PHENOMENOLOGICAL APPROACHES TO RELIGION

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The exact meaning of the adjective ‘phenomenological’ has not always been clear when employed to define an approach to religion. One might assume that it denotes either that particular and quite specific way of looking at things developed by Edmund Husserl, or the school of thought that emerged in the wake of Husserl’s philosophy. And indeed, more often than not, that is precisely the meaning intended. Yet, one can find a less specific employment of the term ‘phenomenological’ that is not related to Husserl’s philosophy at all, nor even to philosophy in general. When employed in this latter case, the term ‘phenomenological’ lacks a specific reference to a system or a method and can mean a number of things, from the non-historical study of religion (religion as such) to religion examined independently from other disciplines (Bleeker 1963 and Pettazzoni 1967). In his study on Chantepie de le Saussaye, W. Brede Kristensen, and Gerardus van der Leeuw, George Alfred James (1995) has grouped what appears to be the common characteristic of those phenomenologies of religion under the triptych of the a-historical, the a-theological, and the anti-reductive. In what follows, the term ‘phenomenological’ indicates, explicitly and consistently, the phenomenological method developed by Husserl, and the school of thought that consists of the work of those thinkers influenced by him.

We need now to inquire after the meaning that the term ‘religion’ has when one speaks of ‘phenomenological approaches to religion’. Especially with regard to phenomenology, why should ‘religion’ constitute a distinct field? How are we to distinguish religion, and from what is it to be distinguished? Is religion a subset of a greater category that encompasses or includes religion among other things? Have we not already committed to too much in assuming that religion is one more field or discipline alongside others similar to, or dissimilar from, it? For example, to what extent is religion reducible to aesthetics – if one were to follow the lead of German Idealism – or ethics, as Kant in fact suggested? Do those distinct disciplines correspond to distinct experiences other than religion? Is philosophy itself ‘larger’ than religion, if the latter is to be included in the specification of a ‘philosophy of religion’? In other words, if we were to raise the question of the proper field of philosophy of religion, how can we know that religion is not encroaching upon ethics, as long as the Good has been another name for God, or upon aesthetics (to recall Hölderlin’s assertion that religion is the offspring of the beautiful)?
The singularity of experience and the impossibility of ascribing the classification of ‘religious’ to any particular class of phenomena

What up to now was mainly a question of interdisciplinary borders and boundaries must be taken to a more fundamental level, that of the singularity of experience. We do not ask whether we can have the experience of more than one thing, but rather whether we can experience anything in a way that would be radically different from that of experience itself. If we have no other recourse to the world than experience – and, in some exceptional cases, non-experience, but this amounts to the same – then we cannot justifiably talk of a phenomenology of religion as if the field for that phenomenology could have been something other than that single experience through which we are able to be in-the-world. Instead, there can be only one and the same field, inasmuch as all phenomenology is a phenomenology of our experience of the world above and beyond the normative classifications of ethics, aesthetics, religion and so on. Yet, even if one were to allow for a distinction among disciplines, fields of study, etc., it would be much harder, if not impossible, to legitimize a similar departmentalization of experience. We cannot speak of multiple experiences even if experience is always manifold. Experience as such cannot be more than one thing. But surely we have an experience of more than one thing. Yes, but whether one experiences the most trivial and mundane thing or the mysterium tremendum itself, experience is experience. Therefore, the error we have committed by speaking of a ‘phenomenology of religion’ becomes immediately apparent, for this determination could make sense only if beforehand we have decided what religion is, which concept, object, moment, or event can qualify as belonging to religion, so as to be properly classified under the description of a ‘phenomenology of religion’. But such an a priori decision we are unable to make.

To the one, then, who would like to know what kind of phenomena we are willing to admit within such a phenomenology of religion, our answer is all. All phenomena are religious for no exclusion can be justified, and therefore all philosophy is a philosophy of religion, if one still wishes to designate it so. We are not talking here of analogous experiences, but rather of ‘a radical community’ – to use Husserl’s phrase – between the objects of experience. This remains the opening gesture of phenomenology, when Husserl (1982: 9) refused to distinguish between objects of eidetic intuition and individual intuition.

The converse side of asserting this impossibility of exclusion – or more correctly, of noting the artificiality of compartmentalizing only some phenomena as religious – is to acknowledge the impossibility of any religious experience, that is, the a priori impossibility of calling experience ‘religious’. It is really an ‘either all or nothing’. Either all aspects of experience could be allowed to stand and be analysed as religious phenomena – worship, but also walking; conversion, but also the less dramatic and more difficult-to-describe moments of doubt, agony and falling back in one’s old ways that lead to conversation, and so on – or, none of it can be allowed to carry, in and by itself, the designation of a ‘religious phenomenon’. In fact, it might be preferable to begin from the acknowledgment of such an a priori ‘atheism’, as one finds it in the work of Jean-Yves Lacoste (2004: 105, 108), because it is only out of such a radical ‘either/or’, where all or nothing is at stake, that talking about ‘religion’ can become meaningful again, by losing the self-imposed limitation to a number of phenomena, determined in advance, and then try to discover in that selection what can be constructed out of those phenomena as a characteristic that might justify and explain their designation as ‘religious phenomena’. Prayer, rites, rituals, and worship in general, the holy and the sacred, and the divine and its manifestations are all obvious cases, to the study of which a phenomenology of the religious might wish to restrict itself. But on what grounds? Simply because it is customary, and a custom supported by the general consensus, that these phenomena should be read as ‘religious’? But then it is not the
phenomena themselves that manifest religion, but religion that is allowed to choose its representatives. We ask again, on what grounds? One sympathetic to religion might be surprised to discover that, if we suspend religion’s judgment and let the phenomena speak for themselves – all of the phenomena, as now we cannot draw any line – then a much greater spectrum of experience comes forth to testify for religion, in a way that ‘religion’ could not have possibly done for itself, and in a way that shows that talking about ‘religion’ (or a ‘phenomenology of religion’) as a distinct realm of experience makes little sense.

Perhaps it would be better to leave aside the terminology of partiality – e.g., philosophy as distinct from religion, religion as distinct from philosophy – and say that what we propose is nothing less than exposing the ‘religious’ (for lack of any other word) foundations of consciousness as such.

Attempts at a phenomenology of religion

The problem of defining what religion is arose at the same time as the first works that tried to examine religion by adopting a scientific perspective – be it psychological, anthropological, or sociological – attempted to establish a science of religion: a threskeiology. In other words, the problem of what constitutes a religious phenomenon arises only from within the religious attitude, as we would say in phenomenological language, in the same way that busying oneself with numbers exists only for the arithmetical world and the arithmetical attitude (Husserl, 1982: 54); but this implies the suspension of the lived world – thus a host of problems, underlined below, emerge. We have at the beginning of the twentieth century several remarkable examples of such an attempt to define religion: James’ The Varieties of Religious Experience (1901–2), Durkheim’s The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life (1912), Otto’s The Idea of the Holy (1917), Freud’s Totem and Taboo (1913/1918) and The Future of an Illusion (1927), and Eliade’s The Sacred and the Profane (1957/1959). What all these works seek is to describe the citadel of religion without entering it, let alone sojourning in it. But it is naïve to expect that an aspect of life might be objectified – turned into a specimen for analytical observation removed and separated from the roots that nourished it – and yet also continue to present the same properties that it possessed when it was alive. The ‘study of religion’ is, of course, not religion. Still less is it faith, prayer, and liturgy. It would be intolerable to commit the same disrespectful act towards philosophy, for example, in attempting to make a ‘study of wisdom’ out of it. The result of such an attempt would be either a sophiology or a philology, but neither is philosophy. So, too, with threskeiology – it has little, or rather absolutely nothing, to do with that experience one calls ‘religion’. To repeat the point differently: what is lifeless, especially qua lifeless, cannot hope to live life, nor can the person who has not loved or been loved be granted access to what he has deliberately denounced in the vain hopes of understanding. Alberich can grasp the power that all knowledge is only at the expense of forsaking love.

The distinction between sacred and secular

The definition of ‘religion’ as pertaining to things sacred, in contradistinction to the profane, was formulated by Durkheim (1976: 37) and followed by Eliade. ‘This division of the world into two domains, the one containing all that is sacred, the other all that is profane, is the distinctive trait of religious thought.’ I wonder why Durkheim did not have the insight to apply to the pair ‘sacred’/‘profane’ the same line of arguments he so successfully employed against the pair ‘natural’/‘supernatural’. Eliade’s study of sacred space and sacred time, furnished by numerous examples, cannot but be convincing. Yet, it would be difficult to admit that man experiences such a
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dramatic bifurcation of his life, even if one is to speak here only of the ‘religious man’. The world
he inhabits is, after all, one world, and the distinction between sacred and profane realms, useful as
it might be, seems to apply more to our studies than to our experience. For in that experience
one could either acknowledge the ‘sacredness’ of time or deny it; but to admit that at some times
time is sacred, but at other times it is not, presents us with the impossibility of two times and two
spaces whose origins and characters are to be accounted for differently. There is, obviously, a time
of feasting and no one would doubt that such a time is dedicated to the gods and their festivals,
yet the time of fasting finds its meaning also in a similar association. There is, no doubt, the sacred
space of altars, temples, and churches, but, ultimately, is not the whole world a sacred space?

Our criticism, in short, is that the distinction between sacred and profane is secondary and
artificial. Notice, for example, the difficulty with which Durkheim is confronted, as soon as he
declares that very distinction, in explaining what makes a thing either sacred or profane, espe-
cially since, as he is astute enough to state himself, the same thing could be classified under
either of these categories. The reader looks in vain to find an explanation of what bestows the
status of the sacred on any particular phenomenon. Both Durkheim and Eliade provide us with
descriptions, but they fail to offer an explanation or a definition of religious phenomena. Yet,
descriptions can point to what is sacred only after it has been recognized as such, and therefore
they help us when what is at stake is the manifestation of the religious itself.

Durkheim insists that the difference between sacred and profane is not a difference of
degrees, as, for example, the difference between good and evil, but rather an absolute difference
of kind. Eliade, too, talks of a ‘solution of continuity’ between these two realms. Yet, such
sharp distinctions cannot but amount to a resuscitation of the old Gnostic dualism. Perhaps both
authors share the conviction that religion is ultimately and fundamentally gnostic, and perhaps this
conviction contains a kernel of truth, as long as one allows for the exemption of Christianity.

The sacred and the holy

What calls for such an exemption is the concept of the holy (sanctity, sanctus) insofar as it renders
the distinction between the sacred and the profane problematic, since such a distinction cannot
account for the holy. Is something by its very nature or essence sacred or does it become so?
Durkheim explicitly states that the sacred does not constitute a particular class of objects but
rather a characteristic that potentially any object could assume. How does an object acquire the
characteristic of the sacred? By the logic of sacrifice (literally ‘to make sacred’)! The sacred (sacer)
prehends over a cluster of notions and practices that are indeed at the core of the religious, such as
sacrifice and consecration. A sacrifice is the ritualistic killing of the sacrificial victim, whether it is a
human being or an animal, and therefore the act of setting it aside from the realm of the living.
The sacrifice is primarily concerned with the distinction between life and death and constitutes
the permissible transgression of that distinction. Once sacrificed, the victim becomes consecrated:
it is set, in other words, on the other side of the profane and its profane use. The same logic
applies to non-animal sacrifices, such as food, objects, and buildings that are consecrated.
Whatever is thus consecrated is dedicated – to ‘dedicate’ and to ‘consecrate’, in religious lan-
guage, denote roughly the same thing – to the gods. Thus, yet another polarity emerges between
what belongs to the gods and what belongs to the mortals.

To follow Durkheim’s (and later Eliade’s) logic, the distinction between sacred and profane,
once prompted, opens up to a number of further distinctions – such as between life and death,
gods and humans, etc. – all already implicit in that primary distinction. The logic of separation,
exemplified in the rite of sacrifice, however, must be complemented with its opposite (such is
the demand of every totality); that is, that of transgressing the very opposition that the sacred
safeguards: the name of that transgression is sorcery. Now it becomes clear why as soon as Durkheim has defined ‘religion’ as ‘the sacred’ he is faced at once with the problem of magic and his failed ways to distinguish it from religion. Lévinas (1990: 141) confirms the association of sorcery with the sacred, as the sacred’s ‘first cousin, perhaps even sister’.

Within the ‘sacred’/‘profane’ distinction, therefore, one discovers the alliance between the sacred and the sorcerous. Against that alliance, and therefore outside of the ‘sacred’/‘profane’ distinction, stands the holy (sanctity, the saintly). The word sanctus (saint, sanctity, sanction) is in fact etymologically related to sacer (the sacred). The word ‘holy’, on the other hand, comes from a different root, that of Heilig, which denotes that which is ‘whole’ (the holy and the whole are related) and also ‘healthy’ (thus without blemishes). However, even within Latin use, sanctus and sacer were not synonyms. The former denotes a symbolic quality – the sanction of the law, the sanctification of a practice, and so on – while the latter a natural quality. This distinction between natural and symbolic is very important; we will see that, ultimately, ‘religion’ – here the term is restricted to certain ‘natural’ religions – is ‘natural’, that is, it focuses on what is natural, it is concerned with nature, etc., while there still remains the possibility of a ‘religious’ overcoming of religion. Such an overcoming is represented by the holy which is neither sacred nor profane and which, one could argue, can be both sacred and profane at once. On the other hand, the distinction between sacred and profane remains within the boundaries of nature and the natural (the supernatural included). The overcoming of the natural is not the supernatural but the historical. And it is on the side of history that we have to look for the overcoming of the ‘religious’ understood as a natural property.

In light of the foregoing discussion one should resist the temptation to provide a definition of religious phenomenon, most importantly because religious phenomena do not constitute a particular class. The characterization of any phenomena as ‘religious’ pertains to signification and not to manifestation as such (without wishing to suggest that the two are unrelated). Does this mean that religious phenomena and religion as a whole are subjective? They can only be subjective – but the term ‘subjective’ here does not have the connotations which it carries in everyday parlance, namely of something dubious, imaginary, or unreal. Rather the religious character of phenomena is subjective in the same sense that history and language can be said to be so, that is, grounded on a subject – yet, as we will see below, on a subject without subjectivity.

A paradigm shift: discovering religion ‘in’ the conscience

The ‘religious’ character of phenomena is not something like a sensational property, like the colour or the sound of a perceived object, for instance. It makes, therefore, no sense to deny or affirm the religious character of phenomena, as if such character were something to be discovered in them. Rather, the characterization of any phenomenon as religious is not decided, so to speak, on the side of the phenomenon itself, but on the side of him or her for whom it constitutes an experience and to whom it is given. In other words, there are no religious phenomena, but only a religious disposition to phenomena in response to the givenness that constitutes the core of the phenomenological revelation. Such a disposition is universal, that is, part and parcel of the constitution of conscience as such.

Givenness, relation, and the call

In the first formulation of his own ‘broadening’ of the phenomenological reduction, Jean-Luc Marion discovers a horizon more essential than, and thus anterior to, transcendental consciousness (Husserl) and being (Heidegger). What constitutes phenomena and, by extension, what constitutes
me as the recipient of these phenomena, is neither the intending character of the consciousness paired with the phenomenon’s intuition, nor is it the opening of Dasein to the nothingness of Being disclosed by anxiety and boredom, but rather the claim addressed to me by ‘the pure form of the call’. Thus Marion (1998: 197–98) writes ‘that which gives itself gives itself only to the one who gives himself over to the call and only in the pure form of a confirmation of the call, which is repeated because received’. Marion’s discussion of the call is indebted to Heidegger’s analysis of the character of conscience as a call that calls Dasein to itself, a call that ‘comes from me yet it calls from beyond me’, as section 57 of Being and Time famously stated. Yet, Marion radicalizes Heidegger’s analysis by emphasizing that the very receptivity of the call is constitutive of a subject without subjectivity (for the subject is neither a being nor a consciousness). It should be noted that the subject does not even exist prior to the call, for ‘giving himself over to the call’ means, first and foremost, to ‘be given a self by the call’. The self that gives himself over to the call does not even have himself; in order, then, to give himself over to the call he has to be given that self. In fact, this is not about a sequence, logical or chronological: the self is not first given in order to be later given up, but rather the self is given as much and insofar as it is given up. For the self too, or rather the self above all, must be given.

Indeed, the gifted (l’adonné) is called to existence as a response to a call (l’interloqué) that calls it to being. ‘Thus is born the gifted’, writes Marion (2002b: 268), ‘whom the call makes the successor to the “subject”, as what receives itself entirely from what it receives’. The summon of the call, the resulting surprise, the call itself, and its facticity – this fourfold of the phenomenology of givenness – implies a self given to oneself by an origin that precedes and predates it and, at the same time, the paradox of a self who, in receiving itself, precedes also and predates itself.

The call, exemplifying what is known as ‘inverse intentionality’, summons me to myself. It summons me, neither to a diluted subjectivity where no taste of particularity can be detected, nor to the ontological uniformity of one-size-fits-all, but rather to myself, that is, to the irreducible, irreplaceable specificity of my thinness. ‘The passage from the nominative [of the subject] to the objective cases (accusative, dative)’, Marion notes, ‘inverts the hierarchy of the metaphysical categories’ (2002b: 268). But how? And what may be the implications of such an inversion? Is the project of Marion’s reduction based only on a grammatical whim? Certainly not! What is at stake here is far more radical than any Copernican revolution. Marion (2002b: 268) explains it in what, in our opinion, might be the most far-reaching claim of his phenomenology: ‘Individualized essence (ousia proté) no longer precedes relation (pros ti) and no longer excludes it from its ontic perfection. In contrast, relation here precedes individuality’ and, as he adds a few sentences later, results from it.

Alluding to Dionysius’ Divine Names, we could say that the self is like the name. A self must be given as a name is always given – we speak of somebody’s ‘given name’ – and never assumed by myself. I cannot name myself unless the Other first gives me my name, by calling me – my parents after my birth, the priest in my baptism, the abbot in my tonsure – thus giving my self to myself. In the absence of others there is neither name nor self. To be given a name indicates one’s beginning, in my name I acknowledge that I am generated, derived and dependent; the fact that I have a name by which the Other can call me implies that the Other has laid a claim over me, that I belong not to myself but to the Other from whom I received not only my name – my name, after all, is a constant confession of this debt – but also my self. A name is always given and therefore it can never be a proper name – for my name does not belong to me, not only insofar as it is given to me but also insofar as it has named others before me and it will name others after me. However, ‘in this way, the baptismal given name, the “proper” name par excellence, results from a call (one calls me with the name of such a saint) because,
more essentially, this name constitutes a call in itself – I would not be called simply by this name, but indeed to this name’ (Marion 2002b: 292).

Only God has no name for God has no beginning. Who was there before God in order to name Him? To give God a name would imply that oneself is prior to or higher than God, but such a ‘God’ would only be an idol, for he who names God creates ‘God’, that is, he erects for himself an idol. God is strictly anonymous (as the Divine Names make clear) or, and this amounts to the same thing, polyonymous (Marion 2001: 142). Marion’s early critique of conceptual and metaphysical idolization – cf., God Without Being and The Idol and Distance – finds its complementary gesture in the critique of subjectivity, for the subject is the idol of (one)self.

It is precisely the death of such idolatry, the idolatry of the self-subsisting subject, that the triple immersion in the baptismal waters effects so that the new person who emerges from death can now receive not only a name, but a new identity ‘in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit’ which is an identity inscribed within a community, a personal identity, since it is given by the invocation of three Persons, given as a gift and not claimed as a possession. For ‘what do you have that you did not receive?’ (1 Cor. 4:7).

After the call to biological existence and the call to ecclesial life there is finally one last call: ‘I tell you the truth, a time is coming and has now come when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God and those who hear will live’ (John 5:25). Here, then, lies the whole question of the call, for ‘the dead will hear the voice’. How are the dead to hear the voice that calls them to everlasting life? How is the voice to penetrate the dead ears which hear nothing? To play with this paradox, we could say that only the dead ear hears; that unless one has become (like the) dead one would not hear the call. Indeed, receptivity to the call presupposes an unconditional passibility, such that one could compare it only to the absolute passivity of the dead. As in the Mystical Theology, one ascends higher by leaving behind more and more of oneself, that is, of one’s own categories, concepts, and images so as to arrive at the summit of aphaeresis naked of all conceptual armoury, so here we will hear the voice that calls to life once we have silenced our voice and have mortified the activities of the subject, once our intending consciousness ceases to search and returns upon itself by means of an inverse intentionality that allows it only to receive, to hear the call and by hearing it to live. The domain of the call, particularly of the divine call, extends from before birth (cf., Luke 1:13) to after death (cf., John 11:43; Luke 7:14) and thus proves itself of being unrestricted by what we might take to be life’s absolute termini. Similarly, though, the one called, the one to whom the call is addressed is shown to be more than his being, for, in a sense, he precedes his birth and survives his death. Thus the call has displayed the insufficiency of being or consciousness in counting as the ground of selfhood. The interlocué is ‘man without being’ as the call that constitutes him comes ultimately from the ‘God without being’.

The foregoing analysis might give to our discussion of the call a particular color that is not entirely accurate. It might, in other words, give the false impression that the call is restricted to one category, that of religious or ethical phenomena; for instance, the ‘call of conscience’ or vocation as a ‘calling’. Against this assumption, we must emphasize that the call is above all a property of the visible, or better yet, the call becomes most noticeable as the visible. By this we mean not that everything that appears is the call, but rather that whatever appears – from everyday things, like chairs and books, to ideas, emotions and state of things – appears because it addresses us a call. A silent face in a café, a painting in a museum, an exam that I need to take, all of these appear by means of a certain call, to which I can respond in different ways. The call is not only what calls our attention, but also what fails to do so, the unnoticed and the unnoticeable; the call is not only the pleasing or the interesting, but also what one finds unpleasant or boring. Therefore, it makes all the more of a paradox to say that the call is the beautiful.
Of course, one knows since Kant that the beautiful is not to be identified with pleasure, and von Balthasar does not hesitate to take even ugliness as a manifestation of God’s glory (the unsurpassable example of such a paradox is, of course, the cross). But what does it mean that the call is the beautiful? Indeed, what else can the beautiful be than what calls? And, how else is one to understand the ability of the call to call if not by means of beauty? Language tells us that much when it indicates that the derivation of ‘the beautiful’ (to kalon) comes from the verb ‘to call’ (kaleo, kalein). Naturally, if we understand beauty as symmetry or proportion, as harmony of color or sound, it would be difficult, indeed impossible, to explain the catholicy of the beautiful as the call that calls through the visible, even when it is not a question of harmony or symmetry. These ‘scientific’ explanations, as Socrates somewhat scornfully calls them in the Phaedo, are descriptive at best of the ways in which beauty is perceived, that is, they explain only the ‘mechanics’ of the aesthetical phenomenon, but fail to answer the question why we call something beautiful, let alone the question what beauty is in itself. Plato, therefore, rejects these questions as insufficient and confusing. Kant rejects them for threatening beauty’s universality, and phenomenology rejects them for imposing limitations that are inadmissible within the reduction. The only two answers to the question of beauty that merit some consideration are those given to us by Plato (c. 350 BCE/2002) in his Phaedo and Kant in his Critique of Judgment. For Plato (100d: 7–8) ‘what is beautiful is beautiful by the beautiful’. Of course, such a statement is heavily in need of interpretation. One has learned to see in this answer Plato’s so-called theory of forms. The beautiful, then, by which anything becomes beautiful, is taken to be the form of beauty. This already implies that what makes something beautiful is not itself, i.e., it is not to be found in the thing itself, but rather comes from beyond, it is other than the thing that one perceives as beautiful. Surprisingly, Kant (1790/1987: 62, 64, and 221) gives a very similar answer when he refuses to assign beauty as the property of a thing. For him, too, beauty is external and a sign of exteriority. Both Plato and Kant seem to converge on another point: that beauty is teleological. It is unnecessary to rehearse here the movements of Kantian teleology – suffice to say that it is solely the teleological character of the beautiful that maintains the coherence of an otherwise disparate Critique, divided, as it is, between aesthetic and teleological judgments. To see a similar notion in Plato’s treatment of the beautiful, we need to remind ourselves of the context within which he discusses beauty: it is the famous episode where Socrates gives a brief account of his philosophical autobiography and of his encounter with Anaxagoras’ teleology in particular. Socrates believes that in Anaxagoras he has found the only tenable answer as to the cause of things, that is, perfection (‘for if one wished to know the cause of each thing … one had only to find what was best for it’ 97c). His later disillusionment with Anaxagoras leads Socrates to the famous ‘second sailing’ that consists of an investigation into the logoi of things, the latter being, as it is made clear in the dialogue, their final causes (thus, every form for Plato ought to be understood as a final cause). For the remaining pages of the dialogue, Plato singles out one particular form, that of beauty, which, by calling everything to itself, makes everything that heeds its call – and everything to some degree is – beautiful.

Dionysius (the Pseudo-Aeropagite) is situated in the middle of the distance between Plato and Kant. His beautiful is not anymore as impersonal as Plato’s form, nor has it been yet depersonalized as Kant’s a priori idea of purposiveness. For Dionysius the beautiful is a person, God Himself:

The beautiful [kalon] that is beyond all being is called beautiful [kallos] on account of its own beauty that it transmits to each and every thing and for being accountable for the harmony and brilliance of all as the light that shines to everything its radiating rays.
Therefore, if the beautiful is recognized as beautiful, it is because it renders itself visible (i.e., it ‘calls’ to itself) and, by the same token, what is visible, what appears in appearance and by appearing ‘calls’ to itself, is only the beautiful. Dionysius’s passage distinguishes between these two (simultaneous) movements clearly: the beautiful radiates ‘like the light’ – thus it renders everything visible, indeed it is the condition of visibility – but also recollects everything to itself, now strictly in its capacity as the ‘beautiful’ – that is, as a call from the future.

It is this double movement of the beautiful/visible that Marion’s phenomenology of saturation retrieves. What these phenomena are saturated with is the excess of the givenness of the phenomenon itself – it is an excess of intuition, a surplus of information we would say, that saturates them. This, however, does not mean that we have to look far for saturated phenomena, not, in particular, among the exotic, the extraordinary, and the bizarre. Saturated phenomena are not a special group of phenomena, but any phenomena seen without the protective glasses of regulatory concepts and preconceived intentionalities. Every phenomenon is inexhaustible – there is no viewing of a painting that is ever final, as there is no performance of a composition that is definitive; there is no event that can be transfixed into a single interpretation and, above all, there is no Other that would fit comfortably in one of my categories. We now understand that saturation is complemented by and, indeed, results in some kind of negation (negative theology). The task of the phenomenologist of the abundant givenness is similar to the theologian of the divine names: never-ending, or, as one could say after Gregory of Nyssa, ẹpectatic. Everything always gives more than one can receive – it is this generosity of phenomenality that necessitates revision, repetition, interpretation and finally, what gives rise to philosophy itself, wonder. This fecundity of intuition surrounds every phenomenon as if it were a halo of excessive visibility – a metaphor often evoked by Husserl himself in his Ideas – a mandorla of light, that transforms phenomena, or, better yet, renders them visible. For, phenomenologically speaking, in order to see what is seen, one must also ‘see’ what one cannot see, what remains unseen and as such shows the visible. There is no doubt that the theme of the abundance and irreducibility of donation as well as the chiastic intertwining of the visible and the invisible bear a strong affinity with a theological worldview. For ultimately the phenomenon of revelation conditions the revelation of the phenomena.

**Perfection**

If, indeed, only the end (in the double sense of telos as finality and purposiveness) makes things perfect (telos), then purpose keeps reminding us of such perfection amidst incompleteness and imperfection. It is as if the human mind were indeed made in such a way as to understand only the perfect and the complete. For even if this is lacking in the present state of things – and it can only be lacking – it feels compelled to supply it by itself. Memory and anticipation are both mediums of ‘idealization’, that is, of bestowing perfection upon the thing remembered or expected that, once presented, the thing lacks. Hence the disenchantment that follows every realized expectation.

The perception of any physical thing, that is, any perception in space, ‘involves a certain inadequacy’ (Husserl 1982: 94). By this, Husserl means that what I see is always necessarily partial, for I can never grasp what I see fully, from every single angle, in every possible way an object can show itself to me. This partiality, this imperfection endemic to perception itself, is a limitation necessitated by the limitations that are imposed on both me, as the perceiver, and the
object of my perception, on account of our respective embodiments. However, the same imperfection perpetuates a series of inexhaustible possible perceptions ‘which can always be continued’ and ‘which are never completed’ (1982: 91). This characteristic alone is enough to become the criterion of distinguishing between two kinds of beings: being as a physical thing, and being as an act of consciousness (for example, the distinction between the perception of a thing and the consciousness of that perception). The former is always given through a multiplicity of adumbrations, the latter can never be perceived adumbrated.

Yet, even if the act of perception can never be completed, what is perceived cannot but be comprehended as if it were complete. For I never see the book that lies on my desk as the one-sided, two-dimensional patch of blue color on my visual field – that would amount to not seeing the book at all – but as an object in which all its characteristics, properties, and angles are somehow presented in a unified way, such that my gazing alone can never discover, and not of any shortcoming on its account, but precisely because at no given instant, at no given perception, could any object be so presented. From where does such completeness come? The answer can only be: from the consciousness itself.

‘When I perceive simply, moving about in my environmental world, when I see houses, for example, I do not first see houses primarily and expressly in their individuation, in their distinctiveness [and thus, in their incompleteness]. Rather, I first see universally: this is a house’ (Heidegger 1985: 66–67). What Heidegger alludes here is the eidetic intuition of ‘the essence of any empirically possible or impossible house’ that is given together with the intuition of that particular house in front of me. As Marion (1998: 14) explains: ‘I see the house, as house, before seeing (and in order to see) a house; or rather, the as of the house precedes a particular house and allows it to appear as such’. Indeed, intuition always gives more than one suspects – for it presents us the world at least twofold: in its particularity and in its universality; in its particularity through its universality. What I see, then, when I see this or that is never the particular thing in itself but the thing in its eidetic horizon without which that thing in itself would be, strictly speaking, invisible. What allows things to appear as the things they are is the surplus of such eidetic intuition, an intuition that regards their eidos. Yet such a regard is not a gaze upward as it was supposedly for the Platonic philosopher in search of his forms, but a gaze forward to the eschatological perfection of things. The eidos of a thing is the thing as given within a horizon of perfection and completion, that is, a state that a thing can have only at the end when completed and perfected. So we read in St Augustine (1953: 253):

True equality and similitude, true and primal unity, are not perceived by the eye of flesh or by any bodily sense, but are known by the mind. How is equality of any kind demanded in bodies, and how are we convinced that any equality that may be seen there is far different from perfect equality, unless the mind sees that which is perfect? If indeed that which is not made [facta] can be called perfect [perfecta].

A little more needs to be said here by way of an explanation of temporality’s role which, even though implicit throughout the foregoing analysis, has not yet been thematized as such. The very notion of perfection implies, on its most basic, etymological level, a terminus or a telos reached over a period of time and by means of such time (per-factum), and thus finished. Perfection is an end-of-time category. To say this does not necessarily imply an absolute, ‘end of times’ (in plural) scenario, although all teleologies draw their meaning from within such an eschatological perspective. It simply means that perfection as a finishing that has been now finished cannot be looked for at the beginning. No beginning qua beginning can be perfect. Perfection is inseparably connected to the notion of time and, more particularly, to time as time passed. To the phenomenological eye,
perfection is not presented by the things themselves – which, as we have seen, are always and
necessarily given through inexhaustible albeit partial chiaroscuro of perception – but it is sup-
plemented by consciousness, a consciousness for which each and every of its cogitations are
always equally necessarily presented in the flow of time:

In itself every mental process [Erlebnis] is a flux of becoming, is what it is in a generation
originaliter of an invariant essential type; it is a continuous flow of retentions and pro-
tentions mediated by a flowing phase of originarity itself in which there is consciousness
of the living now of the mental process in contradistinction to its ‘before’ and ‘after’.
(Husserl 1982: 179)

The ‘continuous flow of retentions and protentions’ that consciousness essentially is does not
move in a simple linear fashion – as our naïve conceptions of time might have it – from past to
present to future (or from future to past to present!), but rather forms a highly complex pattern
wherein the three dimensions of time are interwoven perichoretically, so that every ‘now’
contains a retention of the ‘having been’ as well as a protention of the ‘about to be’. In turn, each
retention as well as each protention is pregnant with a similar tripartition of the now, the before
and the after, and so on. One could give the example of comprehending the verse of a poem as
one recites it: obviously one cannot utter all the syllables that make up any given verse – let alone
all verses – of the poem at once, but during each one of them, as one sound is followed by
another, the words spoken are retained in the words one now speaks, and the words yet
unspoken are anticipated in the words one now speaks. The example is a favorite of St Augustine
who is using it in order to illustrate the passing of time in the famous discussion of time in the
Confessions. Yet we find a more apt employment of the same metaphor in some other of his
works. For example, in De Vera Religione Augustine (1953: 245) writes:

A line of poetry is beautiful in its own way though no two syllables can be spoken at
the same time. The second cannot be spoken till the first is finished. So in due order
the end of the line is reached. When the last syllable is spoken the previous ones are
not heard at the same time, and yet along with the preceding ones it makes the form
and metrical arrangement complete.

That St Augustine is using some proto-phenomenological skills in his observations is confirmed
by Maurice Merleau-Ponty who, centuries after Augustine, used this very metaphor about
signification: we understand the beginning of a sentence from its end, Merleau-Ponty reminds
us, as we understand movement in light of its teleological direction (2011: 205).

How are we to understand this ability of the mind to see perfection when perfection is
lacking? It is precisely at this point that we need to turn to a phenomenological inquiry of the
teleological. It would seem that the first (that is, the most fundamental and the most readily
available) intuition of eschatology is that of awaiting or expecting (‘the hoped for’, or even the
‘unhoped for’, as in the work of Jean-Louis Chrétien). But what would such an intuition
have been without the idea of purpose, that is, of fulfillment of one’s anticipation, even if we
were not to know what or whom we are waiting for? More fundamental then than waiting is this
waiting-for, that is, the structure of a purpose. Whence can we phenomenologically derive such a
structure? First of all, from the very character of intending. Intentionality, even prior to
intending this or that, always intends a purpose; in fact, it is purposive (Husserl 1982: §86). In
every fulfillment, in every filled intention, one can observe the structure of the teleological.
Kant (1987: 31, 68) spoke of pleasure precisely in these terms, and we believe that it is the joy

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of the kingdom to come that is foreshadowed in the feeling of satisfaction that every filled anticipation yields. ‘All pleasures’, after all ‘have within themselves some feeling of perfection’ (Leibniz 2007: 145–46), and, as we have seen, perfection is a teleological category. The very passage from an empty intention to a filled one, that is, the passage from absence to presence, is such a teleological indication, for in all these common structures of anticipation the absolute anticipation, i.e., the anticipation of the absolute, is reflected (Husserl 1970: §22).

Teleology is, of course, one of the oldest ‘proofs’ of the existence of God in the book: from St Thomas Aquinas’ fifth way to Leibniz’s ‘principle of the best’. Nevertheless, it was believed to have been entirely discredited as an argument when it was shown that purposiveness cannot objectively be found ‘out there’ – that is, independently of the human mind. It must, therefore, be only in the mind and a thing of the mind. Nothing would delight us more than this conclusion. Its supporter might have thought that it achieved a decisive blow against teleology, without realizing that he had furnished it instead with its strongest defence. For to say that teleology is a property of the mind is to elevate it, as we have tried to show, to a universal structure of human consciousness. Consciousness first projects perfection in the world and only then, on the basis of such projection, discovers a teleological perfection in the things themselves. So far consciousness had failed to recognize purposiveness as its own essential characteristic and therefore, mistook it as a property of a world assumed to be external to itself. Let this mistake be corrected by the Copernican Revolution that phenomenology brings about, and let teleology, so understood, become the first indication of what could be called the *theological constitution of consciousness*. 

Phenomenological approaches to religion

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