One of the things for which Donald Rumsfeld will be remembered is his distinction between ‘known knowns’, ‘known unknowns’ and ‘unknown unknowns’. He was speaking in 2002, at a press conference where he was commenting on the absence of evidence linking the government of Iraq with the supply of weapons of mass destruction to terrorist groups:

There are known knowns; there are things we know that we know.
There are known unknowns; that is to say there are things that we now know we don’t know.
But there are also unknown unknowns – there are things we do not know we don’t know.

I suspect many of us may have taken some pleasure at seeing Rumsfeld painted into a corner by his own rhetoric, and forced to make such a tortuous and unconvincing defence of his actions. At the same time, I think we should admire the epistemological nuance in his position. All too easily, we act as though the only epistemological categories we have are knowledge and ignorance. Either something is known, in which case it is transparently and fully grasped; or it is unknown, in which case we remain in complete ignorance.

In this paper, I will argue that knowledge is not as simple as that. Rather than being a static description of possessing or not possessing facts, it is an activity; and it is an activity that is always situated between the known and the unknown. Consequently, it is first concerned with discourse and expression, and only in that context is it concerned with information. I’ll devote most of the paper to considering domains in which it is claimed that we speak about that of which we have no knowledge, arguing that if this was strictly true, we would be reduced to silence about these areas, or at least that we should be reduced to silence! Then, I’ll conclude by briefly pointing to the
unknown that always haunts domains like the natural sciences in which we presume that we have clear, distinct and certain knowledge.

The domain in which it is most commonly claimed that we have no knowledge is the domain of the divine. A God who is the supreme, all-powerful and infinite Creator, must be utterly transcendent to the finite and limited creation. As part of that creation, we know that which surrounds us, and which shares in its finitude. This is clearly not the infinite God. In fact, if God’s infinity is to be given due regard, then God cannot be described in terms of anything that is finite. Apophatic (or mystical) theology begins from this insight and proposes a three-stage progression in our propositions. First, it insists that if we speak affirmatively, of what we know, then whatever we might be speaking of, we are not speaking of God. So, next, we speak negatively, and reject all of our finite descriptions as unfitting for God. But then we say nothing. So, concludes apophatic theology, we should describe God as utterly beyond all of our categories or descriptions.

Jean-Luc Marion is one of the better known contemporary attempts to recover this sort of apophatic theology. In his view, any attempt to describe God using human, finite categories or concepts sets up an idol. It names as God that which is only a reflection of our own finitude and projection. Anything which can be described exhaustively and comprehensively in concepts of our human understanding cannot be transcendent. Instead, it is a false god that we have established on our own terms, made in our own image, reduced to proportions that we can comprehend. Marion believes it is these impotent and empty idols that are lamented by Nietzsche’s prophetic madman when he proclaims that “God is dead”. We have the power to erect them, and we therefore also have the power to kill them off when they are no longer convenient. “We have killed him,” says the madman. That which is truly divine must always transcend our finitude in a way that exceeds all our concepts, and can never be grasped by our understanding.

Marion believes that phenomenology – at least in its Husserlian and Heideggerian forms – restricts God’s appearing to that of an idol. It does this by beginning with experience, and describing
phenomena in terms of intuition more or less adequately filling a constituting intention. Crudely put, we begin with a concept (e.g., the idea of a house), which is partially filled by the intuition of a number of apperceptions (our lived experience of walking around the house and seeing it from different angles, then going inside and exploring various rooms), and finally allows us to say that a house has appeared to us. We have been given intuition in our experience that partially fills the concept of house. Marion argues that if this is how God must appear, then the possibilities for such a revelation are limited in advance by the finitude of our human concepts.

For revelation to be an appearing of the infinite and transcendent God, there must be a way for the paradox of something being part of experience while simultaneously transcending it and therefore lying outside the conditions of that very experience. This is a primary motivation that leads Marion to develop his theory of saturated phenomena, as he acknowledges in essays written in the decade leading up to Being Given (1997). He wants to set out the possibility of phenomena that are not limited by the concepts of a constituting ego, but instead overflow those concepts. Instead of giving some degree of at best partial adequation, depending on the extent to which their intuition fills an intention, they are excessive and radically transcendent, dazzling the recipient, whose concepts are unable to contain the intuition that is given. While he gives a number of instances of saturated phenomena – historical events, paintings, the lived body (flesh), the face of the other (Levinas) – the paradigm is revelation, because this is the phenomenon of the infinite and radically transcendent that by definition must utterly transcend the limits of human concepts and understanding. If it does not transcend in this way, then it is finite, the appearance of a false god, a mere idol.

Marion’s strategy is, in part, a response to Heidegger’s critique of metaphysics as onto-logy. According to Heidegger, classical metaphysics searches for the ground or foundation or cause of beings, and names this ground as ‘God’, who becomes the highest or supreme being. This focus on

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peaking between the known and the unknown

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beings involves a forgetting of Being, which is Heidegger’s primary interest. However – and this is not highlighted by Heidegger himself, but by others with more theological and religious interests – it also involves a forgetting of God, because God becomes one being among others, even if the highest or greatest of them. Marion is more interested in the forgetting, or – as he calls it – the reducing of God, than he is in the forgetting of Being. In fact, he wants to go further than Heidegger, by speaking of God as not only beyond beings, but also beyond Being: God without Being, as he puts it in the provocative title of his 1982 book. Such a God is utterly transcendent, and unthreatened by the limitations of finite concepts, including the concept of Being itself.

But, if God is incomprehensible, does this require that God is also imperceptible? If the absolute distance and absence of such a God is preserved, is there any possibility of experiencing or encountering the appearance of God in revelation? While it is certainly not the God of the philosophers, can it be the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the God sought by Pascal (who Marion cites as an inspiration)? Is there any way of saying anything about something that is so radically unknown? Or are we reduced to following Wittgenstein’s advice and remaining silent?

To respond to this difficulty, Marion turns to apophatic theology, and in particular to the discourse of praise – a liturgical discourse in which God is addressed in prayer and invoked as ‘good’, ‘wise’, ‘almighty’, and so on: ‘O God, I praise you as good;’ ‘I turn to you as wise,’ etc. From his earliest writings, Marion has shown an interest in apophatic theology, with Dionysius the Areopagite being one of the recurring figures in his texts. Marion is attracted to apophatic theology because he believes that it offers a model of an approach that affirms God without reducing the divine to the measure of our concepts. Apophatic theology sets out a three-stage process of mystical or contemplative ascent. First, in the via affirmativa (kataphasis), it affirms characteristics about God; e.g., God is good. Then, in the via negativa (apophasis), it denies that characteristics apply to God; e.g., God is not good in the way that finite things are good; but, also, God is not evil or limited. The denials of this negative stage are crucial in eliminating the idolatry that is inherent in any
affirmation using our finite concepts. Finally, in the *via eminentiae*, it invites contemplation of God as *beyond* any affirmation and negation; e.g., God is *eminently* good – good in a way that is beyond any other good that we know or can conceive of. Thus, it allows God to appear as *God*, rather than as an idol that merely reflects the image of the perceiver.

Marion argues that a key characteristic of apophatic theology that allows it to achieve this is that it is *pragmatic* rather than conceptual. Like liturgy, it *praises* God rather than offering a definition. Such a way of denomiating God does not depend on a significative concept, but is instead a way of *envisaging* God. It aims at him without a determinate signification. In *The Idol and Distance* (1977), Marion introduces the idea of a “discourse of praise” as part of his commentary on the writings of Dionysius. Marion argues that, although Dionysius names God, he does this as *praise* rather than as statement. Invoking God in prayer is a way of aiming at, relating to, and dealing with God, rather than conceptually defining God. It elevates the one who prays, rather than causing God to descend. Thus, it traverses distance, rather than eliminating it, and avoids both the collapsing of distance and the objectifying that happens in categorial predication. Further, a discourse of praise invokes God under a *multitude* of names: it praises God as good, as wise, as beautiful, etc. This proliferation shifts the nominative and predicative function of naming. While a single name can be a way of defining and identifying, a multitude of names precludes the use of any one of them as a definition or even as a proper name. Thus, apophatic naming amounts to denomination that is *de*-nomination rather than nomination. It avoids ascribing a proper name to God, and thereby affirms God’s anonymity and inherent namelessness. In this way, God’s transcendence beyond all names and concepts is preserved, and Dionysius opens a distance which can then be traversed, and in which God can appear as *God*.²

² Marion, *The Idol and Distance*, 183-86/223-26.
Jacques Derrida objected to Marion’s use of apophatic theology in a couple of texts from the late 1980s. In turn, Marion responded to this in 1997, in a paper delivered at a conference at Villanova University in Philadelphia, and later re-worked into the final study of *In Excess* – “In the Name: How to Avoid Speaking of It” (2001). The paper is a lengthy consideration of non-significative denomination, defending apophatic theology from the objection that praise is “a disguised form of predication” (IE 134/161), which uses hyperbole as a rhetorical device to affirm an essence, even though none of its affirmations claim to be comprehensive. Interestingly, Derrida was in the audience and responded after the paper – among other things to deny this particular characterisation of his objections!3 Couched in terms more faithful to Derrida himself, one might put the objection something like this: Regardless of whether language is predicative or pragmatic, it cannot refer to a transcendental signified such as God, because the appearance of the truly other is impossible. As Derrida says, *tout autre est tout autre* (each other is completely other). While language can *aim* at this impossible, it cannot *reach* it. Language can only ever be an undecidable trace that marks the absence of a presence. We inhabit a symbolic or textual order, in which there is a never-ending play of difference between these traces, and in which meaning can never be fixed or determined. His idea of *différance* is a way of describing this infinite deferral of determinate meaning, beyond the never-ending play of difference.

I agree with Marion and Derrida that we can never know God. But I am not convinced that this means that God must remain utterly unknown. My problem is that if we are to have meaningful discourse about God, rather than meaningless babble, then that discourse must have some relation to knowledge. I accept Marion’s argument that we cannot predicate attributes to God in a way that defines him, without thereby reducing God to an idol. Similarly, I accept Derrida’s argument that determinate meaning is infinitely deferred. However, it seems to me that there are a range of ways

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3 Marion attributes this objection to Derrida. However, in his response to the paper which was the initial version of this study, Derrida rejects Marion’s characterisation of his position. (*God, the Gift and Postmodernism*, ed. John D. Caputo and Michael J. Scanlon, The Indiana Series in the Philosophy of Religion [Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1999], 42-45)
in which it is possible to offer meaningful descriptions of God, provided that we are clear about their provisional nature, and do not claim the status of determinate knowledge for them. In fact, any meaningful discourse must do precisely this, whether it is the discourse of praise, or the discourse of poetry, or emotion, or aesthetic response, or affection, or promise, or apology, or command. All of these domains of discourse involve a relation of some sort to knowledge, without depending on claims about determinate, comprehensive and fixed knowledge. If a couple had no knowledge of one another or of marriage, it would be impossible for them to make their promises to each other at their wedding. However, even at the most superficial of weddings – imagine a drive-through in Las Vegas – nobody suggests that there can be a determinate and comprehensive statement that defines the couple or their relationship; this is the beginning of a story rather than its end. All of these discourses take place in, and rely on, the space that is opened between the known and the unknown.

The same is true in other domains, which we are more used to associating with knowledge. Only a naïve or shorthand account of science mistakes its observations and theories for facts and knowledge. The most cursory glance at the history of science shows that it is always historical, situated, partial, provisional, cultural, for a particular purpose, and answering a particular question. Even the most basic concepts of modern science put forward by Newton and Galileo have been profoundly reshaped by developments in relativity and quantum mechanics, which becomes even more removed from the domain of observable fact in the version that postulates parallel universes. And more recently scientists have proposed even more disconcerting hypotheses in which, for example, dark energy comprises nearly three quarters of the universe, even though it is only called ‘dark’ because it is by definition unobservable. Science, too, like other discourse, explores its hypotheses and possibilities in the space between the known and the unknown.

For me, the most compelling account of this dynamic interplay between the known and the unknown, in which discourse takes place, remains the theory of the hermeneutic circle. This concept was introduced by Martin Heidegger and developed by Hans-Georg Gadamer. Perhaps the
most accessible example that Heidegger gives is in the opening pages of *The Origin of the Work of Art*, where, characteristically, he takes a seemingly straightforward question, and uses it as the starting-point for an extraordinarily complex series of reflections. In this case, the question is: What is art? Heidegger suggests that when we are asked this question, the obvious response is to answer it by pointing to works of art, and saying: Art is that kind of thing. These examples then function as the raw material for a study of the characteristics of art in general. But, asks Heidegger: How do we know to point to this set of entities and not another set? How, for example, do we know whether or not to include Duchamp’s ready-made art (most notoriously, his *Fountain*, which is simply a porcelain urinal placed on a stand and exhibited in a gallery)? As Heidegger points out, the only way we can decide whether entities are works of art is if we have some set of criteria at our disposal. But the only possible basis for such a set of criteria is a concept of art. And so we find that in order to provide any answer to the original question, “What is art?”, we must already have some answer to the question. Now, that answer is only provisional, and once it allows us to identify a group of entities as ‘works of art’, it provides the basis for further reflection and refinement. This more refined concept of art then allows us to modify the criteria on which we identify works of art, and to interrogate these works in new ways, which in turn leads to further refinement of our concept of art, and so on. Thus, the hermeneutic circle is in fact more of a spiral, in which there is a constant movement from question to answer. Crucially, though, for our purposes, there can never be an absolute starting-point. If we do not already have at least a preliminary and provisional answer to a question, we could never ask that question in the first place, because it would have no meaning for us. But, correlative, any answer at which we arrive remains preliminary and provisional. Just as there is no absolute beginning, so there is no absolute end. The whole dynamic is played out in the space between the known and the unknown. A determinate and comprehensive answer is infinitely deferred.

So, what would the hermeneutic circle mean when we come to ask about God? First, it would mean that, regardless of whether we are engaged in praise or in metaphysics, there is no way of beginning
any sort of discourse about God unless we already have some idea of what we are talking about. Further, this idea must have some content that has a real relation to its object, rather than simply being an empty place-holder or an idolatrous projection. In other words, there must be something that is known about God, even in a discourse of praise. However, this does not mean that God is ever completely known. What we know is always preliminary and provisional, partial and incomplete. It is as much related to the unknown as it is to the known, and always opens into that unknown, just as Dionysius does in his mystical ascent. To be sure, we are reaching out into the dark, but this does not mean that we are completely blind. In Marion’s terms, a saturated phenomenon is not totally without intuition that fulfils intention; rather, in a saturated phenomenon, however much our concept might be fulfilled by intuition, it can never be adequate to that which is given. As St Paul says, “For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known” (1 Cor 13:12). Seeing “dimly” is still seeing; knowing “only in part” is still knowing. It places us between the known and the unknown, which is where discourse about God becomes possible. It is, of course, the same space in which the discourse of science takes place. Perhaps the difference is that in one we are used to thinking that we occupy the unknown, and in the other we are used to thinking that we occupy the known. In both, we might be better served by embracing a little more of Donald Rumsfeld’s epistemological sophistication.