

Phenomenology and the "Theological Turn," by Dominique Janicaud et al

reviewed by [Bruce Ellis Benson](#) in the [November 14, 2001](#) issue

As a philosophy graduate student in the mid-'80s at the University of Leuven, home of the archives of phenomenology's founder Edmund Husserl, I was dazzled by such courses as "Phenomenology of Mysticism"--on Teresa of Ávila. Both Jacques Derrida and Emmanuel Levinas were presences in the curriculum, and Jean-Luc Marion was emerging on the scene. In the States, however, Levinas was still a marginal voice. Derrida was widely read but considered antireligious. And Marion was virtually unknown. Though Paul Ricoeur's influence was significant, he was most often read by theologians, and his courses at the University of Chicago were offered only through the divinity school.

The situation in the U.S. has significantly changed during the past 15 years. Levinas has become a dominant figure in many disciplines; Derrida's writings have taken on a deeply moral and theological tone; and Marion has taken over Ricoeur's position at Chicago (with a joint appointment in philosophy). In short, phenomenology has become much more theological in tone.

Dominique Janicaud's essay "The Theological Turn in French Phenomenology" provides an account of this shift. The essay--literally an official "constat" (report) on the state of philosophy in France between 1975 and 1990--forms the heart of this book. The second part is composed of fine shorter essays by Jean-François Courtine, Jean-Louis Chrétien, Michel Henry, Jean-Luc Marion and Paul Ricoeur. Janicaud claims that the theological turn does not consist merely of explicitly religious voices taking part in the phenomenological dialogue. Instead, phenomenology has become dominated by theological concerns and effectively subverted, particularly by Levinas and Marion.

For Janicaud, the most remarkable feature of recent French philosophy is its concern for the transcendent--or, as he puts it, "the opening to the invisible," to the Other, to a pure givenness, or to an "archrevelation." Such a move is already apparent in the

late Heidegger, but it becomes central in Levinas, who turns us toward otherness (both human and divine). While it may be too simple to say (as does Janicaud) that there has been a shift from "atheist phenomenology" to "spiritualist phenomenology," that move has been the trend not just in France but also in the rest of Europe.

What does that move entail? One can read it as an emphasizing of one aspect of phenomenology over another. On the one hand, Husserl insisted that the logos of phenomenology should arise from the phenomena themselves. Toward this end, he demanded the "bracketing" of all presuppositions. On the other hand, Husserl's notions of intentionality, immanence and horizon seem to go against this emphasis (though not in his own view). If I intend an object by making it immanent to my consciousness, then do I not have some part in its constitution? Moreover, Husserl thinks that objects appear on the observer's "horizon." But then isn't a logos already present? Not only Heidegger but many phenomenologists since his time have concluded that all objects are intended against some kind of background and so are never purely given to us.

Levinas, however, thinks that even Husserl suppresses the "otherness" of phenomena. He sees the entire philosophical tradition as having done violence to phenomena by imposing its concepts and systems upon them. Levinas emphasizes the transcendence of the other, a transcendence that shatters our logos and so comes to us unmediated. While our attempts to control phenomena ultimately fail, these attempts are still morally reprehensible. Arguing from a Jewish perspective, Levinas sees them as breaking the first commandment.

Whereas Levinas can be considered postphenomenological, Marion wants to return to "true" Husserlian phenomenology. Partly inspired by the notion of the "es gibt" ("there is") in Heidegger, Marion emphasizes Husserl's notion of phenomena as being the "giver" to consciousness, translating this givenness as "donation." Thus phenomena become gifts to consciousness (and this concern for the gift has become central to the thinking of Derrida, Marion's former teacher). Nowhere is this transcendence more evident for Marion (writing as a Roman Catholic) than in the ultimate gift, Christ the Logos.

When Janicaud argues that Husserl specifically disallowed God as a subject of phenomenology, Marion (rightly) counters that this bracketing only excludes the God of the philosophers, not the God of theology. However, Marion's argument becomes

problematic when he insists that his idea of gift or donation is an appropriate translation of Husserl's notion of givenness--rather than simply a brilliant innovation of his own. Yet the main point at issue is whether Levinas and Marion can claim that the other breaks through to us in a completely unmediated way.

I side with Janicaud and Derrida, who deny this possibility. Even though the Logos has a way of making radical claims on us and profoundly calling our horizons into question, it is hard to see even Paul's radical conversion on the road to Damascus as involving a total suspension of his horizon.

The presence of theological concerns on the phenomenological landscape is a surprising and welcome change. Though I have deeply benefited from the thought of Levinas and Marion, I'm not convinced that their fundamental reorientation of phenomenology is required or even advisable. Husserl's affirmation of both the otherness of phenomena and the presence of a horizon (or tradition) creates a difficult tension, but it is a necessary tension, true to the phenomenon of human experience, and it in no way excludes theological concerns.