1 | Introduction

Imagining a World

> And the attentive animals are already aware
> that we are not quite reliably at home
> in the interpreted world.
>
> R. M. Rilke (1875–1926), 'First Duino Elegy'

Finding and Making

This book is about how to imagine the world theologically. By this I do not intend to say that theological thought is imaginative, let alone imaginary, more markedly than any other kind of thought. Rather, I take *all* our orientation in the world to be, to some extent, imaginative. 'Imagination', as I use the term, is not primarily the capacity to picture absent or fictional things. Rather, it is first and foremost the power to make the continuous stream of sense perception meaningful by integrating discrete data points into forms or wholes (what the Germans would call *Gestalt*).[1] In Mary Warnock's classic summary of this definition, drawing on the tradition of Hume, Kant, and many others,

> we use imagination in our ordinary perception of the world. This perception cannot be separated from interpretation. Interpretation can be common to everyone, and in this sense

> ordinary, or it can be inventive, personal and revolutionary. So imagination is necessary … to enable us to recognise things in the world as familiar, to take for granted features of the world which we need to take for granted and rely on, if we are to go about our ordinary business; but it is also necessary if we are to see the world as significant of something unfamiliar, if we are ever to treat the objects of perception as symbolising or suggesting things other than themselves.[2]

To put it differently, ordinary seeing – the ability to organize the sensory field into discrete objects – involves imaginative *acts*, which are no less active for remaining unnoticed. Seeing involves the assimilation of data points to perceptual patterns that we have inherited or acquired, and which we continue to update in response to ongoing experience. These integrative processes are not, for the most part, subject to conscious inspection: they form part of the very act of seeing and understanding, and so usually occur unconsciously. Both Hume and Kant were enduringly bewildered by them. Hume marvels that 'ideas are thus collected by a kind of magical faculty of the soul, which … is inexplicable by the utmost efforts of human understanding'.[3] And Kant describes the imagination as a kind of wizard behind a curtain, 'a hidden art in the depths of the human soul, whose real modes of activity nature is hardly likely ever to allow us to discover, and to have open to our gaze'.[4]

What is true of ordinary perception is intensified in the perception of created images, of pictures. The ability to see these strokes as a cube (Fig. 1), these blotches as lilies (Fig. 2), or these lines as a smile (Fig. 3) involves active projection and completion, by matching lines and colours whose

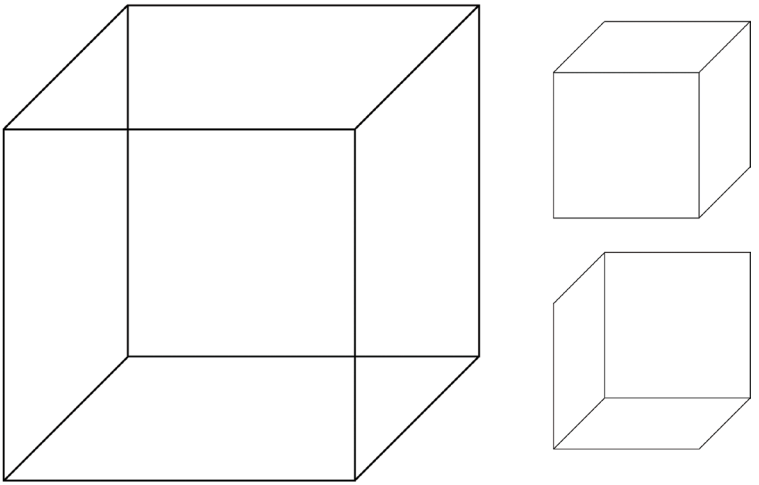


Fig. 1 *Necker's Cube*, 2006. Digital illustration.

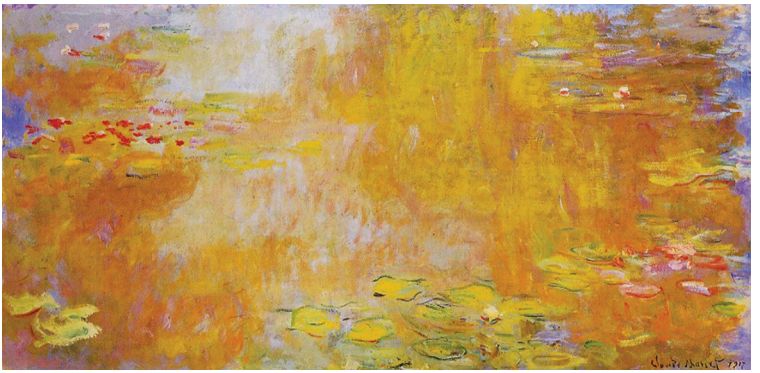


Fig. 2 Claude Monet, *Water Lilies in Giverny*, 1917. Oil on canvas, 100.3 × 200.5 cm; Musée d'Arts de Nantes, Nantes, France.

meaning is not fully determined by their two-dimensional appearance to memories of spatial and psychological depth, and thus completing the appearance in front of us. These acts of seeing are not guaranteed by either the images

Fig. 3 Leonardo da Vinci, *Mona Lisa*, c. 1503–1506. Oil on poplar panel, 77.0 × 53.2 cm; Louvre, Paris, France.

or our memories and patterns: they are co-creative and exceed the calculus of correspondence.

But images are not the only objects which we *see* only by perceiving in them a depth that is not fully contained in their lines and colours. It is not only the mystery of the *Mona Lisa*, but also the mood and character of the people around us that we grasp imaginatively by attending to their faces. Like Mona Lisa's, a baby's smile (Fig. 4) is at once a matter of immediate seeing and one of imaginative projection. Of course, there is often a truth of the matter – but not always. Like our appreciation of artworks, our perception of faces can never fully evade the risk of mis- or overinterpretation; on the contrary, such vulnerability to deception is integral to what it means to see a face at all.[5] This ambiguity

Fig. 4 Ruizluquepaz, *Portrait of a One-Year-Old Boy at Sunset*, undated. Photograph; Buenos Aires, Argentina. Credit: Ruizluquepaz / E+ via Getty Images.

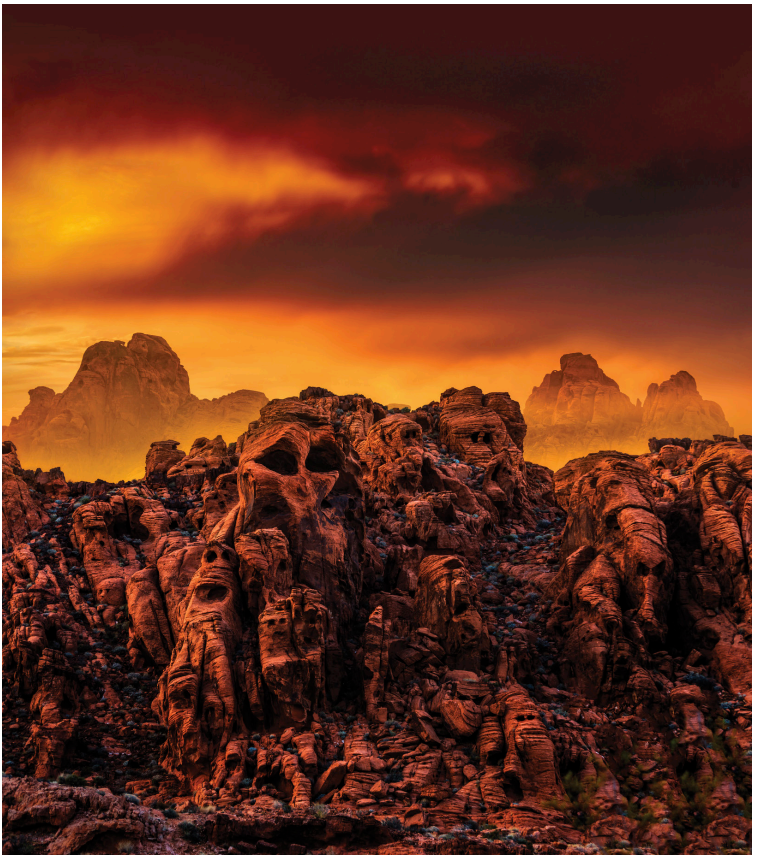


Fig. 5 Matt Anderson Photography, *Valley of Fire Hillside Ghosts*, undated. Photograph. Credit: Matt Anderson Photography / Moment Collection via Getty Images.

is refracted in our ability to appreciate actors on stage or see expressive faces even where there are none (Fig. 5).

And if we cannot see images or faces without imaginatively projecting the spatial and psychological depth that makes sense of them, then the same is true in more subtle and intricate ways of our ability imaginatively to grasp actions and

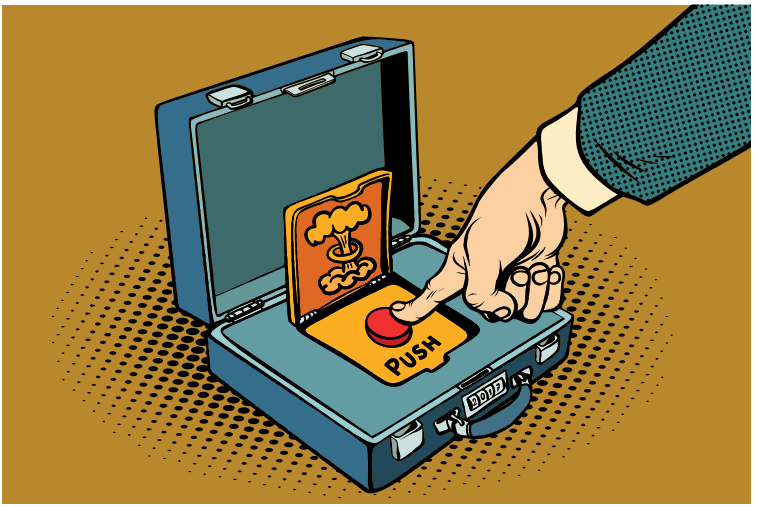


Fig. 6 Rogistok, *Push the Red Button*, undated. Digital illustration. Credit: Adobe Stock.

even entire lives. To see in a finger movement a crime against humanity (Fig. 6), and in a step forward an act of bravery (Fig. 7), requires imaginative projection, informed by memories, expectations, myths, values, and fears. We do not overlay these meanings as belated, optional interpretations on a more basic, neutral perception of component elements: rather, we take in an action and divine its meaning in a single movement. This means that our way of seeing the world is at once immediate and mediating, not merely a matter of finding but always also one of making. This holds both danger and promise. On the one hand, as Pascal observed in his critique of the imagination, it lifts experience from the safe ground of reason: 'The imagination holds sway over everything. It creates beauty, justice, and happiness, which is the entirety of the world.'[6] On the other, as the Romantics realized, it makes us capable of

Fig. 7 Conrad Schmitt Studios, *Martyrdom of St Maximillian Kolbe*, 2014. Stained glass window; Pope St. John Paul II Chapel, University of the Lake, Mundelein, IL. Credit: Original design and creation by Conrad Schmitt Studios. Photo: Fr. Gaurav Schroff.

being co-creators with God. In Coleridge's famous line, 'The primary imagination I hold to be the living Power and prime Agent of all human Perception, and as a repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I Am.'[7]

You will notice the analogical structure of this concept of imagination. It claims that analogous things go on in our perception of everyday objects and images (as in Figs. 1 and 2), our perception of persons and their actions (as in Figs. 4, 6, and 7), our understanding of our own and others' lives, and our way of seeing the world as a whole, our world-view. These include habitual misperceptions (as in Fig. 5) and perceptions to which the terms 'correct' and 'incorrect' cannot easily be applied. On each of these levels, there is a

constant interplay of finding and making: a confrontation with disparate data points which our minds integrate into wholes – into objects, persons, and narratives, and into a whole world with depth and continuity.

In saying this, I am not advancing a radically constructivist view of perception, but rather, to use art historian Ernst Gombrich's term, talking about 'the beholder's share'.[8] In other words, I am taking a broadly phenomenological approach, investigating how phenomena are constituted for us. As Merleau-Ponty puts it: 'Phenomenology … is as painstaking as the works of Balzac, Proust, Valéry or Cézanne – by reason of the same kind of attentiveness and wonder, the same demand for awareness, the same will to seize the meaning of the world or of history as that meaning comes into being.'[9]

Neither is it the primary objective of my account to construct a *model* of the imagination, much less to defend an ontological account of a human faculty called 'imagination' distinct from reason, faith, will, or other putative faculties. If I sometimes reify the imagination, it is only heuristically, not in the sense of a faculty psychology. Many philosophers and psychologists have developed related accounts of human perception using different terms: Wertheimer's 'Gestalt theory', Wittgenstein's idea of 'seeing-as', Merleau-Ponty's phenomenologically dense concept of 'perception'.[10] By using the term 'imagination', I am not constructing a model but bringing a pattern into view (which of course means that I am, in my own terms, doing imaginative work).

The risk remains that I am speaking at a level of generalization or abstraction which, from a psychological point of view, seems nonsensical. Contemporary psychology typically

approaches perception and cognition functionally rather than ontologically: it describes perceptual and cognitive processes that involve a range of bodily systems, identifying the environments and factors that activate such types of processing, their variations and interrelations, and their typical failure modes.[11] Such functional approaches challenge the tendency of philosophers and theologians to ontologize human powers or faculties. At the same time, philosophical concepts such as 'imagination' can serve as focusing lenses, bundling certain processes and phenomena without necessarily adjudicating their ontological status, and can thus direct psychologists towards new questions and investigations.[12] Conversely, some psychological theories strengthen philosophical conjectures. As I have argued elsewhere, the theory of predictive processing (or predictive coding) concretizes some of my phenomenological observations by describing perception as a constant negotiation between 'bottom-up' input and 'top-down' priors, which is operative at all levels of engagement with the world.[13] It is not decisive for the arguments of this book whether we describe the imagination as a faculty, a power or a pattern of processing, or (ultimately) whether we use the term 'imagination' at all. What is decisive are observable patterns of what Heidegger calls our being-in-the-world: the ever-dynamic interplay, at all levels of this being-in-the-world, of discovery and construction.

Hiddenness and Malleability

This book starts from the intuition that our distinctive interplay of finding and making cannot be reduced to either pole: that we live neither in the naïvely realist universe of

many theologians nor in the anti-realist one of postmodernists. Rather, finding and making are inseparable, and this inseparability means that there are real stakes, real risks, and no easy solutions. The ambiguities of invention in its double sense of discovery and creation pervade our self-understanding, our understanding of other people, and our 'metaphysical dreams', including our faith.[14] Faith, indeed, it turns out, plays a pivotal role in our understanding of imagination because it is both a species of imaginative integration and a challenge to our need and capacity for it.

Before embarking on specific studies, I want to highlight and discuss two aspects of the human imagination that are central to its existential and intellectual challenge. The first is that the activity of our imaginative integration of data into patterns or wholes is for the most part hidden from ourselves. It forms part of the processes of perception and understanding, and can therefore be inspected at best indirectly. In Kant's memorable phrase, the imagination is 'a blind but indispensable function of the soul, without which we would have no cognition at all, but of which we are seldom even conscious'.[15]

This hiddenness tends to create the illusion that there is no creative process at all: that what we perceive is straightforwardly *found*. Hume was deeply troubled by this systematic self-concealment. By operating habitually, he thought, the imagination was (in Warnock's succinct paraphrase) 'not only [a] helpful assistant [but a] deceiver, who gives us an altogether unwarranted sense of security …. It is like a drug without which we could not bear to inhabit the world.'[16]

It is a strong claim but one grounded in experience that we cannot ordinarily function without such self-concealment.

When we come face to face with our own imaginative participation in the construal of things, it can propel a crisis of trust in the world: a small crisis if a leaf we picked up turned out in fact to be a bug (the inverse of Fig. 17, Chapter 3); a more profound one if we no longer trust our ability to 'read' the behaviour of those around us, as Shakespeare's Othello and Leontes find to their great cost; or worse, if we realize we might have imagined our very worldview. We usually manage these crises by immediately re-inscribing the *contrast* between fact and fiction: 'I was deluded, and the actual fact of the matter is different.' Doing so, we immediately mask our own imaginative work again.

But we need, instead, to come to terms with our irreducibly constructive, imaginative participation in the world. This is not the same as to argue, with Lyotard, Foucault, Deleuze, Butler and others, for the endless plasticity of reality within a free play of pleasure or desire.[17] Nor is it to say, with Yuval Harari and others, that our past flourishing as humans has been a function of our ability to imagine realities bigger than ourselves – gods, nations, money – which have allowed us to cooperate, but that we must now emancipate ourselves from a belief in our own imaginings and turn what used to be metaphysical *beliefs* into technical *projects*.[18] My argument is different: I affirm that we cannot neatly separate out finding from making, seeing from construing, perceiving from interpreting. But I deny that the solution is to attempt either a reduction to certainty or an emancipation into sheer construction. Our task, rather, is to learn to live in their stress field and shoulder the work of the imagination: to recognize its limits and expand its possibilities. This task is both a perpetual

and a theological one, and this book is intended above all as a series of 'formal indications' (as Heidegger would call them): as ways of helping us undertake that work.[19]

The second notable aspect is the multiplicity of ways in which our imagination is conditioned. To construe objects imaginatively is to match sense impressions or other data to existing mental patterns. Philosophers from Locke and Descartes to Hume, Kant, Husserl, and Sartre, as well as psychologists of various schools, have debated the extent to which these patterns or schemata are innate or acquired and the extent to which, therefore, they are fixed or malleable. The most convincing approach, I think, is a Bayesian one in which the expectations we bring to our perceptions range from the very engrained and normative to the very flexible and ad hoc.[20] How habitually and confidently we match a set of sense impressions or data points to a mental pattern depends on how sure we are of the stability and relevance of that pattern. When we see a piece of abstract art (e.g. Fig. 8), we might be ready to believe it to depict anything or nothing, because we have no stable expectations of what sort of things an abstract painting might depict. (That said, most of us have fairly engrained opinions about the value of modern art, and thus whether or not we think there is anything to which to pay attention here in the first place.[21]) By contrast, when we see a room laid out in tiles, it is nearly impossible for us to see the room as anything *but* rectangular and the tiles as anything *but* regular because our expectations about rooms are so fixed. The Ames Room (Fig. 9) powerfully shows this force of expectation, which persists even when it forces us to see the figures as growing and shrinking.[22]

Fig. 8 Jackson Pollock, *White Light*, 1954. Oil, enamel, and aluminium paint on canvas, 122.4 × 96.9 cm; Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), New York, USA. Credit: © The Pollock-Krasner Foundation ARS, NY and DACS, London 2023. Photo: © Fine Art Images / Bridgeman Images.

Fig. 9 Maksim Popov, *Alice Is Looking for a Black Cat in a Warped Room*, 2023. Photograph; *In the Language of Rules and Exceptions: Science and Art 2023*, exhibition, Moscow Jewish Museum and Tolerance Center, Moscow, Russia. CC BY 4.0 Deed, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Alice_is_looking_for_a_black_cat_in_a_warped_room.jpg.

The relevant point is that most of our imaginative work is hidden from us because most of it is not original but inherited. The patterns to which we match things are not, for the most part, ones that we individually create. Rather, our imaginations are shaped by our families, communities, and societies, whether through long-term exposure to consistent patterns or through acute and persistent reinforcement, for example by social media, political propaganda, or advertisements. Some of our convictions about the shape of things great and small, therefore, are fairly

fixed, especially those that are physically grounded or deeply culturally embedded (such as the shape of rooms). Others, however, are extremely fluid; and part of what our imagination hides from itself is precisely its own malleability. We ensconce ourselves in echo chambers partly in order to constantly reinforce the hidden work of the imagination that is required to uphold a certain way of seeing the world. Once we step out of them, this way of seeing – the patterns into which we have arranged the world – may suddenly seem much less plausible. Stop watching your particular news outlet and the political scene may shift. Stop being at university and your cultural sensibilities may change. Stop going to church and the world may start to seem devoid of God.

This malleability of the imagination – of the habitual ways in which we arrange objects, people, events, and the world

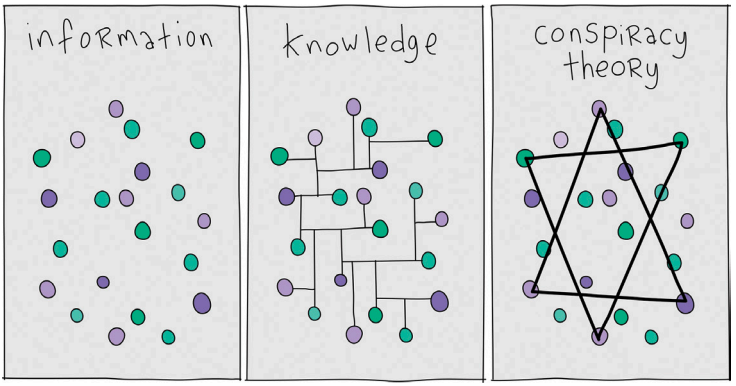


Fig. 10 Gapingvoid Culture Design Group, *Information, Knowledge, & Conspiracy Theories*, 2023. Digital illustration. Credit: Original artwork by @gapingvoid. © Image Copyright – Licensed by Gapingvoid Ltd.

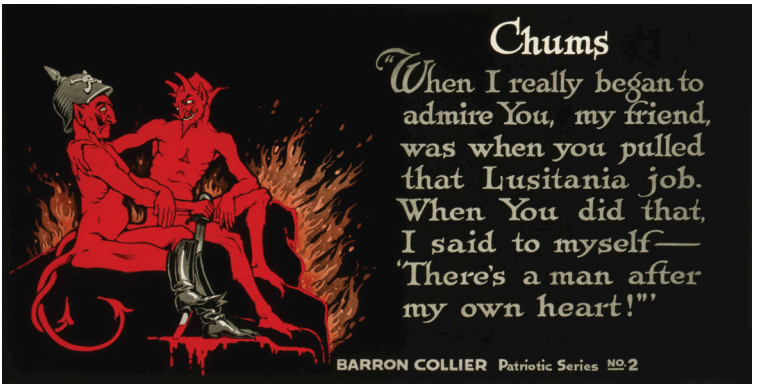
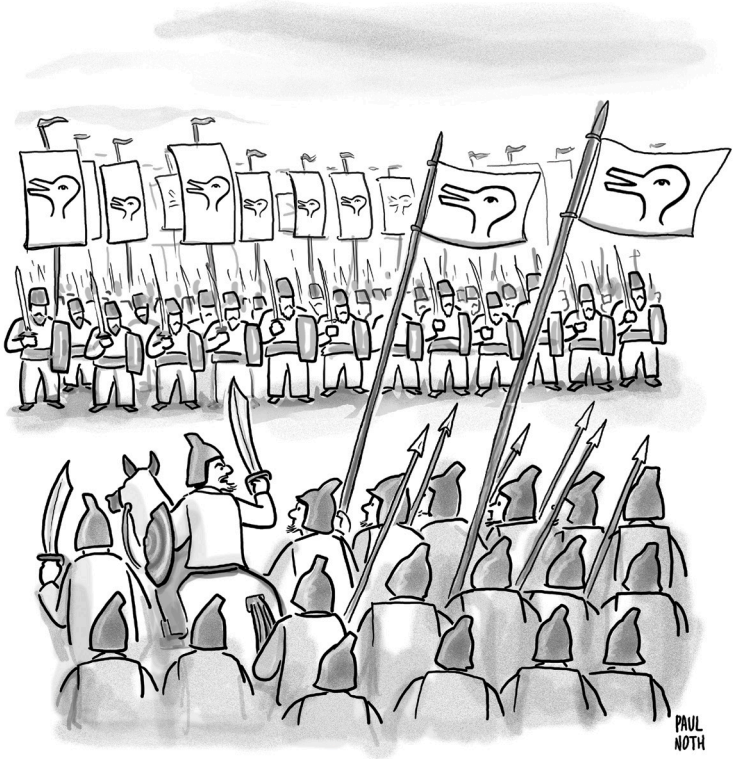


Fig. 11 Barron Collier, *Chums*, c. 1918. Photomechanical print, 27.9 × 53.3 cm; Museum of Fine Arts Boston, Boston, United States of America.

into patterns – does not itself make these arrangements arbitrary or deniable. It is an inalienable feature of our way of being in the world; there is no anti-sceptical cure that will guarantee accurate perception because that is not how perception works. However, the *malleability* of our sense of the world, on the one hand, and its habituated, largely unconscious operation – its *hiddenness* – on the other, do mean that there is a real precariousness to our ways of inhabiting the world and orienting ourselves within it. 'Knowledge' can never *conclusively* be insulated from 'conspiracy theory' (Fig. 10). And this risk is endlessly exploited by economic and political players, whose advertisements and propaganda are, above all, exercises in moulding our ways of imagining the world: associating a car with freedom (or worse, freedom with a car) or a particular political party with evil (Fig. 11). In all these cases, our associations might be as strong as they are arbitrary (Fig. 12).



"There can be no peace until they renounce their Rabbit God and accept our Duck God."

Fig. 12 Paul Noth, *An Army Lines Up for Battle*, 2014. Cartoon; New Yorker. Credit: © Paul Noth / The New Yorker Collection / The Cartoon Bank.

What motivates this book is the dual fact that imagination is both constitutive of life in the world and irreducibly risky. We cannot but construct what we see, and this construction is always fraught with the danger of error, overreach, avoidance, delusion. Stanley Cavell says that

'the dangers of fraudulence, and of trust, are essential to the experience of art'.[23] They are also essential to the experience of life.

Art and Faith

The habituated process of imagining is disrupted in experiences with art. As Chapters 2, 3, and 5 will argue, works of art, literature, and music enable us to become aware of our imaginative work, and thereby expand its possibilities, loosening its rigid and restrictive habits. In this capacity, experiences with art are akin to religious experiences. Theology and religion are often seen as paradigm cases of imposing illusory patterns on the world and on people: of people pretending to find truths where they are merely imagining things, and of insisting that all phenomena fit into these supposed truths, whether or not this does violence to them. I think the opposite is true.

As Chapter 4 will argue, Christian faith is, among other things, a mode of seeing the world which beholds in that world an unseen depth of goodness, significance, and love which we do not make but in which we can participate. For the Christian faith, in other words, the human imagination is in important ways adequate to the nature of reality because our world is poetic, both in the sense that it is God's work or craft and in the sense that we do not merely apprehend but also make the world.[24]

At the same time, Christian faith also suggests that the human imagination always remains *inadequate* to God

and the world: God exceeds our imagining, and the world, other people, and we ourselves have depths and complexities that remain hidden in God. To believe in God demands a commitment to not reducing the complexity of the data points before us, even at the cost of not being able to fully make sense of the world. Such commitment rests on trust that beyond any order we can impose on the world imaginatively, it is and will be held together by God. Chapters 4 and 5 will explore this dialectic of cataphasis and apophasis more fully and illuminate ways in which art, literature, and music can help sustain it.

Interdisciplinarity and Theology

The book proceeds by examining the ways we both discover and constitute the world in individual and communal life, in relation to language and vision, and in our life with art and with faith. The chapters of this book are interrelated, such that what remains unexplained or parenthetical in one is sometimes foregrounded and analyzed in another, and the arguments of all five are mutually informative. All five are also cross-disciplinary, keeping theology, philosophy, history, psychology, art history, and literary criticism in continuous conversation. Their intention is not to master these fields but to get into focus shared concerns and anxieties, confront challenges they pose to each other, unearth resources they lend each other, and formulate questions that can arise only through their dialogue. A certain lightness of tone is necessary to sustain such a conversation, and the book is mostly written in the tone – or

the many tones – of the spoken voice. The text sometimes conducts quiet syntheses or takes unannounced positions within contested fields. Those interested in particular or discipline-specific discussions can find references to relevant debates and texts in the endnotes.

Despite its interdisciplinarity, the conversation staged here is at heart a theological one and is intended, among other things, to model a form of theology, one that is driven by a particular understanding of the Thomist definition of theology as the study of God and of all things in relation to God.[25] Theology, on this definition, seeks to understand a shared whole; and to do so means both to abide by its own principles and to pursue open, critical, and constructive conversations with those from other disciplines and backgrounds. Because theology relates people and fields to each other, it must be responsive to their questions, discoveries, and challenges. Being true to these challenges without thereby giving up the unique vantage point, truth claims, and intellectual and spiritual resources of theology is one of the responsibilities of contemporary theologians.

This responsibility may be realized in a variety of ways, and this book exemplifies only one of them. I want to make explicit some of the guiding intuitions of my approach, so that the arguments of this book do not appear as more, or less, or different than they are. Whether academic arguments convince us, after all, depends not only on their cogency. Rather, their cogency depends on what strikes us as plausible in the first place: what kinds of arguments can be made to count for us. And that in turn depends on our

deepest intuitions of life and faith: on what trade-offs we can accept, on what we can bear, on where we think meaning should be discoverable, and on what should count as meaningless noise.[26]

Precisely because this is so, my own approach is shaped mainly by the questions arising between a Platonically inflected Thomism on the one hand and phenomenology and hermeneutics on the other. On the one hand, my approach is grounded in an ontology with realist depth, which enables certain modes of enquiry: I believe that in God all things hold together, and can therefore be investigated with courage and tenacity; that humans and all created things have dignity, and can therefore be approached with humility and empathy; and that creation is not yet finished, and can therefore be engaged with openness and creativity. On the other hand, the nature of this enquiry, in my case, is not primarily metaphysical, doctrinal, or textual. The questions asked in this book about the imagination do not begin with a metaphysical account of the world ('What metaphysical structures underlie this experience?'), with a doctrine ('What is the trinitarian or Christological shape or grounding of this experience?'), or with a text ('What does Barth say about this?'). Rather, they begin with a sustained focus on the conditions, qualities, and implications of the experience.

This is a phenomenological and hermeneutical habit. Phenomenology and hermeneutics ask about the ways experience is constituted: how we identify and relate to the objects of our enquiry, how they affect us and we them, and how these relationships change and interact with others.[27]

Theology, it seems to me, both demands and complicates such questions because God is not simply an object of enquiry. As Kierkegaard showed so meticulously, humans' relations with God are necessarily subjective and personal because God defies objectification.[28] On the one hand, therefore, to assume an 'objective', disengaged standpoint from which to investigate God's existence and character misses an essential part of what one seeks to understand, namely that there is no such standpoint. On the other, asking these questions in relation to God reveals God as a *transformative* subject matter which directly affects our vision not only of the world, but of ourselves, our modes of knowledge, and how we are to live, act, and speak in the world. This does not leave phenomenology or hermeneutics untouched. The aim of this book, therefore, is neither a pure phenomenology nor a systematic theology, but a mixed account that reflects the depth, breadth, and complexity of ordinary and intellectual life, especially a life of faith.

The Plan of This Book

The work of this book unfolds in five chapters. Following the introductory Chapter 1, Chapter 2 begins by interrogating the modern ideal of authenticity, which has arisen in partial response to the loss of inherited confidence in objective metaphysical and moral frameworks. I argue that by assuming an unmediated access to an 'authentic' self, this ideal fails to acknowledge the ways in which even

our self-understanding is mediated by imaginative projections that are never purely personal but always inherited and constructed. These complex, communal dynamics of our imaginative construal of selfhood are not to be evaded but, rather, engaged. I therefore discuss role-playing – the inhabitation of social and narrative roles – as indispensable for forming authentic relationships to oneself and others. Such role-playing exemplifies both the risks and the possibilities of imaginative finding and making, and though it does not solve the problem of self-understanding, it elucidates its limits. Drawing on meta-theatrical examples from William Shakespeare and Samuel Beckett, I argue for a creative and open-ended life with roles.

Chapter 3 extends the argument of Chapter 2 by describing language itself as an inherited practice of imaginative gestalt formation, shaping an inarticulate 'mess of imprecision of feeling' (T. S. Eliot) into inherited forms of verbal sense-making. This practice is always necessarily fraught with ambiguity. The underdetermination of the stuff that is shaped into language is neither conclusively resolved by articulation nor available in more direct, unmediated form. The patterns into which it is cast are neither fully stable nor fully shared among conversation partners. The resulting ambiguity of all our speaking is constitutive of our common life with language; yet we inhabit it, for the most part, unaware of our own role in it. I argue that the verbal experiments of poetry bring this dynamic to consciousness and create new possibilities of inhabiting the world in language.

I then widen this argument to other forms of art, showing how visual artists loosen our habituated ways of

encountering the visible world by bringing to consciousness our own imaginative work of seeing. In doing so, artists do not impose an alternative picture of the world (as if making could, after all, be reduced to finding) but rather grant us a double vision that allows us to see the world in new ways, consciously participating in its utterance. The chapter concludes by discussing ways in which the Christian liturgy and Scriptures enable such renewals of perception in more existentially demanding ways.

Chapter 4 investigates this theological claim critically by examining the imaginative work that goes into a life with God. I draw on psychological research and on the spiritual senses tradition to discuss the malleability of the human sense of God, suggesting both the power of spiritual formation and the unavoidable risk of projection and self-deception. I then discuss how, in the case of spiritual realities that are acknowledged to be beyond material presence, it is possible to speak about 'perception' at all: whether there can be signs or criteria. Drawing on C. S. Lewis's theory of transposition, and on the foregoing discussion of art, I discuss ways in which an imaginative perception of a 'metaphysical depth' beyond the physical order might be possible. I conclude by emphasizing the centrality of an experience of divine absence, and of the nonsensicality rather than merely the meaningfulness of the world, to such spiritual vision.

The end of Chapter 4 moves from phenomenological to theological argument, and Chapter 5 concludes that turn, laying out a theological account of eschatology and arguing for ways in which the human experience of finding and making

is consonant and can be lived in light of it. Christian eschatology affirms a divine purpose for creation, which invites humans into creative co-creation. At the same time, it promises the consummation of this purpose not as the actualization of latent potential but as a divine gift of new creation. This promise is both an invitation to imagine the world differently and a declaration of the limits of all imaginative construction. Drawing again on Shakespeare and Beckett, I outline a form of theatre that exhibits what I call an eschatological imagination. The concluding Chapter 6 suggests the significance of such an eschatological imagination within ordinary life.

Together, these chapters argue that if the Christian faith is a way of making sense of the world, it does not do so merely by laying out a metaphysical or doctrinal pattern to which to adjust our perception. Rather, it makes sense of the world by enabling us to hold open horizons that we always rush to foreclose, and to sustain uncertainty in the light of a divine promise. To realize this capacity, however, requires a deep faith in a God whom we cannot grasp and take full hold of: a God who is not simply available and who does not simply enable the fulfilment of our ambitions, though he holds out the gift of eternal life. Such faith engenders, among other things, a self-abnegating theological imagination: a realization of both the adequacy and inadequacy of our ways of sense-making to the mystery of creation. Yes, theology constructs. It constructs metaphysical accounts of the world; it constructs theories and images to guide us. But they are light, tentative, humble, because when we construct theologically, we are not building towers; we are building boats. And we trust the sea.

Notes

1. The history of the term *Einbildungskraft* or *imagination* is indicative of, though not coextensive with, the phenomenon this book has in view. That phenomenon is described in a variety of terms and accounts, some of which are discussed later in the Chapter 1. Already Thomas Aquinas, following Aristotle, gives a related account centred on the concept of the *conversio ad phantasmata* in *Summa Theologiae* 1.86.2 and 2; 1.84.7; see Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae: Latin Text and English Translation, Introductions, Notes, Appendices, and Glossaries*, translated and edited Thomas Gilby et al., 61 vols (London: Blackfriars in conjunction with Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1964–1981). There is, to my knowledge, neither a full history of the manifold accounts of the constructive or creative aspect of human perception (what this book calls 'imagination') nor of the term 'imagination' in its manifold uses; but see e.g. Mary Warnock, *Imagination* (London: Faber, 1976); Edward S. Casey, *Imagining: A Phenomenological Study* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1976).

   The term 'imagination' as used in this book is indebted primarily to the continental tradition of philosophy. There has also been a growing interest in the imagination in the analytic tradition, which is engendering scholarship whose sources, questions, assumptions, and methods often differ from those of the continental scholarship on either the term or the phenomenon. This book does not engage directly with this growing analytic literature, which is represented e.g. by Shaun Nichols (ed.), *The Architecture of the Imagination: New Essays on Pretense, Possibility, and Fiction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006); Tamar Szabó Gendler, *Intuition, Imagination, and Philosophical Methodology* (Oxford: Oxford University

Press, 2010); Amy Kind (ed.), *The Routledge Handbook of Philosophy of Imagination* (London: Routledge, 2016); Amy Kind and Peter Kung (eds), *Knowledge through Imagination* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016); Kathleen Stock, *Only Imagine: Fiction, Interpretation and Imagination* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017); Greg Currie, *Imagining and Knowing: The Shape of Fiction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020); Amy Kind and Christopher Badura (eds), *Epistemic Uses of Imagination* (London: Routledge, 2021); Amy Kind, *Imagination and Creative Thinking* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022).

2. Warnock, *Imagination*, 10.
3. David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, edited by David Fate Norton and Mary J. Norton (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2000), 1.1.7.15. On Hume's concept of imagination, see e.g. J. Broughton, 'Impressions and Ideas,' in S. Traiger (ed.), *The Blackwell Guide to Hume's Treatise* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006), 43–58; T. M. Costelloe, *The Imagination in Hume's Philosophy* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2018); Tito Magri, *Hume's Imagination* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022).
4. Immanuel Kant, *Kritik der reinen Vernunft* (Riga: Harknoch, edition A 1781, edition B 1787), translated and edited by Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood as *Critique of Pure Reason* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), A141 = B181. The imagination (*Einbildungskraft*) is a central concept in Kant's account of the possibility of experience and understanding, and there is a great deal of scholarship on the topic, including Karl Homann, 'Zum Begriff Einbildungskraft nach Kant,' *Archiv für Begriffsgeschichte* 14 (1970), 266–302; Hermann Mörchen, *Die Einbildungskraft bei Kant* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1970); Rudolf Makkreel, *Imagination and Interpretation in Kant* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press,

1990); Gary Banham, *Kant's Transcendental Imagination* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005); Jane Kneller, *Kant and the Power of Imagination* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007); Matthias Wunsch, *Einbildungskraft und Erfahrung bei Kant* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2012); Michael L. Thompson (ed.), *Imagination in Kant's Critical Philosophy* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2016); Rolf-Peter Horstmann, *Kant's Power of Imagination* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018); Timothy Burns et al. (eds), *The New Yearbook for Phenomenology and Phenomenological Philosophy*, vol. 17, pt 2: *The Imagination: Kant's Phenomenological Legacy* (London: Routledge, 2019).

5. Exemplary philosophical treatments of faces are Stanley Cavell, 'Knowing and Acknowledging,' in *Must We Mean What We Say?* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969), 238–266; Roger Scruton, *The Face of God* (London: Continuum, 2014); Hans Belting, *Face and Mask: A Double History*, translated by Thomas S. Hansen and Abby J. Hansen (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2017). Empirical studies show that those suffering from depression or schizophrenia have a greater tendency to see and remember faces as displaying negative affect; see e.g. Jukka M. Leppänen, Maarten Milders, J. Stephen Bell, Emma Terriere, and Jari K. Hietanen, 'Depression Biases the Recognition of Emotionally Neutral Faces,' *Psychiatry Research* 128, no. 2 (2004), 123–133; Sara M. Levens and Ian H. Gotlib, 'Updating Positive and Negative Stimuli in Working Memory in Depression,' *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General* 139, no. 4 (2010), 654–664; A. E. Pinkham, C. Brensinger, C. Kohler, R. E. Gur, and R. C. Gur, 'Actively Paranoid Patients with Schizophrenia Over-Attribute Anger to Neutral Faces,' *Schizophrenia Research* 125, nos. 2–3 (2011), 174–178.

6. 'L'imagination dispose de tout. Elle fait la beauté, la justice et le bonheur qui est le tout du monde'; Pascal, *Pensées*, edited by Philippe Sellier (Paris: Garnier, 1999), 78. Pascal's concept of imagination does not, of course, wholly overlap with mine; examinations of his concept are found e.g. in Gérard Ferreyrolles, *Les reines du monde: l'imagination et la coutume chez Pascal* (Paris: Champion, 1995); Matthew Maguire, *The Conversion of Imagination: From Pascal through Rousseau to Tocqueville* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006); Alberto Frigo, 'Necessary Error: Pascal on Imagination and Descartes's Fourth Meditation,' *Early Modern French Studies* 39, no. 1 (2017), 31–44.
7. S. T. Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria or Biographical Sketches of My Literary Life and Opinions*, edited by James Engell and W. Jackson Bate (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1983), 1:304 (ch. 13). The literature on Coleridge's and Romantic thought on the imagination is vast. Classic studies include I. A. Richards, *Coleridge on Imagination* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co, 1934); J. Robert Barth, *The Symbolic Imagination: Coleridge and the Romantic Tradition* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1977).
8. Ernst Gombrich, *Art and Illusion* (London: Phaedon, 2nd ed., 1961), 145–231.
9. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phénomènologie de la perception* (Paris: Gallimard, 1945), translated by Colin Smith as *The Phenomenology of Perception* (London: Routledge, 1962), xxiv.
10. See e.g. the collection of Max Wertheimer's writings in W. D. Ellis (ed.), *A Source Book of Gestalt Psychology* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co, 1938); Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations = Philosophische Untersuchungen*, edited and translated by G. E. M.

Anscombe (Oxford: Blackwell, 1953), pt 2, §xi; Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*. The clearest account of the wider significance of Wittgenstein's discussion of aspect perception or seeing-as remains Stephen Mulhall, *On Being in the World: Wittgenstein and Heidegger on Seeing Aspects* (London: Routledge, 1990).

11. See, for example, the literature on the Stroop effect.
12. An eighteen-month project entitled *Mapping the Imagination*, funded by the Templeton Religion Trust (TRT0354) at the University of St Andrews, investigated just such mutual challenges, questions, and illuminations. The project was led by Prof. Judith Wolfe in collaboration with Dr Marina Iosifyan and produced a range of empirical studies, presented among others in Marina Iosifyan, Anton Sidoroff-Dorso, and Judith Wolfe, 'Cross-Modal Associations between Paintings and Sounds: Effects of Embodiment,' *Perception* 51, no. 12 (2023), 871–888; Marina Iosifyan and Judith Wolfe, 'Everyday Life vs Art: Effects of Perceptual Context on the Mode of Object Interpretation,' *Empirical Studies of the Arts* 42, no. 1 (2023), 166–191; Marina Iosifyan and Judith Wolfe, 'Buffering Effect of Fiction on Negative Emotions: Engagement with Negatively Valenced Fiction Decreases the Intensity of Negative Emotions,' *Cognition and Emotion* (2024): 1–18, doi: https://doi.org/10.1080/02699931.2024.2314986; and Marina Iosifyan and Judith Wolfe, 'Poetry vs Everyday Life: Context Increases Perceived Meaningfulness of Sentences' (under review).
13. The best introduction to predictive processing remains Andy Clark, *Surfing Uncertainty* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016). Though sometimes criticized as relying on a representational model of perception and cognition by other theorists of enactive, embedded, embodied, and extended (4E)

cognition, many predictive processing theorists (incl. Clark) rely on embodied cognition; for discussions, see e.g. M. Miller and A. Clark, 'Happily Entangled: Prediction, Emotion, and the Embodied Mind,' *Synthese* 195 (2018), 2559–2575; Jakob Hohwy, 'The Predictive Processing Hypothesis,' in Albert Newen, Leon De Bruin, and Shaun Gallagher (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of 4E Cognition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 129–146. I have written briefly about the relationship of my philosophical questions and predictive processing in Judith Wolfe, 'The Renewal of Perception in Religious Faith and Biblical Narrative,' *European Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 13, no. 4 (2022), 111–128.

14. The term 'metaphysical dream' was coined by Richard Weaver in *Ideas Have Consequences* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1948), 17 and *passim*.
15. Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason* A78 = B103; see also A120.
16. Warnock, *Imagination*, 25.
17. Jean-François Lyotard, *La Condition postmoderne: Rapport sur le savoir* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1979), translated by Geoffrey Bennington and Brian Massumi as *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984); Michel Foucault, *Les mots et les choses: Une archéologie des sciences humaines* (Paris: Gallimard, 1966), translated as *The Order of Things* (New York: Pantheon, 1970); Foucault, *L'Archéologie du Savoir* (Paris: Gallimard, 1969), translated by A. M. Sheridan Smith as *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (New York: Pantheon, 1972); Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Capitalisme et schizophrénie. L'anti-Œdipe* (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1972), translated by Robert Hurley, Mark Seem, and Helen R. Lane as *Anti-Oedipus* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1972); Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble:*

Feminism and the Subversion of Identity (New York: Routledge, 1990) and *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of 'Sex'* (New York: Routledge, 1993).

18. See Yuval Noah Harari in *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind* (London: Vintage, 2014) and *Homo Deus: A Brief History of Tomorrow* (London: Vintage, 2016).
19. A recent work arguing the complementary converse of my case – namely that images have their own power to instil in us an 'incomprehensible certainty' of the world's metaphysical depth – is Thomas Pfau, *Incomprehensible Certainty: Metaphysics and Hermeneutics of the Image* (South Bend, IN: Notre Dame University Press, 2022).
20. This is a central claim of theorists of predictive processing, as well as influential strands of analytic philosophy (e.g. Willard Van Orman Quine, 'Two Dogmas of Empiricism,' *The Philosophical Review* 60 (1951), 20–43).
21. See e.g. Susie Hodge, *Why Your Five Year Old Could Not Have Done That: Modern Art Explained* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2012).
22. The Ames Room is named after its inventor, Adelbert Ames, who constructed the first such room in 1946 on principles derived from Hermann Helmholtz; see W. H. Ittelson, *The Ames Demonstrations in Perception* (London and Princeton, NJ: Hafner, 1952). Much research has been conducted with and on this visual experiment, and there are conflicting accounts of its implications. A seminal debate is that between James J. Gibson (in *The Senses Considered as Perceptual Systems* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1966) and subsequent works) and Ernst H. Gombrich (in *Art and Illusion*). The so-called Honi phenomenon, named after the woman who first reported it, shows that very close familiarity with a person in the Ames Room will sometimes override its effect;

see seminally Warren J. Wittreich, 'The Honi Phenomenon: A Case of Selective Perceptual Distortion,' *Journal of Abnormal & Social Psychology* 47, no. 3 (July 1952), 705–712; Kenneth L. and Karen K. Dion, 'The Honi Phenomenon Revisited: Factors Underlying the Resistance to Perceptual Distortion of One's Partner,' *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 33, no. 2 (1976), 170–177.

23. Stanley Cavell, 'Music Discomposed,' in *Must We Mean What We Say?*, 180–212, p. 188.
24. Although I will later discuss some points of specifically Christian doctrine, I will not offer any direct comparison of Christian theological resources with those of other religions or explicitly delimit Christian faith against other faiths. How other religious traditions agree and differ in their approaches to the questions raised in this book is for practitioners of those traditions to answer.
25. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* 1.1.7. See also esp. John Webster, 'What Makes Theology Theological?' in *God without Measure: Working Papers in Christian Theology* (London: T&T Clark, 2016), vol. 1, ch. 14, and 'Theological Theology,' in *Confessing God: Essays in Christian Dogmatics II* (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2016), ch. 1.
26. Chris Insole makes this case in detail in *Negative Natural Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2025).
27. A good introduction to phenomenology is Robert Sokolowski, *Introduction to Phenomenology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999). Since the beginning of phenomenology in the early twentieth century, the relation between phenomenology and metaphysics – whether phenomenology bars, presupposes, implies, or fleshes out metaphysics, or exposes any attempt at metaphysics as incoherent – has been a central topic of debate. Edmund

Husserl and Martin Heidegger were both ambivalent about the question and adopted changing views on it; and the extent to which, independently of their explicit thoughts on the question, their own phenomenologies were metaphysically implicated is very much a living debate. For their own views, see Husserl, *Die Krisis der europäischen Wissenschaften und die transzendentale Phänomenologie: Eine Einleitung in die phänomenologische Philosophie* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1954), translated by David Carr as *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology: An Introduction to Phenomenological Philosophy* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1970) and other works; and Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit* (Halle: Niemeyer, 1927), translated by John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson as *Being and Time* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1962). For early debates, see esp. Edith Stein, 'Husserls Phänomenologie und die Philosophie des Hl. Thomas von Aquino,' in Martin Heidegger (ed.), *Festschrift, Edmund Husserl zum 70. Geburtstag gewidmet* (Halle: Niemeyer, 1929), 315–338, and Erich Przywara, 'Drei Richtungen der Phänomenologie,' *Stimmen der Zeit* 115 (1928), 252–264. Recent contributions include Stefano Bancalari (ed.), *Religion et 'Attitude Naturelle'*, *Archivio di Filosofia* 90, nos. 2–3 (2022); Judith Wolfe, *Heidegger and Theology* (London: T&T Clark, 2014); and many others. The debate surrounding later phenomenology, particularly the second and third generation of French phenomenologists, was seminally shaped by Dominique Janicaud (ed.), *Le Tournant théologique de la phénoménologie française* (Combas: Éditions de l'Éclat, 1991), translated as *Phenomenology and the Theological Turn: The French Debate* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2001).

28. See e.g. Kierkegaard, *Begrebet Angest: En simpel psychologisk-paapegende Overveielse i Retning af det dogmatiske* (Copenhagen: C. A. Reitzel, 1843), translated by Reidar Thomte as *The Concept of Anxiety* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1980); Kierkegaard, *Sygdommen til Døden: En christelig psychologisk Udvikling til Opbyggelse og Opvækkelse* (Copenhagen: C. A. Reitzel, 1849), translated by Edna H. Hong and Howard V. Hong as *The Sickness unto Death* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1983).