Metaphysics in Phenomenology: Levinas and the ‘Theological Turn’

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During the second half of the 20th century the phenomenological tradition has given way to a wide variety of ideas, questions, styles and oeuvres. The phenomenological movement has never been a strictly defined school of thoughts, but since the last decades it has become almost impossible to set down a clear demarcation of it. One of the striking developments is the moving away from the perhaps most famous slogan of Husserlian phenomenology: ‘to the things themselves!’ Many phenomenological thinkers, especially in France, pay more attention to the giving of phenomena and to what is beyond the apparent than to the phenomena themselves.

Dominique Janicaud has given a profound critique of this development in his _The Theological Turn in French Phenomenology_, with critical readings of Levinas, Marion, Chrétien and Henry.¹ According to Janicaud these philosophers have given phenomenology a theological turn by leaving aside the phenomenological method and by turning towards the ‘unapparent’, which often happens to have a theological character. His first target is the philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas. Among other things, Janicaud accuses Levinas of imposing from the start a dichotomy of the Self and the Other on all phenomenological analyses. Unfortunately his reading of Levinas is rather poor and in several respects simply wrong.² Nevertheless, the point Janicaud is hinting at deserves

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² Janicaud states that Levinas takes his point of departure in a dichotomy between on the one hand, a metaphysics of alterity and infinity, and on the other hand, the enclosing and reducing strategies of knowledge, ontology, totality, representation and intentionality. Phenomenology falls on the latter side and has been rejected by Levinas as an objectifying method. Levinas, therefore, is supposed to have misunderstood intentionality and to have rejected the phenomenological method from the start. However, a short look at Levinas’ introductions to the phenomenology of Husserl can already demonstrate that Levinas’ interpretation of Husserlian intentionality is quite to the point and does not show the misunderstanding Janicaud finds here: cf. Janicaud, _Le tournant théologique_, pp. 27–29; Janicaud, “The Theological Turn,” pp. 36–39; Emmanuel Levinas, _La théorie de l’intuition dans la phénoménologie de Husserl_ (Paris, 1930), pp. 74–75; Emmanuel Levinas, “L’œuvre d’Edmund Husserl,”
a thorough investigation, for one can still wonder where this ‘theological turn’ comes from, and also whether Levinas is still faithful to what may be called the phenomenological method.

In this article I will first raise the question whether the so called ‘theological turn’ is indeed caused by a pre-phenomenological separation between self and other. Through a reading of an early text of Levinas, *Existence and Existents*, I will show that another separation precedes that between self and other. Then the phenomenological descriptions given by Levinas, and their methodological justifications, will be critically examined. Finally a few alternatives will briefly be sketched.

1 Levinas’ Existential Phenomenology: Being and Being Human

Although Levinas is most well known for his idea of the ethical relationship with the other, this idea has been elaborated in a relatively late phase of his philosophical development. The dichotomy of the Self and the Other is preceded by another separation, between existence and the existent. In his first short articles and texts, published in the 1930s and 40s, Levinas unfolds an existential phenomenology in which several ideas of Husserl and Heidegger are combined in a way that calls Sartre to mind. Whereas Sartre merges a Heideggerian existential human being with a consciousness that is characterized by a Husserlian and even Cartesian transparency, Levinas puts together Heidegger's existential analyses of the human *Dasein* with Husserl's idea of a free and transcendental consciousness that constitutes all its phenomena within its own subjective world. Levinas also shares with Sartre a very negative and pessimistic view of being as meaningless, repellent and even horrifying. The human being needs to escape an existence that thrusts its meaningless-ness upon him in experiences like, indeed, nausea. Levinas’ view of the relation between human beings and Being in general, however, is quite different from both Sartre and Heidegger.


Emmanuel Levinas, *De l’évasion*, 2nd ed. (Paris, 1982), pp. 67–99. It is not easy to tell who influenced whom. It was Levinas who introduced phenomenology in France, and Sartre got to know the work of Husserl and Heidegger through Levinas. But Levinas develops most of his own phenomenology in the late 1940s and afterwards, after the first publications of Sartre, and Levinas clearly reacts in these texts to the work of Sartre.