten* to *beten*, and reciprocally” (Derrida 2011, p. 216).

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