



FROM FORMIDABLE, TO FICTIONAL, TO A FLICKER: GOD'S RETURN AFTER THE DEATH OF GOD

Jessica Eastwood

*Department of Theology and Philosophy, King's College School, UK
Correspondence email address: jge@kcs.org.uk*

ABSTRACT: This paper explores three responses to Nietzsche's declaration of the Death of God, each presenting a distinct impasse, a dichotomy, and a wager. The first response is Nietzsche's atheistic stance, the second is Don Cupitt's non-realism, and the third is Richard Kearney's anatheism. The paper posits that Kearney's anatheism offers solace to modern believers by reclaiming spirituality in a post-secular context, presenting a conception of God after the Death of God, while taking Nietzsche's proclamation seriously. The analysis reveals a shift in understanding God's nature: from the formidable God of theodicy to a fictionalised, nuanced conception, and finally to a minimalist approach reimagining God as a 'flicker' of the transcendent. By expanding upon anatheism, the paper proposes an alternative, minimalist approach to the divine through the language of supervenience, suggesting that this apophatic approach has roots in a classical theological tradition.

KEYWORDS: Anatheism; apophaticism; Death of God; non-realism; realism, supervenience

Introduction

In this paper, we will examine three distinct responses to Nietzsche's proclamation of the Death of God, including Nietzsche's own perspective. Each response presents a unique impasse, resulting in a dichotomy and a wager. I will propose that the third response to the Death of God claim may offer solace to the modern-day believer, who seeks to reclaim spirituality in our post-secular context. This believer aims to present a conception of God after the Death of God while taking Nietzsche's proclamation seriously.

In examining the three responses to Nietzsche's declaration, we will observe a shift in the understanding of God's nature. The first response addresses the formidable,

oppressive, and absolute God of theodicy, existing ‘out there.’ The second response reframes this formidable God into a fictional realm, ultimately revealing a more nuanced, minimalist conception. The third response embraces this minimalist approach, reimagining God as a ‘flicker’ of the transcendent. I will argue that this third apprehension of God may hold the most resonance with modern-day believers.

I will draw on three key figures in this paper. The first, as mentioned, is Nietzsche who provides the initial atheistic response to the death of the formidable God. The second figure is Don Cupitt, who offers a non-realist response by reframing the formidable God as a fictional reality. In his later works, however, Cupitt adopts a more minimalist understanding of God while still situating this nuanced conception within a fictional framework. The third figure is Richard Kearney, who presents an alternative response to the Death of God, distinct from Nietzsche’s atheism and Cupitt’s non-realism. Kearney introduces anatheism, a position that intentionally moves through atheism and, as I will argue, non-realism to present “God after God” (Kearney, 2010, p. 3). This concept of God is reflected in the prefix “ana,” meaning “back again, anew” (Kearney, 2021, p. 79). In the spirit of anatheism and going back in order to go forwards, I will begin by elaborating on Kearney’s anatheistic response to the Death of God.

God’s Return After the Death of God

To elucidate an anatheistic approach to the return of God after the Death of God, Kearney employs the powerful language used by the Alcoholics Anonymous programme, particularly the phrase “we hope for the impossible.” In a 2018 published discussion on the relationship between theism, atheism, and anatheism—where anatheism represents hope for the impossible—Kearney draws on the terminology of the AA programme:

Being cured of an addiction that nothing else – no medicine, theory or psychopharmacology—can seem to heal. Nobody knows why AA works. But somewhere along the line, you begin with the admission that you’re totally helpless before this addiction. Nobody goes to AA unless he or she is at rock bottom. And then out of that confession of emptiness, out of that total surrender [...] the addict hands over his or her powerlessness to what’s called a ‘higher power’ – however that may be defined. It doesn’t have to be a transcendent God. It doesn’t have to be a metaphysical or biblical ‘God.’ But there’s something *else*, something *other*, something *more*, *extra*, *strange* in the sense of not-me, beyond me, more than me. And this is what I’m trying to get at. (Wood and Kearney, 2018, p. 17).

And this *something other*, Kearney confirms, exists beyond language, a point that is pressed to separate out anatheism from atheism, and indeed I argue non-realism.

While engaging with this discussion and the language employed by the AA programme, I was reminded of Nancy Ellen Abrams’ 2015 book, *A God That Could Be*

Real. This work delves into Abrams's journey as an atheist philosopher of science grappling with an eating disorder. Upon joining a twelve-step programme, she is encouraged to invoke a 'higher power'—a concept she initially rejects. Remarkably, this approach proves effective, prompting Abrams to explore the underlying reasons and inspiring a lifelong inquiry. Her personal encounter with a higher power intersects with her unique perspective on some of the most significant astronomical discoveries of our time. Her husband, the esteemed physicist and cosmologist Joel Primack, has significantly contributed to the contemporary understanding of the universe, particularly through theories involving dark matter and dark energy. Consequently, Abrams seeks a conception of a higher power that aligns with this evolving cosmological framework.

In *A God That Could Be Real*, Abrams redefines the concept of God in a manner that aligns with her personal beliefs and contemporary scientific insights. She contends that humans possess what Carl Jung termed a "god-capacity," an inherent drive that has historically led individuals to seek a higher power (Abrams, 2015, p. 84). This pursuit, which Abrams herself engaged in during her recovery, underscores a quest for a conception of God that satisfies intellectually, emotionally, and spiritually.

This desire to apprehend the nature of God on an intellectual, emotional and spiritual level resonates with Kearney's anatheism. This is because anatheism seeks a middle path beyond the extremes of militant atheism and dogmatic theism—the polar opposites of certainty. Anatheism maintains a unique form of transcendence, surpassing atheism and, as I will argue, non-realism too. It navigates through atheism by taking the Death of God claim seriously and acknowledging the uncertainty it introduces. However, rather than adopting atheism due to this uncertainty, anatheism embraces it, accepting uncertainty as an integral part of believing in a 'higher sacred power.'

Kearney draws on Keats to illuminate this idea. Keats speaks of "*negative capability*," that is, the capability of being "in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts without any irritable reaching after fact and reason" (Kearney, 2010, p. 11). This is how Kearney envisions the anatheistic position—moving through and beyond atheism, anchored in "hope for the impossible," with the impossible being a higher power that transcends language. Thus, I suggest that anatheism also surpasses non-realism, as it remains true to metaphysics, albeit in a nebulous and modest sense.

By transcending both atheism and non-realism, anatheism seems to resonate most with those who seek a renewed engagement with the divine. It appeals to individuals who, while moving beyond traditional theistic frameworks, still yearn for a meaningful spiritual experience. This includes modern-day believers who are open to reimagining their relationship with the sacred in a post-secular context – those who seek to reimagine God after the Death of God and beyond atheism, adopting a minimalist approach to the divine as apophatically "something else, something other, something more, extra, strange in the sense of not-me, beyond me, more than me." And I suggest that is who Kearney describes at the beginning of his 2009 book, *Anatheism*:

What comes after God? What follows in the wake of our letting go of God? What emerges out of that night of not-knowing, that moment of abandoning and abandonment? Especially for those who – after ridding themselves of “God” – still seek God? (Kearney, 2010, p. 3).

Anatheism is hope, *not* certainty, of the impossible being possible. It’s a “receiving back what we’ve given up as if we were encountering it for the first time” (Kearney, 2010, p. 3). Moreover, I suggest that Kearney’s anatheistic disposition presents God’s return after the Death of God as a ‘flicker’ of the transcendent. Moreover, I propose that Kearney’s anatheistic response to the Death of God might align the most with the modern-day believer.

Anatheism, as we will see, is not a rigid position, but it is more than just ‘breathing room.’ It represents a continuous journey—a constant intellectual, emotional, and spiritual questioning of one’s faith in the face of adversity. It looks to offer a genuine way to maintain belief that ‘there is more than this’ through the rocky terrain of our post-secular context. It does so *without* insisting that the modern-day believer ‘return to the formidable God’ that was the object of faith before the Death of God but without abandoning the metaphysical altogether like the atheist and the non-realist do.

So, to confirm, why is anatheism not atheism? Kearney explains that if atheism remains merely a negation, it risks being reactive rather than proactive. It may fail to reaffirm life and recognise it as the most sacred aspect of a post-secular world. Nietzsche’s declaration of the ‘Will to Power’ as the primary truth of existence confines him to a voluntarist universe where even ‘life’ becomes a personal mythology. In contrast, anatheism offers the possibility of belief after atheism.

Why is anatheism distinct from non-realism, particularly given that Cupitt’s religious non-realism actively seeks to affirm life positively? Cupitt aims to draw our attention to *this* life, recognising “life” as an idiom for “it all.” He even equates God with life, suggesting that God is life and life is God (Cupitt, 2003, p. 7). At a surface level, anatheism might seem to align with non-realism for this reason. Additionally, anatheism’s concept of transcendence, often described as ‘immanent transcendence’—a ‘*surplus* of meaning’ found within *this* world—might appear similar (Veldsman, 2018, p. 99). This weak form of transcendence, inscribed in everyday immanence, clearly diverges from classical transcendence, a notion that non-realism also seeks to avoid.

However, in anatheism, the transcendent and the immanent do not converge or conflate; transcendence remains distinct. For the non-realist, there is no transcendent level—only the concrete material world, where the sacred and the secular are identical. In contrast, for the anatheist, the sacred and the secular are inextricably interconnected yet never identical. Furthermore, anatheism is not non-realism because it posits a uniquely transcendent sacredness that cannot be reduced to naturalistic language. Is it not then a theistic position? Not quite. While it preserves space for transcendence—something Nietzsche’s atheism and Cupitt’s non-realism discard—it presents a minimalist approach to apprehending its nature. Kearney explicitly describes anatheism as “third way beyond the extremes of dogmatic theism and

militant atheism” (Kearney, 2010, p. 3). It embodies the idea of “retrieving, revisiting, reiterating, repeating” (Kearney, 2015, p. 7).

However — although this is a topic for a separate paper — I am sympathetic to the suggestion that Kearny’s anatheistic approach might resonate with a self-consciously apophatic theological tradition that is epistemically and existentially hesitant to speak in absolute or certain terms about the divine. Moreover, I do not intend to imply that all theists adopt a view of God as formidable. Rather, the overall aim of the paper is to present three responses to the Death of God: Nietzschean atheism, Cupittian non-realism and Kearnean anatheism, and suggest that Kearney’s anatheism might provide the most intellectually, emotionally and spiritually satisfying response for the modern-day believer. With that said, I do not merely provide an exegesis of Kearney’s position; rather, I offer an interpretation of anatheism in support of a minimalist approach to the transcendent as articulated in this paper.

Before I present Nietzsche’s response to the death of the formidable God, it might be worth briefly suggesting why anatheism might appeal to the modern-day believer who finds themselves, throughout their lives, actively engaging and meaningfully questioning their faith. A practice or process, I would argue, that even the traditional theist will charter as they navigate the trials and tribulations of life, death, love, sickness, and the ultimate sense of meaning. An anaesthetic response to the Death of God, firstly, safeguards the *reality* of that which might best be described as divine in nature. And, secondly, it refrains from committing the modern-day believer to additional metaphysical beliefs that they might find difficult to accept. We will now make our way through each of the responses to the Death of God provided by Nietzsche, Cupitt and Kearney.

Nietzsche: Death of the Formidable God

Do we still hear nothing as yet of the noise of the grave-diggers who are burying God? Do we smell nothing as yet of the divine decomposition? – Gods, too, decompose. God is dead. God remains dead. And we have killed him. ‘How can we console ourselves, the murderers of all murders? What was holiest and mightiest of all that the world has owned has bled to death under our knives: who will wipe this blood off us? What water is there for us to clean ourselves? What festivals of atonement, what sacred games shall we have to invent? Is not the greatest of this deed too great for us? Must we ourselves not become gods simply to appear worthy of it? There has never been a greater deed. (Nietzsche, 2010, p. 181)

In his 1882 book, *The Gay Science*, Nietzsche proclaims the disappearance of the old, familiar divinities that we once revered as idols of gold. Through his atheistic philosophy, he deconstructs the concept of the omnipotent God of dominion — the formidable deity of power and might, the God of superintendence, theodicy, and

punishment. Nietzsche declares that we have 'killed' this God through the ascendancy of secularism, scepticism and a scientific worldview. Given the numerous interpretations of Nietzsche's notion of the Death of God—for instance, Jayne Svenungsson cites Nietzsche suggesting that it was theologians who "killed" God—it is important to note that I do not engage with the broader debate on Nietzsche's intended meaning. Instead, I present my own interpretation, which I believe aligns with a predominant scholarly reading.

As a result, what we see at the end of the nineteenth-century is the displacement of metaphysics, which had hitherto provided meaning to human existence and a sense of its value. And it is here that we encounter the first insurmountable impasse presented by Nietzsche: it is no longer tenable to believe in the formidable God. We can no longer rely on objective moral values or hold metaphysical beliefs. This impasse necessitates a completely new way of generating meaning. It is an impasse characterised by meaninglessness and hopelessness.

As a result of this declaration and the impasse it presents, a *dichotomy* was created: dogmatic theism or militant atheism. This reductive and simplistic 'God-or-bust' dichotomy reflects Nietzsche's wider dichotomous position: truth or illusion; the truth being militant atheism and the illusion being dogmatic theism.

Moreover, the impasse presented by Nietzsche and resulting dichotomy leaves individuals with the responsibility to wager on creating their own values and meanings in life. In works like *The Gay Science* and *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, Nietzsche emphasises that this process requires a profound re-evaluation of all values and a commitment to living authentically and creatively. The concept of the *Übermensch* embodies this idea, representing an individual who transcends conventional morality to forge their own values based on their 'Will to Power'. Thus, Nietzsche's philosophy involves a significant wager on the creation of personal values in the absence of traditional metaphysical and moral frameworks.

Now, despite being a militant atheist, Nietzsche recognised that the impasse of an untenable belief in a formidable God, along with its dichotomy—either belief in this God or atheism—and the resulting wager to create our own values, would be an enormous challenge. One that many would not be able to undertake. Many people had yet to grasp the profound implications of this paradigm shift, as evidenced by the laughter that greeted the declaration of God's death in *The Gay Science*. Nietzsche himself harboured doubts about his own capacity to embody the qualities of the *Übermensch*.

It is important to note that Nietzsche's existentialism is not paralleled by today's anti-God squad: Richard Dawkins, Christopher Hitchens, and Sam Harris. Whilst they take seriously the impasse presented by the Death of God, the *dichotomy* of dogmatic theism versus militant atheism, and the wager on our capacity to create moral values in a Godless world, they perceive this task as relatively straightforward. For them, the solution lies in simply choosing militant atheism and living in accordance with scientific truth. In contrast, Nietzsche's atheism is far more nuanced and complex. He acknowledges the profound significance of abandoning theism, even as he insists on its necessity.

Imagine the universe as a vast ocean and God as the lighthouse that guides ships safely to shore. For Nietzsche, extinguishing this lighthouse plunges the ocean into darkness and chaos, symbolising the existential crisis and disorientation that follow the Death of God. In contrast, for some contemporary atheists, extinguishing the lighthouse simply reveals the stars, allowing sailors to navigate by their own means and discover new paths across the sea.

Whilst no discerning theologian or philosopher of religion should totally sideline the impasse presented by Nietzsche's proclamation of the Death of God, the resulting dichotomy and wager have been reinterpreted by some twentieth-century philosophers in an effort to preserve or restore elements of faith that are worth reimagining or retelling for the modern-day believer. The first reinterpretation we will examine is by Don Cupitt.

Cupitt: The Fictional God

[...] non-realism is the view that things don't exist apart from our knowledge of them and the ways in which we describe them: everything takes shape and gets fixed on our conversation. So I am giving up the ideas of a pre-existent self, world, and God, quite apart from human belief, human commitment, and human descriptions. God doesn't exist apart from our faith in him. (Cupitt, 2010, p. 191-192)

In response to Nietzsche's proclamation of the Death of God, twentieth-century philosopher and former Church of England priest, Don Cupitt, addresses this pivotal moment and perpetuates the Nietzschean impasse regarding the untenable belief in a formidable God. However, Cupitt introduces subtle nuances to this impasse. Rather than framing the issue as the untenability of belief in a formidable God, Cupitt emphasises its ontological nature, reworking it to assert that it is a *realist form of belief* in a formidable God that is untenable. In other words, for Cupitt, it is the belief in the existence of a powerful and mighty God existing independently and metaphysically 'out there' that is untenable, *not* any form of engagement with God.

Moreover, the resulting *dichotomy* is also a subtly reworked version of Nietzsche's dichotomy. Instead of presenting the dichotomy as 'dogmatic theism or militant atheism,' Cupitt offers a nuanced version: 'Religious realism or religious non-realism.' In his 1984 *The Sea of Faith*, Cupitt further refines his dichotomy to 'religious realism or religious seriousness,' (Cupitt, 1984, p. 54) indicating his preference for the latter, non-realism as the serious religious position. Briefly then, what are these two choices of 'realism' and 'non-realism'? To illustrate the dichotomy between religious realism and non-realism, Cupitt compares the conceptions of God held by two seventeenth-century religious scientists, Descartes and Pascal.

Cupitt suggests that Descartes's metaphysical God was a God of reason. Pascal, on the other hand, did not seek 'reason' or 'metaphysics' to validate his belief in God. He was not looking 'out there' to confirm what he felt 'in here.' Cupitt defends Pascal's conception of God because he saw it as intertwined with a form of religious non-realism. For Cupitt, Pascal's conception reflects 'religious seriousness' because it

exemplifies “a passionate Christian whose whole life is invested in his faith – but who does not possess objectivity.” (ibid p. 54). Cupitt states, “Either you can claim to have an objective God, like Descartes, or you can have an authentic Christian faith, like Pascal” (ibid., p. 54). He suggests that a conception of God understood from a non-realist perspective is the more ‘serious’ option. “It is one or the other: take your pick” he says (ibid., pg. 54). Note the air of certainty in Cupitt’s dichotomy; a certainty that non-realism, as a fixed position, is the best response to the Death of God.

Non-realism reframes the formidable God into a fictional construct. This fictional construction translates religious language as fiction, akin to a novel, and involves engaging with religion, specifically Christianity in Cupitt’s case, as a form of make-believe. Even if God does not exist in an objective sense, the concept of God can serve as an imaginative focal point for moral reflection, such as representing ideal love. Moreover, the wager as it presented by Cupitt also differs slightly from Nietzsche’s. Although Cupitt agrees with Nietzsche that we can no longer rely on a formidable God to instruct, reward or indeed punish and that we must create our own human values, we *can*, Cupitt insists, use the basic Christian values for guidance and wisdom in our post-secular context.

Although it might seem odd to explain exactly how something regarded as fiction can nevertheless guide one’s life, it seems to me that we need only appeal to the undoubted power of fiction such as novels or films to induce an emotional response. This emotional response can then be harnessed to guide behaviour. Fiction can develop our moral and spiritual sensibilities (see, Eastwood 2024, 2022). Religion, then as Cupitt sees it, is a morally serious game of make-believe. Moreover, Cupitt insists that we can create our own values based on Christian ethics. At a recent conference in September, part of the Leverhulme-funded research group exploring the impact of Cupitt’s work, Cupitt emphasised the importance of Christian ethics. When asked, “If climate change forces us to live on sunburnt mountains, what essential items would we need, and how would we plan for our future society?” he responded “scientific method and Christian ethics”.

However, Cupitt’s conception of God changes over the course of his writings. In his later works, the formidable God reframed to a fictional reality becomes more and more indistinct. The formidable God becomes a ‘shooting star’ and then a powerful idiom meaning ‘life’, as I mentioned earlier. God becomes increasingly nebulous and representative of that in which we hinge our hope upon: “We should see God as rather like what the Americans call your dream, or your guiding star: the ideal towards which your life is orientated, the ideal you live by. Sometimes I have spoken of God as the pearl of great price (a parable told by Jesus explaining the value of the Kingdom of Heaven)” (Cupitt, 2010, p. 196). All this, of course, from a non-realist framework.

“What has happened is that the popular idea of God has become far too anthropomorphic, it is biblical poetry, but it can’t be literal truth – it has lost its philosophical background” (Cupitt, 2010, p. 195). Now, many might agree with Cupitt that God has become too anthropomorphic. Cottingham recently published a fantastic article on this (Cottingham, 2024). The non-realist framework where the formidable God, and the later God of ‘life’, resides in a fictional realm might resonate on an

intellectual and emotional level. But perhaps, critically, it might not resonate on a *spiritual* level for the modern-day believer.

In considering Nietzsche's proclamation of the Death of God, we turn to a third response that may offer modern believers an alternative perspective. This minimalist approach apprehends the reality of God as existing somewhere between Cupitt's immanent non-realism, and radical or hyper-transcendence (see, Ellis, 2024). It assumes that contemporary believers seek to distinguish God from the mundane and material world without resorting to a dualistic universe that relegates God to an alien absolutist realm entirely detached from human experience. Interestingly, in 2017 Kearney and Matthew Clemente published *The Art of Anatheism* which talks about returning to God through art, including fiction. More specifically through the act of making (poiesis). This is certainly a topic for another paper, but interesting to point out as we move onto Kearney's response to Nietzsche's Death of God proclamation.

Kearney: God as a 'Flicker' of the Transcendent

[Anatheism] marks that middle space [...] it is at all times dynamic and attentive, moving intrepidly between engagement and critique, recovery and loss, sadness and joy. Instead of *never* making up its mind, it is *always* making up its mind. The anatheistic moment attests to humanity fully alive because acutely aware of the complexity of ultimate things. (Kearney, 2010, p. 184)

The third response is offered by Richard Kearney in his philosophy of anatheism. Kearney reimagines Nietzsche's response, presenting the impasse not as the untenability of belief in a formidable God, nor as the untenability of a *realist* belief in a fictional formidable God, as Cupitt suggests. Instead, Kearney views the impasse as a mystical and creative moment of doubt.

To demonstrate this, Kearney provides historical examples where notable figures have experienced existential moments of doubt. These moments might even be thought of as somewhat reminiscent of Nietzsche's concern that is shared by Cupitt. Kearney paints us a picture of such a moment, how "[s]uch moments may visit us in the middle of the night, in the void of boredom or melancholy, in the pain of loss or depression [...] the event of radical dispossession is felt by any human being who is deeply bewildered by what existence means [...] experienced in our bones – moods, affects, senses, emotions – before they are theoretically interrogated by our minds. And they are, I would insist, as familiar to believers as to nonbelievers. No human can be absolutely sure about absolutes" (Kearney, 2010, p. 5)

What comes with this impasse presented as a mystical moment of doubt is *not a dichotomy* for Kearney. As we know, Kearney gestures toward a "third way" beyond the extremes of dogmatic theism and militant atheism. Thus, what he presents is a "movement – not a state – that refuses all absolute talk about the absolute" (Kearney, 2010, p. 16). Moreover, what Kearney offers is not a straight up and down dichotomy of 'theism versus atheism', or a reworked 'realism versus non-realism', but a "third way" namely anatheism.

With ‘ana,’ as we know, meaning ‘in space and time, back again anew’ we can understand anatheism to support the deeper and broader sense of ‘after’ contained in the expression ‘God *after* God’. We find that idea of repeating. “But repeating *forward* not *backward*” (Kearney, 2015, p. 7). Hence returning to God after the Death of God. It invites us to radically open ourselves up to something that has been lost or forgotten; to reimagine the sacred after a moment or moments of disenchantment.¹

Furthermore, anatheism is not atheism or theism, not anti-atheism or anti-theism, but it’s a “form of post-theism” (Kearney, 2010, p. 57). This is why, Kearney tells us, “anatheism proposes an open space between and time before and after the binary division of theism versus atheism [...] in favour of an existential experience of the impossible becoming possible, of hostility being transformed into hospitality.” (Doude van Trootwejk & Kearney, 2018, p. 41). The concept of transitioning from hostility to hospitality encapsulates the hope we embody: to welcome and place trust in the ‘other’ or the ‘stranger’, terms Kearney sometimes uses to refer to the ‘higher power’. This shift from a stance of hostility to one of hospitality illustrates the anatheistic wager.

“Only if one concedes,” Kearney tells us, “that one knows virtually nothing about God can one begin to recover the presence of holiness in the flesh of ordinary existence,” this is the wager (Kearney, 2010, p. 5). It is transcendence “inscribed in everyday immanence” (ibid., p. 102). It is not a return or rehabilitation of classic transcendence and the formidable God. Nor is a reframing of this God into a fictional reality. Kearney looks to reimagine the sacred. What I have called in the title of this paper a ‘flicker’ to represent the minimalist, subtle, apophatic nature of the transcendent, of God.

It is what the theologian Paul Tillich and the philosophers Jacques Derrida and Emmanuel Levinas try to do, namely avoid the extremes of transcendence and immanence. This existential wager is “central to everyday movements of belief and disbelief, of uncertainty and wonder,” Kearney tells us, it is about “what matters most to us, what we consider most precious and ‘sacred’ in our lives” (ibid., p. xvii).

A Minimalist Approach to God

As articulated at the outset of this paper, I contend that anatheism provides a viable framework for modern-day believers to engage with the spiritual in our post-secular context. On behalf of the modern-day believer, I wish to defend the legitimacy of a minimalist approach to understanding the nature of the divine. I propose that anatheism’s wager interprets a unique dependency relationship between the divine and the world. More specifically, between the divine ‘flicker’ of the transcendent and a richly conceived account of naturalism. This expansive form of naturalism consciously makes ontological space for phenomena that cannot be reduced to naturalistic language, such as moral values and, I argue, a divine interpretation of the transcendent.

¹ For more on the philosophy of reenchantment, see De Vriese & Meijer (2020).

This perspective aligns with Aquinas's ideas, interpreted as one of the subtlest thinkers of Scholasticism, particularly in *De Ente et Essentia*, Cap. 4, where Aquinas explores the dependency relationship between creatures and God through the language of essence and existence. More broadly, contemporary advocacy of Aquinas's status as an apophatic thinker is evident in Herbert McCabe's *God Matters*. Influenced by his teacher at Blackfriars studium in Oxford, Victor White, McCabe summarises Aquinas's thought as thus: "That to prove the existence of God was not to understand God but simply to prove the existence of a mystery. His arguments for the existence of God are arguments to show that there are real questions to which we do not and cannot know the answer" (Herbert, 2008, p. 76). Denys Turner also interprets Aquinas as closer to apophasis than he might seem, quoting *Summa Theologiae* I Q3, prol: "[S]ince we cannot know of God what he is, but what he is not, we cannot inquire into the how of God, but only into how he is not." Turner even argues that there are apophatic elements in the five famous causal 'proofs' of God's existence (Turner, 2008, p. 27).

Simon Hewitt, too, regards Aquinas's theology as apophatic, writing in the beginning pages of *Negative Theology and Philosophical Analysis*: "The book as a whole may read as a defence of a claim of Aquinas, 'we do not know what God is'" (Hewitt, 2020, p. xxi). Within the Christian tradition, other thinkers characterised by stark apophaticism might usefully be mentioned, most notably Pseudo-Dionysius, whose framework Aquinas adopts (Pseudo-Dionysius, 1897, c. I, sect. 6, in G., III, 595; c. I, sect. 41, in G., III, 516. 590). Mystics such as Meister Eckhart often employ apophaticism in their writings: "One is the negation of the negation and a denial of the denial," emphasising the idea that the Divine is ineffable and beyond names, drawing from adumbrations in Aquinas (Eckhart, 2019, p. 791-793).

This perspective also resonates with the thoughts of a much later and very different thinker, Schleiermacher, who stated: "The first and most basic element of Christian faith is the consciousness of being absolutely dependent, or, which is the same thing, of being in relation with God" (Schleiermacher, 1989, 12). However, there is a question regarding the direction of this dependency. It is relatively uncontroversial to say that the cosmos is in some way ontologically dependent on God. But to speak about the dependency going the other way is more controversial, as it suggests that God is in some unique way dependent on a richly conceived understanding of our world.

In *Transcending Fictionalism* (2024), I explore the concept of supervenience, which posits that A depends on B, indicating that A supervenes on B. This relationship implies that A cannot change without a corresponding change in B, yet A is not reducible to B. For instance, mental states are dependent on the brain: thoughts, emotions, and beliefs supervene on neural processes. Consequently, alterations in mental states correspond to changes in the brain, although mental states themselves are not merely brain states.

In describing the unique dependency relationship between God and the world, I propose utilising the concept of supervenience to suggest that God is intrinsically connected to the state of the world. This approach, while potentially contentious, emphasises three key aspects: exercising epistemic humility, underscoring the intimacy of this relationship, and countering the Platonic notion of a detached

transcendence. In this way, I believe it aligns with Fiona Ellis's contemporary account of theistic expansive naturalism (see, Ellis, 2014).

Our understanding begins with our experiences in the world, centered on our daily lives, where the modern believer senses a transcendent 'something more.' However, if we were removed from the world or if the laws of nature were radically different, how could we be certain that this divine 'something more' would persist, given that we only experience it through our worldly existence? This stance consciously embraces humility, refraining from claiming certainty, much like atheism.

The concept of supervenience may also serve to legitimise Kearney's atheism and its nuanced metaphysics. Supervenience helps clarify the distinction between God and the world. While God is not entirely separate from a richly conceived world – thus avoiding Platonism – God is not identical to the world either; God cannot be reduced to the world or to naturalistic language. Using the language of supervenience, God can be said to 'emerge over and above' the world, akin to the relationship between mental states and brain states.

Ultimately, if there were changes in the world, such as the absence of human minds or souls, the world's relationship with God might change. Thus, the language of supervenience might provide a potential framework for describing the complex relationship between God and a richly conceived world. This approach actively departs from the Platonic, alien, supernatural, and superstitious conception of a separate world, suggesting instead that the sacred is present with us here and now.

Many philosophers are exploring alternative ways of apprehending divinity in similar ways. One such approach is expanding naturalism, as I mentioned Ellis's work, while another is Philip Goff's panpsychist view of reality, which posits that the divine pervades the universe because it is filled with consciousness, rather than being a cold, unfeeling mechanism. As Goff states drawing on the language of supervenience, "a world of pure mathematico-causal structure could not constitute a supervenience base for phenomenal qualities. If these arguments are sound, then pure physicalism must be [...] false." (Goff, 2024). Thus, like Ellis and Kearney, Goff allows for a flicker of the divine transcendent within a post-Death-of-God, post-atheism, post-non-realism, and post-secularism context. Goff explains:

Despite rejecting religion, I always had a spiritual sense, a sense of a greater reality at the core of things, what William James called 'The More'. But I would connect to 'The More' in my own way, through meditation and engagement with nature. In other words, I was a signed-up member of the 'spiritual but not religious' grouping (ibid.,).

One might argue that this method of comprehending the divine is indeed grounded in a theological tradition. Tillich, as I mentioned earlier, rejected the notion of an "isolated transcendence of God as a perfect being far removed and exalted in heaven" (Stoker & Van der Merwe 2012, p. 11). Tillich's foundation lies in the human experience of the Ultimate, the power of being, or Being-itself. This Being is transcendent because "Being-itself is beyond finitude and infinity, otherwise it would be conditioned by something other than itself," yet it is also immanent, as "everything finite participates

in Being-itself and in its infinity. Otherwise, it would lack the power of being and would be engulfed by non-being" (Tillich, 1953, p. 263).

My argument posits that the concept of supervenience, despite its apparent contentiousness, offers a means to understand the distinctive dependency relationship between a minimalist approach to God and a comprehensive naturalistic account of the world. This approach does not aim for certainty or clarity; rather, it underscores the intimacy and mystery inherent in the relationship between God and the world. It preserves a space for transcendence, thereby resonating with the principles of anatheism.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have pursued four primary objectives. First, I aimed to acknowledge the profundity of Nietzsche's proclamation of the Death of God, challenge the contemporary relevance of the 'atheism versus theism' dichotomy, and question the resonance of the concept of a formidable God in today's context. Second, I sought to appreciate Cupitt's non-realist response to this proclamation for creating a new space to intellectually and emotionally engage with the divine, particularly as it transitions from a formidable to a more nuanced conception.

Third, I defended Kearney's focus on spirituality through his anatheistic wager, which subtly gestures toward the divine in a manner that transcends the extremes of dogmatic theism and militant atheism, as well as traditional realism and reductive non-realism. I suggest that anatheism adopts a minimalist approach to God as a 'flicker' of the transcendent, offering a subtle yet profound understanding of the divine.

Finally, I aimed to enrich the anatheistic position by proposing the use of the language of supervenience to articulate the unique dependency relationship between a minimally conceived God and a richly conceived account of naturalism. This perspective harmonises with both contemporary alternative approaches to the divine and traditional theological frameworks, all striving to apophatically preserve the mysterious reality of the divine as transcendent yet uniquely intertwined with our lived experience and world.

References

- Abrams, N. E. (2016). *A God That Could Be Real: Spirituality, Science and the Future of Our Planet*. Beacon Press.
- Cottingham, J. (2024). God, Evil, and Anthropomorphism. *New Blackfriars*, 1-12. <https://doi.org/10.1017/nbf.2024.49>
- Cupitt, D. (1984). *The Sea of Faith*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Cupitt, D. (2003). *Life, Life*. Santa Rosa, CA: Polebridge Press.
- Cupitt, D. (2010). Don Cupitt on Non-Realism about God. In D. Edmonds, & N. Warburton (Eds.), *Philosophy Bites*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 191-200.

- De Vriese, H., & Meijer, M. (Eds.). (2020). *The Philosophy of Reenchantment*. United Kingdom: Taylor & Francis.
- Doude van Trootwejk, C., & Kearney, R. (2018). A Conversation After God. In C. Doude van Trootwejk & M. Clemente (Eds.), *Anatheistic Wager*. Indiana: Indiana University Press.
- Eastwood, J. (2024). *Transcending Fictionalism: God, Minimalism and Realism*. London: Bloomsbury.
- Eastwood, J. (2022). Can fictionalists have a genuine emotional response to religious discourse? *International Journal of Philosophy and Theology*, 83(5), 339-350. <https://doi.org/10.1080/21692327.2022.2137561>
- Eckhart, M. (2019). *Sermon 21*, DW 1, 363, 7-8. English version by Vinzent 2019, p.791-793.
- Ellis, F. (2014). *God, Value and Nature*. London: Oxford University Press.
- Ellis, F. (2024). A Metaphysics of Spiritual Experience. *Religious Studies*, 60(3), 403-412. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034412522000816>.
- Goff, P. (2024, October 1). My Leap Across the Chasm. Aeon. <https://aeon.co/essays/i-now-think-a-heretical-form-of-Christianity-might-be-true>
- Hewitt, S. (2020). *Negative Theology and Philosophical Analysis: Only the Splendour of Light*, Palgrave Macmillan.
- Kearney, R. (2010). *Anatheism*. Columbia University Press.
- Kearney, R. (2015). God after God: An Anatheist Attempt to Reimagine God. In R. Kearney & J. Zimmermann (Eds.), *Reimagining the Sacred: Richard Kearney debates with James Wood, Catherine Keller, Charles Taylor, Julia Kristeva, Gianni Vattimo, Simon Critchley, Jean-Luc Marion, John Caputo, David Tracy, Jens Zimmermann, and Merold Westphal*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Kearney, R. (2017). *The Art of Anatheism*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Kearney, R. (2021). Theism, Atheism, and Anatheism. In C. Romano (Ed.), *The Experience of Atheism: Phenomenology, Metaphysics and Religion* (pp. 79-86). Bloomsbury Academic.
- Keats, J. (1817, December 22). Letter to George and Thomas Keats. Hampstead.
- McCabe, H. (2008). Aquinas on the Trinity. In *Silence and the Word: Negative Theology and Incarnation*. (Eds) Oliver Davis and Denys Turner, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Nietzsche, F. (2010). *The Gay Science: With a Prelude in Rhymes and an Appendix of Songs* (B. Williams, Ed.). Columbia University Press.
- Pattison, G. (2024). *A Philosophy of Prayer: Nothingness, Language, and Hope*. Fordham University Press.
- Pseudo-Dionysius. (1897). *De Divinis Nominibus*. In *Early Church Fathers – Additional Texts* edited by Roger Pearse. Online, https://www.tertullian.org/fathers/areopagite_03_divine_names.htm, accessed 13/03/25.
- Schleiermacher, F. D. E. (1989). *The Christian Faith*. (H. R. Mackintosh & J. S. Stewart, Trans. & Eds.). Edinburgh: T & T Clark.

- Stocker, W., & Van der Merwe, W. L. (Eds.). (2012). *Culture and Transcendence: A Typology of Transcendence*. Leuven: Peeters.
- Tillich, P. (1951). *Systematic Theology Vol. 1*. London: The University of Chicago Press.
- Tillich, P. (1953). *Systematic Theology, Volume 1*. London: Nisbet.
- Turner, D. (2008). Aophaticism, Idolatry and the Claims of Reason. In *Silence and the Word: Negative Theology and Incarnation*. (Eds) Oliver Davis and Denys Turner, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Veldsman, D. P. (2018). *Debating Otherness with Richard Kearney: Perspectives from South Africa*. South Africa: AOSIS.
- Wood, J., & Kearney, R. (2018). Theism, Atheism, Anatheism. In C. Doude van Troostwijk & M. Clemente (Eds.), *Richard Kearney's Anatheistic Wager: Philosophy, Theology, Poetics* (pp. 7-39). Indiana University Press.

How To Cite This Article

Eastwood, Jessica. (2025). "From Formidable, to Fictional, to a Flicker: God's Return after the Death of God," *AGATHEOS: European Journal for Philosophy of Religion*, Vol. 2, No. 2, pp. 45-59.

Copyright Information

This is an open-access article published under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License ([CC BY 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)), which permits use, distribution and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.