

DAVID WOOD

J. AARON SIMMONS

MOMENTS OF INTENSE PRESENCE:
A CONVERSATION WITH DAVID WOOD

J. Aaron Simmons: *I have always been fascinated by the accounts that philosophers give of their influences and their own explanation of how they have gotten to where they are. How would you characterize your own philosophical genealogy?*

David C. Wood: Well, answering that question is a truly philosophical enterprise. One could start at various points in answering the question “how did this happen?” For example, how did someone like me ever get into philosophy in the first place, or into something like continental philosophy in particular, and then how these kinds of questions are best pursued. When I look back at the boy who at the age of seventeen started reading philosophy, it was someone who at the age of ten had been uprooted from one context in England and thrown into a very different world in New Haven. Some of the things that I had been told were absolutes turned out not to be. For example, my teachers in England had told me that when you formed a ‘t’ that it had to go two-thirds of the way up to the line above and then when I got to America I was told that it had to go all the way up. How can both of these be true? It dawned on me that they were both true in the sense that they conformed to local norms. This may seem trivial, compared, say to Derrida being excluded from his Algerian school because he was Jewish, but it made quite an impression on me at ten. The second thing that I remember was going every week to the local YMCA pool for school swimming and that we boys were expected to completely strip off and swim naked. I had never been asked to do that in my life and I thought “what is this?” The force of cultural specificity hit home. The third thing was a six-week trip, driven by my family, around the United States seeing unbelievable landscapes such as the Grand Canyon that I could never have imagined and couldn’t quite take in. It was an aesthetic trauma – a *wonderful* trauma – a taste of the sublime. This happened over and over again all over the Southwest and elsewhere. We drove 10,000 miles over six weeks camping everywhere. It changed the wiring in my brain – I was a different person after that. The shape of my imagination, my sense of what was possible, and my sense of the natural world had changed. This experience gave me what Heidegger would describe as a sense of not exactly being at home in the world anymore – in a positive way. It was as if the *unheimlich* was now on my shoulder like a parrot. That, I think, was what I brought into the study of philosophy and perhaps what brought me in.

JAS: *If I remember correctly, your early training in philosophy was not what we would understand to be a typical “continental” approach – at least within the graduate programs in America. There was clearly some sort of shift that occurred. To what do you attribute the transition to continental philosophy as the mode in which you would eventually do philosophy? Perhaps continental philosophy resonated with these early experiences and your own lived existence in a way that other approaches to philosophical inquiry did not?*

DCW: The first degree I took was at the University of Manchester and Manchester was an extremely interesting department when I got there. It had several really significant philosophers. There was a very distinguished Whiteheadian – Dorothy Emmett – from whom I took a couple of introductory classes. She had a real sense of philosophy as a systematic activity and was an extraordinary mind. I am very lucky to have met her. There was a somewhat charismatic Polish logician called Czeslaw Lejewski with a curious wartime background. I was drawn to this guy because he was extremely imaginative and creative in coming up with logical systems. He had all sorts of formal accounts of Being (mereology, stereology, chronology...) on the basis of simple operations and minimal premises. I just fell for him. Although little of his grand scheme actually got completed, he was a man of much promise. He believed in what Strawson called “descriptive metaphysics,” that you could, as it were, give logical accounts of the nature of the real. And there was also his colleague, another of my teachers, Arthur Prior, who wrote on formal logic and ethics. He was a very severe kind of guy. There was also a young German lecturer, Petra von Morstein, who, along with many of my friends, I fell in love with. She had just come up from Oxford where she had studied analytic philosophy, and she was also a poet. Youthful passion helped me take analytic philosophy seriously! An American Larry Chase was a window on a Wittgensteinian approach to philosophy, which I also appreciated. But in addition to all these people the person who really influenced me was Wolf Mays. Mays had been a student of Piaget and had also become something of an expert in phenomenology. He was the president of the British Phenomenological Society and the editor of the *Journal of the British Society of Phenomenology*. I had a class with him and about five other students on Husserl’s *Ideas*. We spent the entire year reading about half of it in a very intense way. This was like an opening onto another world. I guess that this set my course somehow. Wolf was a very unusual, diminutive man who spoke very quickly and very excitedly. He had an encyclopedic mind and was completely dedicated to the intellectual life. And yet, despite being a serious phenomenologist (he would have said because of it), he had a very limited tolerance for Heidegger. Heidegger was completely out and I had to come to Heidegger by myself. After Manchester I went to Oxford as a graduate student and I started off working with Stephen Lukes, a brilliant sociologist of knowledge, and Peter Strawson, a creative interpreter of Kant. Then I fell in with Alan Montefiore a moral philosopher at Balliol College, who was Oxford’s most visible ‘Continentalist.’ He had a strong connection with Derrida in Paris and would bring him over to talk a couple times a year. Ultimately, I fell for Derrida. He was in his early forties at that time and extremely charismatic, intense, and *authentic*, to use a strange word about him. He was completely committed to

dialogue, to thinking and writing differently, and to many of us graduate students, he was utterly engaging.

JAS: *Do you remember the first time that you met Derrida?*

DCW: In (I believe) the Spring of 1968, he gave the “Différance” lecture at Balliol and we went back to Montefiore’s house and, although I can’t remember what it was that we all talked about, I do remember that we all sat on the carpet. We were all very laid back. One just didn’t sit on chairs. And Derrida sat on the carpet with the rest of us. In retrospect what is astonishing is that I met Derrida before he was ‘Derrida,’ or as he was becoming Derrida, before he published all his books. He was then, as he always was later on, unassuming, charming and quite the opposite of the person many people imagined. Undoubtedly, meeting him led me down a certain track, not least towards a broader interest in continental philosophy, especially French. I had also become really interested in environmental issues from a practical and political point of view. In 1971, I started a short-lived group called Ecology Action. I was also very heavily influenced by two Canadian philosophy graduate students - Stanley and Roslind Godlovitch - who had come down from Montreal as something like vegan evangelists and they started a revolution in Oxford. They brought the good news, as it were.

JAS: *They brought the Gospel?*

DCW: Yes, they brought this Gospel and they spread it, certainly in the philosophy community. Through rational argument (and food)! Many people were influenced by them, including Peter Singer, who quickly wrote *Animal Liberation*. The rest is history.¹ We published a collective volume – *Animals, Men, and Morals* in 1972,² which was a turning point in my becoming an animal right’s person. I then became a vegetarian.

JAS: *This actually raises a question that I wanted to ask about the progression of your own work. Many argue that there was something of an “ethico-political” or even “ethico-religious” turn in Derrida’s later work. I know that you claim that these concerns are there from the near beginning of Derrida’s authorship and should not be viewed as a transition in his thought, but rather as a shift of emphasis. Could one say of your own work that there has been something of an “ecological turn” over recent years? From the account you give of your time at Oxford in the early 1970’s, it seems like these concerns were formative and not subsequent developments. It sounds like there was an ecological sensitivity at the heart of your philosophy even at this early stage. Is that right?*

DCW: Not really. Strangely enough, I dealt with these things out of different sides of my brain and I did not bring them together philosophically or

¹ Peter Singer, *Animal Liberation* (New York: New York Review, 1975).

² Stanley Godlovitch, Roslind Godlovitch, and John Harris, eds., *Animals, Men, and Morals* (New York: Taplinger, 1972).

theoretically. It is odd; it was as if they were partitioned. The environmental stuff took a backseat for more than twenty years. I didn't teach it, I didn't pursue it; I thought it was important, but I didn't really take it very seriously philosophically. As for the animal rights stuff, well, my friends had done a better job with it and I let them move forward with it. I can only think that when it came to philosophy, I tended to pursue problems, issues, texts, and people that I didn't understand or couldn't quite understand. Whatever was just out of my reach intrigued me and drew me on. The animal right's stuff just wasn't like that. It just felt obvious. And pursuing it took a toll on one's relationships. You had to explain over and over again to people why their moral intuitions forced them into positions that they didn't want to hold. They often did not appreciate it. It was hard not to sound self-righteous, and I just got bored with the whole business.

JAS: *But over the past few years, you have clearly taken the environment very seriously as a philosophical question. In one of your essays "What is Eco-Phenomenology?"³ you seem to lay out the different directions that phenomenology opens to ecology and that ecology opens to phenomenology. Now that you have moved into this decidedly philosophical engagement with such issues, what do you understand "Eco-Phenomenology" to be as a contribution to debates in environmental philosophy generally?*

DCW: Eco-Phenomenology can be taken in two different ways. You can understand it as an ecological framing of phenomenology or you can understand it as a phenomenological way of capturing ecological principles. That essay tries to weave together these two projects. It is meant as a reprise of Merleau-Ponty's opening question in the preface to *Phenomenology of Perception*⁴-- namely, "what is phenomenology?" My essay was meant originally as a contribution to a volume on Eco-Phenomenology edited by Ted Toadvine, who has pioneered this approach. My exploration of the connections between ecology and phenomenology arose at a time when I was more willing to be a bit more speculative. In my book *Deconstruction of Time*⁵ -- the original title of which was "The Structures of Time" -- I mention what Strawson called a "descriptive metaphysics" which sounds like it is falling back into a pre-critical mode. I was thinking along the lines of such a project when I wrote this essay on Eco-Phenomenology. It struck me that there were things that one could say about space and time which would open up a sense of experience that could both be attached, if you like, to what we call "subjects," but also open those subjects not just onto the immediate sensory world, but also the background dimensions of that world.

³ David Wood, "What is Eco-Phenomenology?" in *Eco-Phenomenology: Back to the Earth Itself*, eds., Charles S. Brown and Ted Toadvine (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2003), 211-233.

⁴ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 2nd ed., trans. Colin Smith (London: Routledge, 2002).

⁵ David Wood, *Deconstruction of Time* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2001), originally published in 1989.

JAS: *This sounds similar to what Heidegger refers to in 1973 as a “phenomenology of the unapparent.”⁶ Would you deploy such a description?*

DCW: Well it is certainly a *phenomenology of the background* and of the depth structure of experience. At least that is the idea – a *structural phenomenology of space and time*. I am trying to talk about ideas of compositionality, integrity, and temporal construction as they get witnessed in our experience and, in particular, in the natural world. I got interested in how you could think through the different kinds of “integrities,” as I called it, of rocks, creatures, and humans. In a sense, I tried to replay that march from the stone to the lizard to the human that Heidegger describes.⁷

JAS: *It sounds like you take the environment to be the “ultimate” background for all the relatedness that experience presents to us.*

DCW: Yes, and very much in space and time. I think that the thing that totally intrigues me can be marked by the experience that I had out at Yellow Bird⁸ of having a friend there who is a geologist. She pointed out marks in a limestone slab and asked “you know what that is?” I said no, and in fact I couldn’t even see them. She drew my attention to these strange markings and said “that’s coral fossil.” I asked how old it was and she replied that it was somewhere between three hundred and fifty and four hundred and fifty million years old. It is that old and yet simply sitting right there in front of me. I then looked at my hand and I think “how old is that?” Well, we know how old it is literally, but then we realize that it is the product of hundreds of thousands of years of evolution. The past in all kinds of levels and ways is sedimented, we might say, in the present – in what we see in front of us, in the rock, in who we are.

JAS: *Would it be right to say that you are attempting to expand the genealogical accounts of someone like Nietzsche to include geological time?*

DCW: Geological time, biological time, species time. I am deeply fascinated by ‘the question of ethics’ (which is of course not simply one question), especially questioning the idea that ethics could be radically opposed to ontology as we seem to find it in Levinas, for example. I suspect that the idea that ethics is radically different rests on a narrow sense of the ontological. For example, we might suppose that when we look at another creature – a non-human, say – that we have to engage in some complex ethical extension to allow this creature to be the ethical beneficiary of my moral intuitions because such notions only properly

⁶ See, Martin Heidegger, *Four Seminars: Le Thor 1966, 1968, 1969, Zähringen 1973*, trans. Andrew Mitchell and François Raffoul (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2003).

⁷ See Martin Heidegger, *The Metaphysical Foundations of Logic*, trans. Michael Heim (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984).

⁸ Yellow Bird is an artist’s retreat, nature preserve, and nascent sculpture park in central Tennessee run by David Wood.

apply to other humans. I think that this is Levinas's position and Kant's position. We only have indirect duties to non-humans.

JAS: *They might politically signify, but not ethically signify?*

DCW: Right. Now, my sense is that when we think like that we identify ourselves in a rather restricted way as *simply* human. But, I don't see myself as *just* human. I think that I am a mammal, I am a living being, etc. Look at your hand, open your shirt. We have nipples (even us guys); we're mammals! We know this; it is obvious. Moreover we are, more broadly, participants in a life-stream, which is, perhaps, unique to this planet. My sense is that the moral imagination is fed very powerfully by grasping this sense of multiple temporal dimensions of my existence, and does not need 'extending' as much as one might think. I am only here as a product of all this extraordinary background work of evolutionary change and natural selection.

JAS: *Would you then say that "gratitude" is the right moral feeling, rather than "respect" as Kant claimed? For Levinas, morality seems to convey a sense of dependence and boundedness to the Other, but for you it comes across as more of an open-ended gratitude – a relatedness without a specific relation.*

DCW: I wouldn't automatically reject the word 'gratitude.' It is compelling in a certain way. But it then does raise the question of to whom, or to what, or for what is one grateful. In that way lies religion and theology.

JAS: *Which might make for a good segue into some questions about religion.*

DCW: One obvious, and very seductive, thought is that we *need* to feel grateful. We do constantly want to transform aporetic moments into relations with two identifiable parties. So the feeling say of gratitude demands a relation to something or someone to whom one is grateful. We end up with my relation to God or something like that. That example offers, I believe, a general formula for how we can begin to deconstruct theology or religious belief in the first place. For we can see just how compelling it is. Just as it is compelling, when we think we are "under attack," to believe that there has to be an *enemy*. We need this category to respond in a way that reduces the awful anxiety regarding our inability to know what to do. Nietzsche would clearly be an ally in this thought. These are all ways of capturing the experience that reduces the anxiety and allows us to deal with the experience. That, in a sense, is why religion is so double-edged. It does properly capture experiences that we must not deny or refuse. But it charges a price for these services – a storage tax.

JAS: *Which we are obligated to pay?*

DCW: Perhaps the question is *how* to pay it. With what currency and for how long. Returning to the question of gratitude, it may be that 'gratitude' is the wrong word, or certainly not the only appropriate response. It may be better, or sufficient, to speak of acknowledgement or wonder at what I am; what we are. It

is not strictly personal but rather an extraordinary sense of being part of something bigger than oneself.

JAS: *The “here I am” that Levinas and Derrida make quite a bit of is, for both of them, a response to a prior call from the Other. For Levinas, the caller seems to be more clearly located and, at least to some readers, even potentially has theological echoes that, for Derrida, tend to be lessened (or at least made more opaque). But for you the “here I am” is better understood as a sort of question to oneself that is internal to these structures of time and space as possibilities. That is, we must always already acknowledge these horizons of relatedness in which we find ourselves in order to even stand as a self at all. The phrase “here I am” is, then, not a reply to a call to ethical action, but instead signifies as a question about my own standing. On such a model, ethics and ontology come into a complicated relationship rather than a clear priority of one over the other. Of course, one could argue that even for Levinas and Derrida, each in his own way, this relationship between ethics and ontology is also more complicated than their own rhetoric might occasionally indicate.*

DCW: As you were talking, I realized that while there is considerable depth of reflective and intuitive possibility open to this path of, let’s call it “recollection” in Plato’s sense, Heidegger’s sense . . .

JAS: *And Kierkegaard’s sense of “repetition” as “recollection forwards?”*

DCW: Yes, Kierkegaard’s sense as well. I want to think through the different levels and layers of what it means to collect oneself, which is not any longer *just* oneself, and to project that collection or collectedness forward. That is a never-ending thought and it is deeply intriguing. But, of course, it still sounds like an expansion of *me*. Even in this story there is not any room for the encounter with the Other. How has that been left out? Well, it both has and it hasn’t been left out. One of my problems with Levinas is that he thinks Heidegger has left out all of this stuff. My response is parallel to the way that I think Heidegger would respond: you can’t separate your relation to the Other from your relation to the Other’s mortality. At some level, Levinas has to agree with me. The command “Don’t kill me” only makes sense if (a) the Other is mortal and (b) doesn’t want to die. Actually, the significance of the statement changes with the sense that the Other has of her own mortality. What that suggests is that all that Heidegger says about being-towards-death, the abyss, and the self-as-a-potentiality-for-being, continue to be crucial even if these reflections are not included in Levinas’s account of the encounter with the Other. So, the question of who the Other is (and why the Other might matter) is not separable from the question of this connectedness with a life-stream — namely, the connection with our biological past which generates this moral being that we each are. In other words, there is a connection between what’s at issue, what’s at stake, why it might matter that the Other can address me in certain ways on the one hand, and my grasp of myself as part of something a whole lot bigger, on the other.

JAS: *I know that some of your close friends and philosophical interlocutors, particularly John Caputo and Catherine Keller, have been on the forefront of recent debates in process*

philosophy/theology.⁹ There seems like there are substantial resonances between your descriptions of the levels and layers of biological connectedness in the life-stream and this general process approach. However, for both Caputo and Keller, “God” shows up as a functional reality. The term/name ‘God’ signifies something unique in their work that you might resist. I draw from your remarks not only that you don’t think that ‘God’ is required, but that using the term ‘God’ is, perhaps, a strategic misstep. The price that one pays for introducing such a term is too high. Do you see a sort of process approach as something that allows for you to speak of God in a different way? Or, do you find God to not just be an “unnecessary hypothesis,” but actually a necessarily problematic way forward?

DCW: Well, without using concepts of this second order, you can’t have a process philosophy or a philosophical orientation that attempts to get at ways in which the real is integrated, purposive, creative, or open to radical transformation, and all in space and time. I am very reluctant to take a small set of those concepts, the teleological ones for example, and privilege them (while discarding the others) and then say that these concepts are themselves organized by a central concept of a theological sort. What I am committed to is the value of these second order concepts and the struggle between them in our own thinking and discourse. Take something like creativity ... is the cosmos creative? Well, yes, but it is also destructive and these terms are inseparable; alongside creativity there is chaos and catastrophe. We need the theater of conflict in which these terms are the actors. Do we need a *director* of this play? Well, I don’t think that we do. But, we do need the *theater*. If someone says that she needs the word ‘God’ that is fine but I would then translate that into a statement about the need for there to be a stage on which these issues and levels of understanding get taken seriously.

JAS: Let me just extend the metaphor a bit more. Recently, there has been a debate internal to phenomenology that was largely inaugurated by Dominique Janicaud’s very critical account of the post-Heideggerian transition in phenomenology toward what seems to be a comfort with God-talk.¹⁰ This happens in the work of figures such as Levinas, Michel Henry, Jean-Louis Chrétien, Jean-Yves Lacoste, Jean-Luc Marion, and Derrida among others. We could say that this expanding circle could then include such thinkers as Gianni Vattimo, Merold Westphal, John Caputo, Bruce Benson, and Jeffrey Bloechl. For Janicaud, to do phenomenology is to be closed off to talking about God. God is inappropriate as an object of phenomenological inquiry. Yet, for these proponents of “new phenomenology,” God becomes a topic of conversation in diverse ways. Marion’s discussions of givenness, Chrétien’s conception of prayer, Levinas’s account of the Other, Henry’s discourse on Life, Lacoste’s expansive notion of liturgy, Derrida’s deployment of Justice, etc. can all be read as displaying some sort of “theological” overtone. In Vattimo, for example, we find long considerations of how kenosis is the key for understanding

⁹ See John D. Caputo, *The Weakness of God: A Theology of the Event* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006); and Catherine Keller, *Face of the Deep: A Theology of Becoming* (London: Routledge, 2003).

¹⁰ See, Dominique Janicaud, Jean-François Courtine, Jean-Louis Chrétien, Jean-Luc Marion, Michel Henry, and Paul Ricœur, *Phenomenology and the “Theological Turn”*: The French Debate (New York: Fordham University Press, 2000).

political emancipation in a nihilistic world. Seemingly, phenomenology has taken a “theological turn” or, as Hent De Vries will term it, a “turn to religion.”¹¹ Do you see this development as a turn away from phenomenology as does Janicaud or do you simply see it as one possible way of constructing the theater of post-Heideggerian inquiry? That is, it might be legitimately phenomenological, but it is not the way that you would advocate going forward. In other words, is this a fundamentally flawed theater or simply one that you simply have decided not to be an actor within?

DCW: When I think about these questions I start out noticing that the God question can be posed from two different directions. I am not actually sure whether I prefer one direction more than the other. One direction would go something like this: We have these religious commitments whether we are Jews, Catholics, Protestants ...

JAS: Or rightly pass as atheists?

DCW: Oh, right. And that could take us into a brief discussion of Sartre’s extraordinary essay on Kierkegaard – the “Singular Individual.”¹² Therein he says that Kierkegaard has taught him the importance of “becoming an atheist” ... If you start with faith and become a philosopher, then one of the questions that you will ask yourself is *where can I park God?* You have this concept, but as Kant says of a regulative idea, you can’t derive it from experience. So where do you park it? How do you connect it to your phenomenology? You could claim direct experience of God – that would do the trick, at a price. But, there seem to be all sorts of more plausible ways to answer that question – the idea of the holy, or the unknowable, unthinkable, the sublime, and all the various expressions of it offered by the thinkers that you mentioned above. What is happening here is that we are trying to give some sort of grounding for what turns up on the other side of the river as “God-language” or “God-talk.” And I have nothing against that at all. This goes along with my sense that the relationship between philosophy and theology can be understood in the following way: At certain times in the history of philosophy, philosophy has refused to acknowledge or take seriously particular kinds of experience. I imagine philosophy as a homeowner who has a lot of stuff in the garage but doesn’t know what to do with it. So, he puts it out in the yard with a sign saying “free to a good home.” After dark, the theologians come by and take it all away, storing it in their homes until such time as philosophy realizes that it needs that stuff and wants it back. We have to knock on the door of the theologian and ask “can we please have some of that back?” At that point, we realize that we, illegitimately, excluded it in the first place. This reminds me of Hegel in the late 1790s when he thought that philosophy just doesn’t cut it, simply because philosophy only ‘cuts’ – that is, it is only an analytical enterprise – and so in a world that cries out for

¹¹ Hent De Vries, *Philosophy and the Turn to Religion* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1999).

¹² For an extended consideration of this Sartrean notion, see David Wood, “Thinking God in the Wake of Kierkegaard,” in *Kierkegaard: A Critical Reader*, eds. Jonathan Rée and Jane Chamberlain (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), 53-74.

healing, we need to call on the force of religion. In Christianity, Hegel found the idea of communion, community and so on. But then Hegel discovered dialectic, and dropped primitive Christianity to return to a philosophy offering new tools. With this sort of second stage philosophy (not only analytical, but also dialectical), he stitches the broken world back up together again, synthesizing connections instead of just being left with the rubble of history. I am saying that the relation between philosophy and theology waxes and wanes with the capacity of philosophy to take seriously the experiences that it tends to exclude or, at least periodically, has excluded. Of course, what I want to have happen – and here I am really very close to Derrida – is that whatever we might want to call ‘discourse’ or ‘philosophy,’ what matters is not the label, but how we understand thinking, the shape of thinking, the direction of thinking, the point of thinking to be. And that, in a sense, is where I use the expression “the step back” or “negative capability” in my own work.¹³ The point of philosophizing is to acknowledge and to activate those marginal seams – those boundary situations, those moments of un-decidability – in such a way that you don’t just resolve those situations and tie them off in a neat bow, but that you find ways of permanently activating what is in play there. Here we can ask a strategic question: does “God-talk” mobilize the resources available in these moments or close them down? And how can we best accentuate difficulty and vibrancy, while steering clear of the sclerotic tendency?

JAS: *This reminds me of something I have often heard you say – ‘God is trouble.’ It seems like this phrase functions as a possible way of hearing God-talk activate this call for contestation, interruption, and even constant critique.*

DCW: Yes, consider the question “What is Jesus for?” Is he there to save me? And from what? For me it would have to be to save me from complacency; from being deaf, dumb and blind to the poor, the sick and the hopeless. That is what I mean. It is not that God *is* trouble, God *should be* trouble. This is a bit unfair, but I think that as soon as God starts holding your hand and says that everything you are doing is fine and I am with you in your complacency then the game is up.

JAS: *This seems to echo Kierkegaard’s contestation of “the Established Church” in his attempt to “bring Christianity to Christendom.”*

DCW: Indeed, and his grasp of how close we are to despair is important too. In castigating the God of complacency, I don’t want to be thought to be cruel. There are of course times when it seems impossible to go forward or to know why you are even alive. There are times when you weigh your own resources and ask how you can carry on given the situation that you are in, or your friends are in, or your town is in, or your race is in. Why not simply despair? In that situation, God is not trouble, but hope and possibility. I am really interested in

¹³ David Wood, *The Step Back: Ethics and Politics After Deconstruction* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2005). The introduction to this book is entitled “Negative Capability.”

the almost Feuerbachian thought, (with all the attending ambiguities given that Feuerbach did not take himself to be an atheist but thought himself in an odd way to be promoting God), that the relation to the other is a virtual relation that is empowering even when there is no Other. Imagine that you are shipwrecked on a desert island and you believe, on the basis of false evidence, that you are going to be rescued in exactly a month, but you only have enough food to last three weeks. Nonetheless, you hang on, and by chance someone actually turns up. I am saying that the structure of faith is independent of the existence of its object and is deeply wired, not only genetically, into what it is to be human. Our brains are *essentially connected* devices. Like the absurdity of a lone cell-phone, it just doesn't make any sense to omit this connectedness. I see religious belief as a potent and accurate expression of that hard-wired relatedness.

JAS: *It is difficult to hear your account of what we might call a "structure without an object" without thinking of the Derridean notions of "religion without religion" and a "messianism without a messiah."*

DCW: Right.

JAS: *But what is interesting about Derrida, and also the account that you are providing here, is that the move to structures without objects is more accurately a question about the "without" rather than a dogmatic assertion of it. For Derrida, these questions arise at the same place in his authorship when he makes moves towards questions of the political. "Messianism" is prominent, for example, in Derrida's Specters of Marx¹⁴ in which he interrogates the ideas of hope and expectation that we have inherited from Marx's own vision. However, despite this discussion of political life, deconstruction is often charged with speaking a lot about ethics and politics, but failing to provide any sort of clear model for how to move forward in social life. As Richard Rorty might say, Derrida doesn't seem to help us in the project of "making tomorrow better than today." Perhaps it gives us a certain kind of political theory, but it seems very far removed from anything that could be considered a public policy. Can the messianistic impulse yield an immigration policy, or a cap and trade system, or a plan for health care, etc.? How do you see this shift from theory to practice, or from words to action from within a deconstructive framework?*

DCW: I would start by pointing out that when we talk about public policy we are talking about the future. What is possible? And we are always talking about what might be possible in the face of the way things are and our fears of how they might continue. Then there are these questions that get recycled in objections to deconstruction that what we want may seem impossible, or utopian, or that it is hard to see how we could get there.

JAS: *So at the same time it is utopian and nihilistic. Both options are two sides of the same coin of resignation and quietism.*

¹⁴ Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, The Work of Mourning, and the New International* (New York: Routledge, 1994).

DCW: Yes. And there is another dimension of this that Derrida doesn't directly take up, but it becomes pretty clear whenever you engage in political action, which is whether it makes sense for me to act not knowing whether other people are going to join in. That then opens up a number of different dimensions of how to admit of a certain kind of incompleteness of knowledge, assurance, and guarantee. First, whether what we want is really possible given the present situation. Second, whether when I act enough other people will act in concert to actually bring about the change. Third, whether when we think about what we want, we are tempted to direct ourselves towards achieving an end-state which, once realized, will allow us to go back to sleep. Most conceptions of utopia are static or problematically self-replicating. But, when you see that this doesn't work, you have to imagine a "goal" that, for those reasons, would not be achievable. Or, put another way, to achieve what we intended, what we achieve would need to be dynamic rather than simply repetitive. When you put these considerations together something like a "democracy to come" begins to make sense. When Derrida talks about democracy to come, he is not talking about a future democracy that will be made present. It is not a future present that could be achieved. Derrida calls this the *im-possible*. By im-possible, Derrida means at least something that, although it can't be realized, can always be that in relation to which something that is realized can still be measured or judged, and so on. Although he doesn't want to call it a regulative idea; however, he is somewhat ambivalent about this. Sometimes he accepts that it is not that far from a regulative idea, but he makes clear that he does not want the architectonic baggage that accompanies this notion in Kant. The point that I am trying to get at is that it is not simply that there might not be enough people acting along with me (the free rider problem, for example), but also whether action, *my* action, *my* agency is the center of all this, or whether it is also necessary to have a certain *faith*. I once asked Al Gore how he gets up in the morning and continues to believe, given all the doubts that he has about being successful. His answer was that "I believe that what we fear in climate change - namely reaching an irreversible tipping point - is also true in political life as well." Your actions, small though they might seem, might just make the difference. And if you don't act then you might be responsible for it happening when it might not have. The notion of the democracy to come presents us with these key problems, issues, and questions: (1) we don't actually know what actions will make a difference, (2) we don't actually know whether others will join or follow us, (3) we don't know if our own powers are going to be sufficient, and (4) we don't know what will happen. And there are other unknowns. Let me give you an example of that from a conference that I am organizing "Giving Voice to Other Beings."¹⁵ The frame of that conference is something like the realization that we don't actually believe that we could have a parliament of other creatures in which they could actually speak or be properly represented.

JAS: *We don't live in Narnia.*

¹⁵ This was a conference held at Vanderbilt University in May 2008.

DCW: We don't live in Narnia. Nonetheless, we do have *some* kind of idea of what it would be to listen to, or to respond to, or to acknowledge, or to give voice to, all the creatures of the planet – without knowing quite what that would mean. You might say that this will be very difficult, or that it would be impossible, or that it would let too many cats out of the bag, or open too many cans of worms. What on earth would this mean? That is democracy to come. I don't even know what I mean by this, but I do know that there is something anticipated in this project that would be unending and unrealizable, but still points in the right direction.

JAS: *Could we say that expectation is active?*

DCW: Yes. It is active, creative and responsive and it opens a certain trajectory of engagements whose shape is not determined from the outset. That is a good example of how you could understand this sense of expecting something without the expectation that it will happen. You open yourself to the possibility of something coming.

JAS: *It like a phenomenological filling-in of the age-old adage to "expect the unexpected."*

DCW: It is a *filling-in* and an *opening-up*. It is a celebration of possibilities and an activation of one's orientation toward those possibilities that are not definable ... completely.

JAS: *Let me ask one more question in this same vein. Regarding the conference "Giving Voice to Other Beings," you can imagine someone saying that as a result of this conference we should get together and advocate a policy to make vegetarianism the official commitment of the American government, say. Surely this could be one of those unexpected horizons towards which we should strive.*

DCW: Yes, but we might perhaps start with our local university campus.

JAS: *Granted. Nonetheless, elsewhere you have said that "vegetarianism is deconstruction"¹⁶ and we might hear this as a call for a specific possibility for public policy. But, then we could also imagine someone responding to this call for vegetarianism by asking, "why should we be committed to this vision?" The conference participants might reply, "Given certain premises . . ." and the imagined interlocutor jumps in and says, "No, why should we even take ourselves up as having these sorts of relationships to other beings? Why should we care about their voices? Why not simply affirm a strong notion of ethics that begins from humanism that sees every other relation as derivative?" In other words, I am wondering how one justifies such a commitment to an expansive, deconstructive vision of relationality rather than a narrowly humanistic one, say? How does one stand in the public square and appeal to reasons that will be*

¹⁶ David Wood, "Comment ne pas manger – Deconstruction and Humanism," in H. Peter Steeves, ed., *Animal Others: On Ethics, Ontology, and Animal Life* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999), 15-35. This also appears as chapter 9 of David Wood, *Thinking After Heidegger* (Cambridge: Polity, 2002).

recognized by non-deconstructionists? This is series of questions that I don't think are asked frequently enough in continental discussions of ethics and politics. Post-Rawlsians political philosophers are very good at considering this topic, but post-Derrideans tend to avoid it.

DCW: Well, let me try out a few lines of response to typical arguments that lead in the direction you are headed. Kantians, for example, believe that there is some sort of inner connection between rights and duties and you just can't attribute rights to a being that doesn't also have duties. I think that this is a logical mistake. Rights and duties are indeed conceptually connected, but that does not require a connection between a particular object of rights and subject of duties. This is crystal clear when you think about babies and the insane and so on – who have rights but not duties. If you then say, “yes but they belong to a species which (...)” this is, in my view, just speciesist prejudice, a bad philosophical argument that rests nonetheless on a truth. There is a connection between rights and duties but it doesn't have to be realized in any particular case. Just as we have duties to recognize the rights of children we can have duties to nonhuman animals without then demanding that they have duties to us. Next, and you can see this in Kant, Levinas, and probably in Heidegger, it is said that animals can't speak, that they don't have language, and hence there is something radically different about them which disqualifies them from being proper moral objects. But let's take Heidegger for a minute. Heidegger doesn't understand the essence of language to be the uttering of words, but is rather wrapped up with the disclosedness of truth – grasping things as such, as beings. This is something, which humans are able to do and nonhumans cannot do. His example would be that the lizard lies on the rock but does not grasp the rock as a rock. But this is totally question begging. Does the human bather lying on the rock grasp the rock as a rock? In what sense? Does she need a degree in crystallography? I don't think so. There is a beautiful poem “The Lizard” by Theodore Roethke in which he asks whether the terrace belongs to me or to the lizard. He says that it belongs to the lizard. “Belongs?” This is property!

JAS: *Property rights for lizards?*

DCW: Yes, and some will insist that property surely begins with the law. I would turn it the other way around. The law doesn't just begin with legislation, but with the idea of a home. And if you can't see that this terrace is the lizard's home, then you are blind. ‘Home’ here is not just a metaphor. That is where the lizard lives. You *could* respond that we just apply the notion of ‘home’ derivatively when we talk of the fox in its den. I would say that it is almost exactly the other way around. It is pretty clear that the fox has its den, the rabbit has its burrow, and the bird has its nest. It is not as if we have our suburban house and then somehow the bird gets its nest as an extension of a sense of home that we have invented out of nothing. That would be crazy.

JAS: *Could it be that the law actually reflects the fact that we begin with an understanding of the relationships of animals to their place and then extend this to our own conception of human sociality?*

DCW: Yes. Heidegger says that we have a capacity to put ourselves in the shoes of others and that we do this as humans constitutively – *being-with*. But, I want to say that it is not as humans that we do that, but that it is just as likely as *mammals* that we do it. When you look at the deer walking through the woods, you don't have to say, "Hmmm – I walk with two feet and it is a bit like a human walking with four feet and I will just transpose ..." No. You look at it *without analogy*. You can see what is going on.

JAS: *Are you appealing to something like a deconstructive version of moral intuitionism? If someone doesn't "see" this fact about the deer or fox immediately, is it that something has gone wrong in her mammality? Or is it that something has failed about her sociality?*

DCW: Well there are various senses of failure. There are psychopaths who fail to transpose even to other humans. And yet the capacity for a certain emotional distance is one of the extraordinary achievements of human beings. In war, for example, we somehow can flip into this. And we do this with animals in all kinds of contexts. We are very grateful that surgeons can do this, however. They *must not* feel. If they did, then they couldn't cut in and heal people. These are all value-laden terms, but I think that there is a real empirical basis for what can turn into a pathological capacity. We have whole institutions based on this capacity to allow suffering. We have seen this recently with torture scenarios in American politics. In *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, Derrida speaks of a general war on pity conducted against non-human animals on this planet.¹⁷ It would be hard to describe this absence of affect simply as a 'failure.' It seems rather to be a successful way of allowing certain kinds of institutional violence to continue. But maintaining this anesthetic wall is not easy. I have said that Heidegger's claim that the animal doesn't relate to things as such, is question begging. And Heidegger himself is clearly troubled with this. He talks about the abyss between oneself and the animal and yet refers to the appalling proximity between myself and the body of the animal. He continues to talk about the infinite difficulty of thinking this through. The claim that the lizard doesn't grasp the rock as such rests on a very narrow sense of what "grasping it as such" means. The lizard doesn't have a conception of "rock." But what does that mean? That the lizard doesn't know what rocks are? That he always reduces it to "sleeping place?" Well, who knows? There might be certain kinds of worms that creep up on that rock. Couldn't it be that the lizard thinks that the rock is good for sleeping and for worms? Must it always be connected to a particular function? I don't know, but Heidegger can't rule this out. Derrida makes this point against Heidegger regarding death as such. As we have seen, Heidegger is not talking about language in the sense of making squawks, but in the sense of disclosure . . .

¹⁷ Jacques Derrida, "The Animal That Therefore I Am (More to Follow)," *Critical Inquiry*, Winter 2002, p. 396. This also appears in Jacques Derrida, *The Animal that Therefore I Am*, ed. Marie-Louis Mallet, trans. David Wills (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008).

JAS: *In the sense of projecting a horizon of meaning?*

DCW: Right. Look at Heidegger's discussion of Rilke and the "open." In fact it is an open that is circumscribed by an 'inhibiting ring,' a capacity within a certain space to respond to stimuli. Well, this is a model that we have of the animal. To circle back to your question, if we look at Levinas again (and along with my friend John Llewelyn), I would make the following argument: When Levinas talks about the "face-to-face" he is not talking about an actual face, but rather the face is a cipher for the ethical significance of the Other. The shoulder would do. Perhaps even a shadow would do. The question of whether the animal has a face is a dumb question. Levinas thinks that the dog has a face, but is unsure of whether a snake has a face. One has to think that there is some Biblical baggage here. It is not that when we look at a snake we really wonder if it has a face. Rather we wonder whether we are able to connect with it. He ends up saying that the snake doesn't have language. And just as Heidegger doesn't require particular squawks as a proof of language, neither does Levinas. The issue is not whether they can speak, but whether they can engage, existentially if you like, in what is at stake in language. And that then raises the question Derrida asks of whether a cat can address me.

JAS: *Or, can a cat see me naked?*¹⁸

DCW: Well, let me set that aside for a moment. I want to focus on those modes of performativity that we attach to language – can it address me, ask for something, insist on something. The answer is absolutely yes in all these categories. You would have to be La Mettrie or Descartes to say that the cat can't ask to be let in, or insist on being fed. This language seems to appropriately apply and if these conceptions are central to language then Levinas doesn't have a leg to stand on, as it were, when he denies language to the animal other. Now if you take these sorts of arguments to legitimate my response about relations to humans and non-humans, then these arguments actually look to be just speciesist re-inscriptions of humanism by another name. Our 'failure' to grasp directly a certain intimate connectedness with the deer in the forest is no simple lapse, nor the refined capacity for distance of a surgeon, it is a deeply embedded reflection of what Wittgenstein called a 'form of life' which, as we witness massive terrestrial species loss, may yet prove to be pathological in a strong sense. This is some sort of philosophical justification for the sort of deconstructive position I advocate.

JAS: *So we are justified because we have good arguments?*

DCW: No, no. I am not saying that we should do this *because* we have good arguments, but that these arguments are ways of *capturing* our moral intuitions.

¹⁸ See Derrida, *The Animal that Therefore I Am*. For an extended engagement with Derrida's essay, see David Wood, "Thinking With Cats," in *Animal Philosophy: Essential Readings in Continental Thought*, eds. Matthew Calarco and Peter Atterton (London: Continuum, 2004), 129-144.

When you are brought in front of these intuitions they are pretty hard to deny. Of course you *can* deny them.

JAS: *The psychopath is always possible.*

DCW: It is not just the psychopath. Not every hunter is a psychopath. They might have been brought up that way and possess a complicated fabric of beliefs and feelings according to which this practice makes sense. Nonetheless, that practice might turn out to be bio- or eco-pathological, as I have suggested.

JAS: *In our conversation today, you have, in various ways, stressed the importance of a critical interruption or challenge on the one hand and a hope for a different future on the other. This might be termed a critical vision in the sense of a critical engagement that opens new visions of how to move forward. In light of this, I am interested in how we might then apply this to the state of contemporary philosophy. With the death of Derrida some might argue that there are other thinkers and texts that are extremely important, but that there is something of a clearing out of continental philosophy in which new possibilities confront us. Viewed negatively we might term this a philosophical vacuum, but viewed positively we might term it the dawn of a new day. Given the unbelievable succession of interlocutors in the conversation that is the history of twentieth century continental philosophy, what do you see as the state of continental philosophy now? And, where do you see it going? What is your "critical vision" off for continental philosophy?*

DCW: We are fortunate to have people like you who will continue these traditions.

JAS: *Well, at least continue it in continuing to be concerned about these questions.*

DCW: Yes, and this is such a complicated issue. I wrote an essay in the late 1980s entitled "The Future of Continental Philosophy"¹⁹ and I almost got drummed out of the 'continental' community as a result. (Not really.) I argued that the future of continental philosophy lay in giving itself up. Not to analytic philosophy, but to pursue its questions in a receptive relation to other traditions. This did not go down well with some people. I got attacked by my friends who said that I didn't understand the history of SPEP (The Society for Phenomenology and Existential Philosophy) and the struggles that they had been through. It is like someone from Kenya coming to America and saying that the black guys should stop thinking about slavery.

JAS: *That is an interesting example considering the current presidential race in which Barack Obama, a Kenyan-Kansan, who sees a different way forward and is being called to the mat by many leaders from the civil rights movement who claim that he doesn't understand the history of the struggle.*

¹⁹ David Wood, "Translating the Differences: The Futures of Continental Philosophy," in *Writing the Politics of Difference*, ed. Hugh J. Silverman (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991), 291-296.

DCW: Yes, the claim was that I didn't see that continental philosophy was under attack, that the dominant (analytic) tradition would just as soon squeeze us out of existence and that the suggestion of any sort of assimilation was suicide. It is only by claiming some sort of determinacy of our own that we could survive.

JAS: *Isn't that close to saying that only if we maintain our status as victims – as marginalized – that we preserve our voice? It sounds to me like this could be self-defeating except in certain historical contexts. The better strategy seems to be claiming that continental philosophy is now, legitimately, part of the philosophical conversation rather than simply continuing to occupy the status of an unwanted sibling. Isn't it time to move forward in conversations about engagement rather than conversations of competition?*

DCW: The question is whether peace can be declared by one side. If the lamb puts down its arms in the presence of the wolf, the wolf may just eat it. This is what they were worried about, and I think, given the political situation, they may have been right. But I was also calling for a certain self-criticism. There is barren scholarship everywhere. And there is both productive and also unproductive continental *and* analytic philosophy. I was trying to say: let's cut the cake, in terms of quality, while at the same time recognizing the distinctive importance of tradition and developing conversations between traditions through history. Although, even what conversation and dialogue look like may be problematic. Analytic philosophy certainly tended to privilege the latest paper and its conversation would only go back a few years at most. If, when I write about Heidegger, I draw on the whole history of philosophy since the pre-Socratics, and you are referring to a few key journal articles, it looks as if we have a stand-off about the very terms and shape of a dialogue. On the one side it can seem like we have the authority of tradition and on the other side we have light-footed, nimble, lawyer types. That does set up a kind of differend and a difficulty for easy engagement. Fortunately, there is a lot more middle ground. A good example is the recent collection *Philosophy and Animal Life*,²⁰ which makes much of the traditional philosophical divide seem antiquated.

JAS: *Do you think that part of the tradition that needs passed on to the next generation of continental philosophers are these obstacles to dialogue? Or, does there need to be room in continental philosophy for it to start looking different from what it has been over the past few decades? Isn't this an example of a way in which the notion of the democracy to come seems to demand continental philosophy not be bound by its own tradition, but receive it as a challenge to move on towards new spaces of thought and practice?*

DCW: Well, I have two lines of thought here. One would be to stress the distinctiveness of the European tradition as opposed to the American. One perhaps weird example I could give you would be public environmental policy.

²⁰ Stanley Cavell, Cora Diamond, John McDowell, Ian Hacking, and Cary Wolfe, *Philosophy and Animal Life* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008)

There are real differences in how people think about environmental policy in different countries and this largely has to do with the difference between the individualistic, neo-liberal line of thought so prevalent in America and the more communitarian, social-justice based orientation in European thought. I am grateful for the fact that Europeans in general have protected their philosophical legacy and I begin to get worried when Europeans, not only philosophers, but motorists, and consumers, slide towards a more liberal orientation in philosophy. There will be more SUV's on the road, and more obesity in the general population (and perhaps in thinking itself!). Currently, all of these are on the rise in Europe and it looks as if they will be increasingly prominent. In sum, I would rather see a certain tradition maintained in order for there to be productive dialogue between traditions than see a convergence that eliminates the distinctions. Secondly, Derrida once said that he thought that his peers from the 1960s had never properly been read. I have to say that I agree with him although it may seem in some ways very parochial view to stress figures such as Foucault, Lacan, Deleuze, Althusser, (and Derrida), and I may seem false – surely these guys have been read and read again! Nonetheless, I believe they were really revolutionary figures and that they opened a window of extraordinary creativity and fertility. Heidegger once said that German Idealism was never refuted, but that the German people just weren't ready for it. In a way, I think that the 1960s have not been refuted, but that the world just wasn't quite prepared for them. I am tempted to generalize and repeat the move that Derrida makes in *The Specters of Marx* with other figures that have "died." They may have died, but if they went to heaven we are now awaiting their return.

JAS: *Only an angel can save us now.*

DCW: I am not saying that we should feed on corpses, that only the dead are great. We need to see the great among us. How many German philosophers thought highly of Heidegger while he was alive? Not many. I don't see any sort of theoretic deficit at the moment. There is a whole lot of stuff still being worked through.

JAS: *So you are hopeful?*

DCW: Yes, but I would not deny that, as Sartre put it, *les choses sont contre nous*. Hope is largely independent of the facts. People distinguish between being optimistic and being hopeful. I am certainly hopeful in ways that reflect what we have discussed about the to-come and our inability to control the future. Nonetheless, we have a duty to imagine, await and facilitate the unexpected and the unpredictable. This is why I am fascinated by Heidegger's *Beiträge*,²¹ a text written in wake of his recognition that he had put his money on the wrong number when it came to Hitler. He talks about the need to prepare the way. When I first read this I thought that it was so weak; I don't want to just prepare the way, I want to build something and make something happen! But in terms of

²¹ Martin Heidegger, *Contributions to Philosophy, From Enowning*, trans. Parvis Emad and Kenneth Maly (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999).

our contribution to history and the emancipation of humans and other creatures, I really do think that history throws up moments, forks in the path, and whether a certain way has been prepared for may make all the difference as to whether we go that way or another way. So, preparing the way can be the causal precondition for something happening and it is far from being a weak, second rate strategy.

JAS: *We are all John the Baptist?*

DCW: Yes, we are all in the position of inaugurating the possibility of something happening.

JAS: *As a way of concluding then, let me ask you to say something on the event of having been interviewed. At the intersection of the interview's being past and the reception of it being yet to come, how do you envision the task of the interview here at this moment, where you/we are?*

DCW: Self-understanding can seem like a turning inward of the searchlights of the mind and then reflecting upon what we see there. But no one really sees that as an adequate model. A much more powerful source of self-understanding is conversation and interaction. Consider one's engagement with the world in general and conversation with one's friends. In casual conversation, people often just tell you what you want to hear. It is not aimed at discovery. As Heidegger says, we pass the word along. What is so interesting about an interview is that even when you are being thrown some juicy bones that prompt the re-articulation of existing thoughts, it is a real opportunity to think through things anew. An interview might be thought to be like squeezing a bottle to see what is in there. But, at least in this case, it is not like that at all. Rather, each question is a chance to think though something afresh. That means that the process of self-understanding is being dramatically accelerated by the significant Other actually addressing you and returning to you, with a twist, the things that you think.

JAS: *As Levinas makes clear, real dialogue only occurs when there is the possibility of surprise.*

DCW: Right. That is what is so interesting about responding to questions that one has not anticipated. Even the idea of self-understanding is not just an understanding of the self, but is a kind of understanding that puts the limits of self in question. An interview is a bit like Gadamer's conception of art and play in which you are drawn out into a space in which you are not just yourself, but you are swimming around noticing the limits of selfhood while dealing with the relationships between selfhood and issues that are bigger than you. I have no doubt that this interview will have an impact on my subsequent thinking about things and maybe even on what others think that I am doing. So, this moment of intense presence will have a future which will itself be folded back into future presents. It is an intriguing educational event. It draws out . . . no, it does more than just draw out, it *generates* stuff that was never there. When you ask me

questions it sounds like “tell us what you believe about X,” but the question is part of the space that is being generated. And *you* are responsible for that.²²

DAVID WOOD is Centennial Professor of Philosophy at Vanderbilt University, where he teaches continental philosophy and environmental thought. Wood’s extensive publications include *Time After Time* (2007); *The Step Back: Ethics and Politics After Deconstruction* (2005); *Thinking After Heidegger* (2002), and *The Deconstruction of Time* (1989).

J. AARON SIMMONS is Visiting Assistant Professor of Philosophy at Hendrix College. Primarily working at the intersection of continental philosophy of religion and political philosophy, Simmons is co-editor (with David Wood) of *Kierkegaard and Levinas: Ethics, Politics, and Religion* (Indiana U.P.), and has published in such journals as *Philosophy Today*, *Journal of Religious Ethics*, *Symposium*, and *Philosophy in the Contemporary World*.

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²² This interview occurred on April 19th in David Wood’s office at Vanderbilt University.