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"THINKING THE IMPOSSIBLE": THE EVENT AS A POST-HEIDEGGERIAN DIVIDE IN FRENCH PHILOSOPHY*

Abstract: This paper argues that the concept of the Event in post-1960 French philosophy constitutes a dual reaction to Heidegger's legacy, particularly concerning the problem of "thinking the impossible". For Heidegger, the limits of thought are tied to the limits of being, raising the question of whether that which transcends being can be thought at all. Drawing on Garry Gutting's *Thinking the Impossible*, the paper examines a key divide between two forms of skepticism: absolute and relative.

Absolute skeptics — such as Levinas, Derrida, and Marion — argue that certain aspects of reality remain fundamentally beyond conceptual grasp. Their Event is an irreducible rupture: Levinas's ethical encounter, Derrida's différance, and Marion's saturated phenomenon all resist conceptual containment. Relative skeptics — like Deleuze and Badiou — treat the Event as conceptually challenging but not unthinkable. For them, Events prompt revisions of our frameworks: Deleuze's ontological difference and Badiou's evental rupture can be integrated within philosophical systems.

The paper further explores Claude Romano's position as a potential third path. Rejecting both ineffability and formal abstraction, Romano presents the Event as a lived transformation that reshapes the subject's temporal and spatial experience.

By situating these divergent approaches within the legacy of Heidegger, the paper reveals a deeper tension in post-Heideggerian thought: whether the impossible must remain conceptually inaccessible or can be rendered thinkable through renewed frameworks. In doing so, it clarifies the stakes of the Event as a philosophical concept and its role in mapping the fractures within contemporary thought.

Keywords: *event, Heidegger, Deleuze, Badiou, Marion*

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In 2011, Garry Gutting published *Thinking the Impossible*, an introduction to post-war French philosophy in which he discusses its main thinkers.[1] However, in the final chapter — bearing the same title — Gutting makes a particularly intriguing move. He summarizes the entire tradition of contemporary French philosophy as an effort to engage in what he calls "thinking the impossible".[2] From there, he introduces a distinction between two camps: "absolute skeptics" and "relative skeptics".[3] This classification is interesting for three reasons. First, it is not immediately clear what Gutting means by "thinking the impossible". Second, the philosophers he uses to substantiate this distinction — Gilles Deleuze, Alain Badiou, and Michel Foucault as relative skeptics, and Emmanuel Levinas, Jacques Derrida, and Jean-Luc Marion as absolute skeptics — are all philosophers who have written extensively on the topic of the Event. And third, the term "skeptics" itself is not one typically associated with contemporary continental philosophy. It therefore seems worthwhile to review Gutting's classification. This paper will proceed in three steps. First, it will examine what Gutting means by "thinking the impossible" and his distinction between absolute and relative skepticism. Second, it will test whether this framework holds when applied to the philosophy of the Event. Third, it will assess whether Gutting's division is exhaustive or whether alternative positions can be taken.

Let's begin by considering what exactly Gutting says. According to him, French philosophy since 1960 has "a fundamental concern with thinking what is conceptually impossible".[4] French postwar philosophy, according to Gutting, is characterized by a profound fascination with what appears to be beyond the limits of human thought — whether in terms of ontology, ethics, or politics. While philosophy as a whole always challenges the limits of thought, what distinguishes contemporary French philosophy is its particular fascination with what *cannot* be thought. This does not mean merely speculating about abstract impossibilities, but rather confronting concepts, events, or experiences that resist full conceptualization yet demand philosophical engagement. Gutting emphasizes that for thinkers like Derrida, Badiou, and Deleuze, the impossible is not a simple negation of thought but a productive site of philosophical inquiry — where contradictions, paradoxes, and aporias reveal deeper structures of reality. According to Gutting, this attitude towards conceptual limits is a key difference between French — and more broadly: continental — philosophy and the approach of the analytic tradition.[5] Analytic philosophy, he

1 Gary Gutting, *Thinking the Impossible: French Philosophy Since 1960* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).
2 Ibid., 184.
3 Ibid., 185.
4 Ibid., 184.
5 Ibid., 184–87.

suggests, works under the assumption that anything meaningful must ultimately be expressible within a coherent conceptual framework — problems arise from conceptual confusion, and philosophical progress is made by clarifying concepts and resolving ambiguities. By contrast, French philosophy actively engages with what seems conceptually irresolvable or paradoxical, treating these impossibilities not as errors to be corrected but as fundamental features of thought that reveal deeper truths about being, language, and experience. While analytic philosophy tends to work within established logical and linguistic constraints, postwar French philosophy often seeks to stretch, subvert, or even abandon these constraints in order to engage with what resists formalization.[6]

This leads us directly to Martin Heidegger's — and to some extent Immanuel Kant's — influence on French post-war philosophy. Heidegger's proclamation of the end of metaphysics implied that any attempt to conceive the ultimate ground of being is destined to fail, as the limits of thought are inseparable from the limits of being itself.[7] This raises the fundamental question of whether that which transcends being can be thought at all. Through his critique of metaphysics, Heidegger not only questioned the possibility of thinking the impossible but also suggested that it may remain entirely beyond human comprehension. Post-1960 French philosophy develops its own responses in this very context. According to Gutting, much of the French philosophical tradition over the past half-century can be understood as an engagement with this legacy.[8] He then proceeds to make his distinction between the two types of skepticism within this tradition. Here, he states, there is a "fundamental division […] between *absolute skeptics* about conceivability […] who hold that there are ineliminable conceptual impossibilities (which cannot be thought by any concepts), and *relative skeptics* […] who claim only that there are conceptual impossibilities for any given set of concepts (but that new concepts can be developed to eliminate the impossibilities)".[9] So, the relative skeptics acknowledge the limits of thought but believe in strategies to bypass these limits — whether through conceptual invention, political intervention, or artistic creation. The absolute skeptics, on the other hand, see these limits as insurmountable, turning instead to the ethical and the aporetic as sites of philosophical engagement. This distinction, then, is crucial. Whereas figures like Deleuze, Badiou, and Foucault remain committed to finding new ways to think beyond apparent impasses — through ontology, mathematics, or power structures — thinkers like Levinas, Derrida, and Marion insist on the absoluteness of certain thresholds, particularly in

6 Ibid., 185–187.

7 See for example: Martin Heidegger, *Basic Writings*, trans. David Farrell Krell (London: Routledge, 2010), 307–326.

8 See for Gutting's interpretation of this influence: Gutting, *Thinking the Impossible*, 50–66.

9 Ibid., 184.

relation to ethics, alterity, and the divine.[10] Relative skeptics overcome the limits of thought by treating impossibilities as challenges rather than absolute barriers. They view the history of philosophy as a continual process of conceptual reinvention, where new frameworks, languages, and methodologies allow thought to expand beyond what was previously deemed unthinkable. Deleuze, for instance, introduces ontological innovation by reconceiving difference and becoming, while Badiou employs set theory to rethink being and event.[11] Foucault, on the other hand, deconstructs the epistemic conditions that structure knowledge and power, revealing new ways to conceive historical transformation.[12] In each case, the impossible is not rejected but actively met, leading to new forms of philosophical intervention that reshape the landscape of thought itself. Absolute skeptics, by contrast, do not attempt to overcome conceptual limits but instead work within them, exploring the very nature of their inaccessibility.[13] For thinkers like Levinas, Derrida, and Marion, the impossible is not something to be eliminated but rather something that defines the limits of human thought and ethics. Levinas, for example, treats the encounter with the Other as an experience that exceeds comprehension, irreducible to conceptual capture.[14] Derrida's notion of *différance* exposes the inherent deferral of meaning, showing that presence and total understanding are always beyond reach. Marion's theology radicalizes this further, proposing that certain phenomena — such as divine revelation — manifest themselves precisely through their resistance to conceptual capture.[15] For these philosophers, impossibility is not an obstacle to be overcome but a horizon that continuously disrupts and reorients philosophical inquiry.[16]

Interestingly, Gutting connects this distinction to two distinct ways of responding to Hegelian thought.[17] Foucault famously remarked that the task of 20th-century philosophy is to deal with Hegel's legacy, and Gutting interprets this, at least in part, through the lens of his division between relative and absolute skepticism.[18] The relative skeptics align with a reinterpretation of Hegel's dialectical process, where contradictions and conceptual limits are not seen as absolute impasses but as opportunities for transformation.[19] Hegelian dialectics operates by engaging

10 Ibid., 185.
11 See for Deleuze: Ibid., 128–132. And for Badiou: Ibid., 165–183.
12 See for Foucault: Ibid., 140–147.
13 Ibid., 185.
14 See for Levinas: Ibid., 117–128.
15 See for both Derrida and Marion: Ibid., 151–164.
16 Ibid., 185.
17 Ibid.
18 Ibid., 32.
19 Ibid., 185.

contradictions and resolving them at a higher conceptual level — what Hegel calls *Aufhebung* (sublation). Thinkers like Deleuze, Badiou, and Foucault take up this legacy in their own ways. Deleuze radicalizes the dialectic by replacing it with a philosophy of pure difference, rejecting Hegel's synthesis in favor of continuous conceptual reinvention.[20] Badiou reinterprets Hegelian negation through set theory, positing the Event as a rupture that generates new forms of thought. Foucault, while less directly Hegelian, sees history as a discontinuous process where new discursive formations emerge by breaking away from dominant epistemes. For these thinkers, *thinking the impossible* means finding conceptual innovations that allow philosophy to move beyond its apparent dead ends. The absolute skeptics, on the other hand, reject the Hegelian model of dialectical resolution, emphasizing instead the irreducibility of certain limits.[21] Rather than overcoming contradictions through conceptual progress, they remain within them, revealing their inescapability. Levinas, for example, resists Hegel's totalizing logic by insisting that ethical responsibility to the Other cannot be subsumed under a larger conceptual framework. Derrida, too, disrupts Hegelian synthesis through *différance*, exposing the ways in which meaning remains forever deferred, resisting closure. Marion extends this rejection of totality into theology, where divine presence is understood as an irreducible givenness that remains beyond the grasp of conceptual thought. For these thinkers, *thinking the impossible* does not mean resolving paradoxes but recognizing them as fundamental to thought itself, forcing philosophy to deal with what necessarily escapes comprehension.[22]

Now, we can apply Gutting's distinction to the philosophy of the Event, beginning with relative skepticism. For this, Deleuze and Badiou will serve as key examples.The concept of the Event in Deleuze's thought has multiple meanings, but here we can focus on its role in his *Logic of Sense*.[23] At the core of Deleuze's philosophy is an effort to think the virtual — a realm that underlies and exceeds the actual.[24] To reach the virtual, we must counter-actualize the actual, breaking free from conventional modes of thought based on identity, representation, and stability. This requires a more creative way of thinking, one that deterritorializes fixed structures

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20 Ibid., 185–186.

21 Ibid., 185.

22 Ibid.

23 Gilles Deleuze, *Logic of Sense*, trans. Constantin Boundas and Charles Stivale (New York, NY: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2015). For a comprehensive overview of the many meanings of the Event in Deleuze, see: Clayton Crockett, *Deleuze beyond Badiou: Ontology, Multiplicity, and Event* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2013), 75–100.

24 For a good introduction, see: Todd May, *Gilles Deleuze: An Introduction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005). Or, alternatively: Peter Hallward, *Out of This World: Deleuze and the Philosophy of Creation* (New York, NY: Verso, 2006).

and opens up new possibilities. One way to do this is through concept creation. Concepts allow us to move beyond the actual, pushing thought beyond its given limits. However, language itself, as a medium of representation, poses a problem. This is where Deleuze introduces his logic of sense, in which the Event plays a crucial role. An Event, in this sense, occurs when language creates something new — when it does not merely describe but actively generates reality. A classic example is the performative utterance: if someone enters a bank and shouts, "This is a holdup!", the phrase itself brings about a new situation. This epiphenomenal effect shows how language can disrupt the actual and open access to the virtual.[25] In this way, Deleuze's Event aligns precisely with Gutting's characterization of him as a relative skeptic. The Event marks the moment where conceptual limitations are transcended, allowing thought to break through to something radically new.

Despite the many differences between Deleuze and Badiou, Gutting's distinction places them in the same camp. Both thinkers reject the end of metaphysics, refusing to accept that thought has reached its limits. While Deleuze seeks to expand thought through the creative power of the Event, Badiou approaches it from a different framework — one that insists on the possibility of new truths beyond established conceptual constraints. For Badiou, philosophy must be grounded in what he calls truth procedures, which emerge through ruptures in established structures of knowledge.[26] At the core of his ontology, developed in *Being and Event*, is a commitment to mathematics, specifically set theory, as the foundation for thinking about being. He argues that being is pure multiplicity, irreducible to a single, unified structure. However, within any given situation, what exists is organized through representation — a process that assigns identities and structures to what otherwise remains an indeterminate multiplicity. This process of representation, which he terms the state of the situation, functions by gathering elements into collections, stabilizing what is otherwise radically heterogeneous. The Event, for Badiou, is what disrupts this representational order. It is something that occurs outside the logic of the situation, something that cannot be predicted or fully accounted for within existing structures. An Event forces a rupture, forcing thought to reconfigure its understanding of reality. However, an Event only truly exists if it is followed by a truth procedure — a process through which a subject remains faithful to the Event by reworking the situation in its aftermath. Truth, in this sense, is not a correspondence between thought and reality but an active process of fidelity that reorganizes what counts as

[25] See for this reading of the Event in Deleuze: Deleuze, *Logic of Sense*, 140–153. The hold-up example does not come from Deleuze himself, but can be traced back to Austin's work on performative utterances. Example taken from: May, *Gilles Deleuze*, 101.

[26] For a good introduction, see: Peter Hallward, *Badiou: A Subject to Truth* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2003).

thinkable and possible.[27] This places Badiou firmly in the camp of relative skepticism, as Gutting describes it. Like Deleuze, he does not accept that certain conceptual impossibilities are absolute. Instead, he believes that the limits of thought are contingent on representation — they exist within a given structure, but an Event reveals new possibilities beyond those limits. By engaging with the Event and remaining faithful to it, philosophy can extend the realm of truth, breaking through the apparent impossibilities imposed by the existing order.

Let's now turn to the absolute skeptics, those who, rather than seeking to overcome conceptual limits, emphasize the inescapability of certain boundaries and the necessity of engaging with what remains beyond thought. Levinas and Marion can serve as exemplary thinkers. In Levinas's work, the Event is not an ontological rupture in the sense of Deleuze or Badiou, but rather an ethical encounter that fundamentally exceeds conceptualization. The Event, for Levinas, is the face-to-face encounter with "the Other", an encounter that disrupts the self's autonomy and calls it into responsibility. Unlike Deleuze and Badiou, who see the Event as a means of expanding thought, Levinas sees it as something that escapes thought — an intrusion of radical alterity that cannot be assimilated into existing conceptual structures. This Event is not an occurrence within being but a transcendence of being itself. The face of the Other presents an irreducible demand — an ethical imperative that cannot be contained within any philosophical system or representational framework. Levinas explicitly critiques the Hegelian totality, arguing that traditional metaphysics seeks to absorb alterity into the same, whereas the ethical Event resists such reduction. It is an Event precisely because it shatters the economy of knowledge and power, revealing an absolute ethical responsibility that precedes and exceeds all comprehension. Thus, for Levinas, the Event is not about creating new concepts (as in Deleuze) or revealing new truths (as in Badiou), but about bearing witness to what thought can never fully grasp — the infinite responsibility to the Other.[28] This situates him clearly within Gutting's category of absolute skepticism, as he insists that certain limits — especially the ethical relation — cannot be overcome, only recognized and responded to.

This is even more clear in the work of Marion. The Event has many meanings in his thought, but here we can focus on the Event as an example of the "saturated phenomenon" — a phenomenon that exceeds the capacity of human intuition and conceptual grasp.[29] For Marion, a saturated phenomenon is one that overwhelms the

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[27] This reading of the Event in Badiou is entirely based on: Alain Badiou, *Being and Event*, trans. Oliver Feltham (New York, NY: Continuum, 2005).

[28] For Levinas' reading of the Event, see: Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 1998).

[29] For an instructive overview of the different meanings of the Event in the thought of Marion, see: Kadir Filiz, *Event and Subjectivity: The Question of Phenomenology in Claude Romano and Jean-Luc Marion*

structures of representation and understanding, flooding consciousness with more meaning than it can process. Unlike ordinary phenomena, which are structured by the subject's intentional acts (as in Husserlian phenomenology), saturated phenomena impose themselves on thought, disrupting its ability to categorize or control them. The Event, in this sense, is something that arrives undemanded, not as an extension of what is already thinkable but as a rupture that transcends conceptualization altogether. A prime example of this is revelation, particularly in a theological sense. The divine does not appear as an object to be analyzed but as an overwhelming givenness, exceeding all conditions of knowledge. Similarly, love, the encounter with the Other, or even an artwork can manifest themselves as Events that impose themselves with an intensity beyond comprehension. These experiences cannot be reduced to a conceptual framework but must be endured and responded to in their irreducible excess.[30] This places Marion like Levinas within Gutting's absolute skepticism: rather than trying to overcome the limits of thought, he embraces the idea that certain realities — especially those related to the divine, love, or the Other — are fundamentally ungraspable. The Event, for Marion, is not something to be understood but something that overwhelms, making us recognize the limits of human cognition and representation.

From this, it becomes clear that Gutting's distinction between relative and absolute skepticism is indeed valid when applied to the concept of the Event. Deleuze and Badiou, as relative skeptics, treat the Event as a means to expand thought beyond conceptual limitations, either by creating new concepts (Deleuze) or by forcing a rupture in the structure of knowledge that opens the space for new truths (Badiou). In contrast, Levinas and Marion, as absolute skeptics, emphasize that the Event is irreducible to conceptualization — for Levinas, it is the ethical demand that resists assimilation, and for Marion, it is the overwhelming givenness of the saturated phenomenon that surpasses thought's ability to grasp it. Moreover, this distinction proves to be an important conceptual tool because it allows us to relate the Event to both the Hegelian and Heideggerian contexts. Read in light of the Hegelian tradition, the Event is either an extension of dialectical overcoming — where the limits of thought are transcended through conceptual or ontological innovation (relative skepticism) — or a break with Hegel's totalizing system, claiming an irreducible excess that cannot be sublated into a higher unity (absolute skepticism). In the Heideggerian context, the Event can be seen as a response to the end of metaphysics. For the relative skeptics, the Event functions as a way to reintroduce the possibility of new truths, challenging the

(Leiden: Brill, 2024), 29–62. http://doi.org/10.1163/9789004689541 For an overall introduction to the thinking of Marion, see: Christina Gschwandter, *Reading Jean-Luc Marion: Exceeding Metaphysics* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2007).

30 This interpretation of the Event in Marion can be found in: Jean-Luc Marion, *In Excess: Studies of Saturated Phenomena*, trans. Robyn Horner (New York, NY: Fordham University Press, 2002).

Heideggerian notion that metaphysics has exhausted itself. Meanwhile, for the absolute skeptics, the Event affirms Heidegger's claim that being withdraws from full comprehension, reinforcing the idea that certain experiences — whether ethical, theological, or existential — remain beyond conceptual grasp. Hence, there is clear philosophical validity in Gutting's distinction, as it not only clarifies differing approaches to the Event but also opens new avenues for understanding how contemporary philosophy negotiates the legacy of Hegel and Heidegger.

As a concluding remark, there are two critiques one can formulate on Gutting's distinction. The first one — which is a rather superficial remark — concerns the term "skeptics", which does not fully capture the philosophical positions he is referring to, even though the distinction itself remains valid. The word skeptic traditionally implies a stance of doubt or suspension of judgment, yet neither Deleuze and Badiou nor Levinas and Marion engage in skepticism in this sense. Rather than doubting the possibility of thought, relative skeptics actively push beyond its limits, while absolute skeptics engage deeply with the impossibility of overcoming them. Second, there is an interesting middle path between the two positions, which becomes evident when we reconsider the concept of the Event itself. This perspective is particularly well-articulated in the thought of Claude Romano.[31] Unlike Deleuze and Badiou, who see the Event as something that either ruptures established knowledge or opens up a new ontological realm, or Levinas and Marion, who view the Event as an encounter with radical alterity beyond comprehension, Romano offers a more phenomenological understanding of the Event — one that integrates elements of both perspectives. For Romano, particularly in *L'événement et le monde*, the Event is neither simply a break that generates new concepts nor an intrusion of the unthinkable.[32] Instead, he presents the Event as something that reconfigures the subject's relationship to the world, marking a transformation of meaning rather than an absolute rupture or an ungraspable excess. Romano shifts the focus from the ontological status of the Event (as in Badiou and Deleuze) or its ethical/theological implications (as in Levinas and Marion) to its experiential and existential structure. The Event, for him, is something that happens to a subject in such a way that it fundamentally changes their orientation toward the world. This perspective offers a middle path between Gutting's categories: it does not assume that the limits of thought can always be surpassed through conceptual reinvention, nor does it treat them as insurmountable. Instead, the Event, in Romano's view, reshapes what can be thought and experienced without necessarily breaking with thought altogether or exceeding it completely. It is not simply an

[31] See for an Romano's phenomenological reading of the Event: Filiz, *Event and Subjectivity*, 84–142.

[32] See: Claude Romano, *Event and World*, trans. Shane Mackinlay (New York, NY: Fordham University Press, 2009).

emergence of new concepts (as in Deleuze and Badiou), nor a confrontation with the unspeakable (as in Levinas and Marion), but rather a lived transformation — a shift in the subject's relation to meaning, time, and experience itself. Thus, while Gutting's distinction remains useful, Romano's approach suggests a more nuanced understanding of the Event — one that navigates between conceptual expansion and irreducible limitation. This perspective highlights the possibility that the Event is neither wholly within nor wholly beyond thought, but instead functions at the threshold, constantly reconfiguring the very structure through which we engage with the world. At the same time, Romano makes clear that Gutting's distinction primarily concerns the conceptualization and interpretation of the Event. What it leaves aside, however, is a prior dimension: the occurrence of the Event itself and the lived experience through which it is first encountered. Romano shows that the Event is not merely an object of philosophical classification but, before anything else, a transformation that is experienced and only later subjected to interpretation.

Exploring this in full is beyond the scope of this paper, but it at least offers an interesting path for further investigation — one that navigates between the poles of Gutting's distinction and deepens our understanding of the Event. This middle path not only challenges the binary of relative and absolute skepticism but also suggests a more dynamic interplay between conceptual innovation and the recognition of limits. Ultimately, it provides a direction for future research that can build on Gutting's conceptual framework, which remains an intriguing lens for reading postwar French philosophy.

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