

the irreducible

kevin hart

At first Husserl conceived phenomenology as descriptive psychology and then as transcendental philosophy. With the second conception, announced publicly in his lectures of 1907, phenomenology was presented as co-ordinate with what he often called “reduction” or even “the reduction.”¹ Whether there is just the one reduction or several, whether there is an order of them that must be respected (the usual sequence being phenomenological, transcendental and eidetic), how they hang together (if they do), and whether his understanding of reduction is circular, are pressing questions that emerge over the course of Husserl’s writing life. They are sometimes accompanied by skeptical questions whether some reductions—the inter-subjective, for instance—are no more than promissory notes, whether reduction presumes a sort of Cartesian dualism, and even whether phenomenology really needs reduction of any kind in the first place. In addition, one might inquire whether other styles of philosophizing, including philosophizing undertaken in earlier periods and in other cultures, perform reduction of some sort, even if it is not asterisked for attention in their vocabularies; and, further, one might ask if reduction occurs in other practices: contemplative prayer and meditation, the production of art, and the writing of theology, for instance.

All these are questions I have considered elsewhere, and I shall not discuss them in any detail in this paper. Instead, I shall approach reduction from behind, as it were, and ask a question that Husserl does not himself pose. What is irreducible?

That is: what, in Husserl's philosophical world, allows no purchase for reduction? That question may be answered by close reference to his writings from *The Idea of Phenomenology* (1907) to *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology* (1938), but the response it elicits is not simply exegetical: it concerns the scope, the direction, the nature, and indeed the proper sphere or spheres in which reduction might be performed.² The question can certainly be answered, but the more interesting questions hide just behind it: What resists reduction almost completely, and why? In answering these questions I set aside reservations made by realist phenomenologists—Roman Ingarden, in particular—as to whether reduction, regarded as a methodological precaution for epistemological investigations, can have any purchase on ontology.³ I remain solely with Husserl here, although I note at the outset that answering the questions I have posed touches on the very possibility of phenomenology in the Husserlian style.

Reflection on Husserl's insistence on the need for reduction has had five main phases. To begin with, there is considerable perplexity and even defiance with respect to the idea by members of the Göttingen Philosophical Society—Roman Ingarden and Hedwig Conrad-Martinus, among others—for whom reduction marks a decisive reorientation of phenomenology. It is not a productive reorientation in their view, for it truncates the project of a thoroughgoing anti-psychologist realism, as started in the *Logical Investigations* (1900-01) and, worse (they think), it opens a slippery trail back to the subjective idealism of Fichte and the young Schelling. This first phase is doubtless the most important for Husserl himself, since it prompted him to clarify the direction, extent and nature of reduction, which, in turn, led him to devise increasingly exacting accounts of it. His lectures on the theory of reduction in 1923 and 1924 are exemplary in this regard.⁴ Yet at the same time those lectures were being delivered other reservations about reduction were perhaps already being pondered.

Could reduction be rethought so that phenomenology may be situated on firmer ground? The young Martin Heidegger perhaps believed it could when in the Summer of 1927 he said that, for him, reduction was a leading back from beings to being; but we need to take this re-formulation with a pinch of salt, for while Heidegger felt it essential to master Husserlian phenomenology he had little interest in the transcendental.⁵ It is not even right to see the "Da" of "Dasein" marking place as a condition for human being. For Heidegger, it indicates "the openness where beings can be present for the human being, and the human being also for himself" and of course Heidegger does not appeal in the slightest to mental conditions.⁶

His formulation of reduction is perhaps more prudential than methodological. What chiefly interests the Heidegger of *Sein und Zeit* (1927) and thereabouts is a way out of Cartesianism and Neo-Kantianism, and any hint of methodological primacy of a mental operation resulting in a pure philosophical gaze brings less his suspicion than his rejection.⁷ He is not invested in an epistemic distinction between subject and object, and is certainly no advocate of θεωρία as a model of human interaction with the world. His interest is in *In-der-Welt-sein*, and θεωρεῖν features only in terms of looking out on the world.⁸ “Reduction,” as the young Heidegger practices it, turns not on mental abstention from positing in order to survey the processes of constitution as much as *Stimmung*: a mood “comes over” one, and leads one from beings to being. Later, in his own way, he will rethink reduction more thoroughly, as a “step back” [*Schritt-zurück*] from the ontic to the ontological or as a meditation [*Besinnung*] into the truth of being, *das Seyn* rather than *das Sein des Seinden*.⁹ And finally, he will speak of releasement rather than reduction.¹⁰ Long before he gets to that stage, he will have given up all pretense of keeping faith with Husserl’s methods and vocabulary. He will have passed from what we might broadly call contemplation of phenomena to meditation on being: it is a passage between two great philosophers in which more than one thing goes back and forth.

Perhaps the most disturbing reformulation of reduction, however, comes from Eugen Fink in his *Sixth Cartesian Meditation* (1932); and some of its force derives precisely from his careful attention to *Being and Time* (1927) and to the young Heidegger’s lectures, which he began hearing in 1928. Fink was especially taken by Heidegger’s reflections on *Befindlichkeit*. The “natural attitude,” for Fink, passes from a mode of mental ἀσκησις to *Weltbefangenheit*, a captivation of, by and for the world. Fink’s animating question is “not only *how* phenomenologizing comes about as the performance of the reduction but *why* it takes place at all.”¹¹ Although Fink saw himself as pursuing a phenomenology of reduction, and so performing phenomenology to the second degree, the question is in truth more classically philosophical than phenomenological. The “how” is followed by a “why.” There is always a Hegel behind Husserl in the *Sixth Cartesian Meditation*, for Fink believed that epistemological idealism anticipates the transcendental idealism of phenomenology, and indeed he figures his study as “an anticipatory look at a meontic philosophy of absolute spirit.”¹² In any case, his basic question raises the uneasy issue of whether reduction, as Husserl practices it, presumes itself, and whether the philosopher is therefore guilty of circular reasoning.

To forestall this criticism, Fink attempts to refigure reduction; and he does so with great finesse. He distinguishes the three “I”s involved in reduction: the human “I,” which continues to believe in the world as pre-given, the transcendental-constituting “I,” which allows the constitution of the world to be viewed, and the “I” of the phenomenological onlooker, who “*has never lived in belief in the world to begin with,*” and who performs “the universal epoche” (42). As Fink says later, “it is not properly man who performs the reduction” (121); and the very performance of reduction signifies “the *un-humanizing of man*” (120). At risk in this understanding of reduction is whether phenomenology opens higher human possibilities, as Husserl believed it does, or whether it quietly affirms a philosophical interpretation of Gnosticism, the belief in an uncreated life hidden beneath created consciousness.¹³ A philosophical Gnosticism, as endorsed by Fink, would be the belief in a purely transcendental consciousness behind an empirical one, whereas Husserl affirms merely a transcendental aspect to an empirical consciousness. That said, it must be acknowledged that Fink’s radical proposal prompted some of Husserl’s most clarifying comments on ἐποχή and reduction.¹⁴ In particular, it is salutary to hear that the phenomenological onlooker is not entirely distinct from the empirical “I” or the constituting “I” but is gradually “freed” by the actions of an ἐποχή and reduction.¹⁵

Doubtless influenced by his conversations with Fink at Louvain in 1939, Maurice Merleau-Ponty sought to refigure reduction; but he certainly did not adopt Fink’s way of doing so, and, we might say, held back from experiencing “the awful tremor” of fully passing through it.¹⁶ Reduction, for him, was to be partial so that phenomenology did not leak into the broad river of modern idealism, the base flow of which begins with Kant.¹⁷ Paul Ricœur and Jacques Derrida followed his lead, though in their own ways and to different ends.¹⁸ Derrida, in particular, drew deeply from Fink, and the German’s appeal to the pre-existent constitution [“*vor-seienden*” *Konstitution*] of the phenomenological observer was cleansed of associations with epistemological idealism and combined with Jean Hyppolite’s suggestion that Husserlian consciousness might very well be understood as “a subjectless transcendental field.”¹⁹ The younger Frenchman took both ideas and put them in a new setting. The role of pre-existent constitution is detached from consciousness and even from structure, as urged in structural linguistics, and becomes *la différance*. There is no deconstruction without reduction, which is not to say that reduction appears as a theme in deconstruction. Indeed, unless one looks very closely it does not appear to be marked at all.²⁰

More generally, we might say that in French philosophy after the war there was always something that would resist bringing phenomena back to the pure immanence of absolute consciousness: a commitment to Gestalt psychology, an endorsement of hermeneutics, or an insistence on material inscription. All were motivated by a fear that thoroughgoing reduction of a mentalist kind, especially transcendental reduction, would animate an idealism that was better kept locked in the past of Königsberg, Jena or Berlin, or, closer to home, in uneasy memories of lectures by Léon Brunschvicg. Only with some philosophers associated with the “new phenomenology” has reduction been endorsed as something that needs to be undertaken as thoroughly as possible. (I emphasize *some*, not all: one does not look for reduction in Michel Henry or, among our contemporaries, in Jean-Louis Chrétien or Claude Romano.) Jean-Luc Marion, casting Heidegger’s prudential reformulation as a second reduction, proposes a “third reduction” that itself derives from Heidegger’s reflections on attunement in his 1928 lectures; and in the end reduction will lead us past being and past beyng to givenness [*Gegebenheit*].²¹ Marion’s reduction is as radical as Fink’s, although it goes in precisely the opposite direction; rather than seek a transcendental consciousness distinct from its empirical counterpart, he looks to the self-giving of the phenomenon itself. Or, if you like, the two reductions contest Husserl’s view that phenomenality seems to be hybrid, divided between transcendental consciousness and the phenomenon, and distribute it in extreme ways: the one ascribes it to a transcendental consciousness distinct from empirical consciousness, and the other to the phenomenon itself.²² Not all contemporary revisions of reduction, however radical, go quite so far: indeed, one of them shows that rather than phenomenology having no limits at all it encounters a limit precisely by performing a new reduction. Such is Jean-Yves Lacoste’s “liturgical reduction,” which seeks to show that phenomenology cannot get to the bottom of what we mean by “human,” especially not if we understand the human state of living *coram deo* to be an essential determinant of being human.²³

Of course, it may well be doubted if Husserl, even after 1907, thought that all he did as a philosopher might properly be classed as “phenomenology.” Anyone who reads his collected writings will come across extended passages of epistemology, ethics, logic, and ontology.²⁴ To be sure, these reflections on what we might call general philosophy are not simply contributions to it; they are inflected towards phenomenology. Husserl’s logic, for instance, is forever seeking transcendental grounds, and phenomenology in its genetic strain makes itself more and more felt, and is followed, finally, by generative phenomenology as sketched in the

Crisis. That said, no one could plausibly interpret Husserl's speculations on the all-encompassing monad, for example, as anything other than speculative metaphysics, even metaphysics prompted by theological ambitions.²⁵ Certainly anything that must be construed to be "irreducible" must belong to general philosophy, if it is to belong to philosophy at all, and not phenomenology. But what does Husserl acknowledge as irreducible?



There are just three candidates for being irreducible —absolute consciousness, God, and natural language—although only the first attracts Husserl's sustained interest because it is essential for the project of phenomenology. Reduction, we are told in *The Idea of Phenomenology* (1907), means "the exclusion of the transcendent as such as something to be accepted as existent, i.e., everything that is not evident givenness in its true sense, that is not absolutely given to pure 'seeing'" (7). Indeed, "Our phenomenological sphere, the sphere of absolute clarity, of immanence in the true sense, reaches no farther than self-givenness reaches" (10). Now by the time we reach *Ideas I* (1913) we find a full account of reductions (§§ 56-62), which Husserl prepares for in his investigation of consciousness. In § 42, for instance, we find him placing an emphasis less on "evident givenness" and "self-givenness" than on two kinds of being, consciousness and reality, which are marked by "*an essentially fundamental difference between the corresponding kind of givenness*" (90). Both mental processes and spatio-temporal objects are subject to intentionality. Yet only the former can be perceived immanently, without adumbration, and so are entirely evident in their givenness. Spatio-temporal objects are transcendent, on the other hand, and their mode of givenness is co-ordinate with adumbration: they are given as oriented with respect to transcendental consciousness in one way or another, and consequently they can be oriented in many other ways, each of which has to be taken into account in an exercise of pure "seeing." Physical objects are "merely phenomenal" in their being, Husserl insists in § 44, while a mental process is immanent and therefore absolute. An adequate grasp of it does not call for infinite reflection.

Although phenomenological reduction leads a transcendent object back to the immanence of consciousness, it cannot change the status of the object's being: it remains "real" rather than "absolute." Nowhere can we see this more clearly than in *Ideas I* § 49 when Husserl adapts a well-known principle set out by Descartes. Husserl is seeking to show that ἐποχή and reduction combine to yield "the annihilation of the world" and that what remains is "absolute consciousness." He

distinguishes absolute being from real being in two short italicized paragraphs:

Immanent being is therefore indubitably absolute being in the sense that by essential necessity immanent being nulla “re” indiget ad existendum.

In contradistinction, the world of transcendent “res” is entirely referred to consciousness and, more particularly, not to some logically conceived consciousness but to actual consciousness. (110)

Descartes writes in the *Principia Philosophiæ* (1644), “*Per substantiam nihil aliud intelligere possumus, quam rem quae ita existit, ut nulla alia re indigeat ad existendum*” [By substance we can understand something which exists so that it does not require something else in order to exist].²⁶ Absolute being is nothing like Cartesian substance—such is the point of Husserl’s scare quotes around “re” and “res”—apart from the claim that it subsists entirely in itself, while real being, which is transcendent, depends wholly on absolute being. Unless one states this distinction with great care, and glosses “depends” in an appropriate manner, it will appear to commit its author to subjective idealism. So it is important to see that the distinction turns on phenomenality, not existence. Without absolute being, no entity can manifest itself; and, by the same token, absolute being requires entities in order to lay claim to being, which consists entirely in its power to render things manifest.

Once this distinction is firmly established it makes no sense at all to suggest that consciousness—at least in its constitutive role—could be reduced. It is irreducible precisely in that it is the condition of possibility for transcendent entities to be reduced to pure immanence. One cannot reach this level of clarity, however, without encountering an oddity. Phenomenality, for Husserl, seems to enjoy what I have already called a hybrid state; it is shared between an entity (insofar as it can be a phenomenon) and what allows it to be led back to immanence. Yet this sharing, if it is indeed that, is not at all equal. As Husserl puts it, “phenomenality, as a characteristic that specifically *belongs to appearing and to the thing that appears*,” would, if understood in the broadened sense of the term, be the fundamental characteristic of the mental” [my emphasis].²⁷ I take it that the term in question is “mental” and that the broadening is the addition of the transcendental aspect of consciousness to empirical consciousness. To say that phenomenality is the “fundamental characteristic of the mental” is to distance oneself from Brentano’s

well-known remark about intentionality being the mark of the mental; and it is also to step back from any claim about the primacy of intentionality, even in Husserl's sense.²⁸ By the same token, it is not to endorse intuition as basic to phenomenology. Rather, transcendental consciousness is characterized, first and foremost, by way of phenomenality. The ability of an entity to manifest itself is, counter-intuitively, assigned primarily to that to which it manifests itself.

The phenomenon's capacity to manifest itself, as Husserl understands it, is therefore alienated from itself. This would be the case in all respects: perception, to be sure, but also anticipation, recollection, imagination, and so on. Phenomenality would be in the phenomenon, we might say, but only if we are careful to specify its mode of inherence: as a term "in" a relationship, and one that has been initiated by transcendental consciousness. The "essence of a phenomenon" is, it seems, to be found by way of an asymmetric relation of an intending consciousness with what has become a phenomenon. A clarification is immediately required, for the essence in question is not the noema, the intentional content of an experience, but the capacity that underlines the possibility of noetic-noematic correlation and that, if we follow Husserl to the letter, seems to be shared between the two, though only because of the ability of absolute being to capture real being through the structure of intentionality and the power of acts of intuition.

At this point a number of fundamental problems begin to impinge on the inquiry. I have already noted that one can eliminate some of these problems by declining to regard phenomenality as a relation. If we do that, we find Michel Henry on one side of a divide: phenomenality is primary, definitive of "life" itself. And we see Marion on the other side: phenomenality belongs by right to the phenomenon, and so intentional horizons are vulnerable to being breached, and a new class of phenomena, those saturated by intuition, comes into view. But providing a history of philosophy never serves well as a solution to philosophical problems; it simply generates problems of its own. In the case of this division there would be two main difficulties. With Henry there is the problem of establishing that the intentional actually derives from the non-intentional and, if it does, showing in what way or ways a consideration of the non-intentional can be of sustaining interest for a subject.²⁹ And with Marion the quandary is in finding that the cost of enjoying saturation to the first or second degree is accepting the stripped down version of the self that is called *l'adonné*, the one born to the gift. It may well be that intuition rather than intentionality is the driving force of phenomenology as it was conceived, yet intuitions for Husserl are acts that rely on consciousness in order

to be performed; and, at first, *l'adonné* seems strangely bereft of consciousness, always an infant, as it were. Of course, an account of adult consciousness can be given, but it requires more of a finely grained genetic explanation than is readily found in Marion's writings in and around *Étant donné* (1997).

Yet phenomenality, for Husserl, cannot be a relation between two terms that pre-exist it. For transcendental consciousness enables an entity to become a phenomenon. I think it would be a mistake to take Husserl overly literally and to assert a mental quality, phenomenality, which subtends intentionality and intuition. Phenomenality is indeed shared but not between phenomenon and consciousness; it is a name we can give to the combined operations of intentionality and intuition. The power of that combination is restricted to certain sorts of entity, namely those we can intuit and of which we can be conscious. We might say that some of these entities are amenable to reduction while, in principle, others do not require it in the first place. Let us consider the second case first. If we remain with Husserl, we have to say that mental processes are one with their phenomenality. To think a real number— say, 2—or to perform a basic arithmetical operation with regards to it (say $2 + 3 = 5$) is utterly to exhaust its phenomenality. There is nothing other than cognition at issue. Yet when I perceive, remember, anticipate or even imagine two pears, their phenomenality falls outside the immanence of consciousness, such that I am in principle required to embark on an infinite task of description, even though I may have very high levels of *Evidenz* at my disposal with respect to the pears if I can perceive them with more than one sense. The number 2, as I apprehend it in consciousness, does not need to be reduced; it does not give itself to me in any orientation with regard to consciousness at all. Yet the two pears make endless demands upon me because I can see them from different perspectives.

If Husserl tells us, time and again, about this, it is nonetheless to the painters, photographers, sculptors and poets that we must go for concrete testimony. Often when literature is at issue we are directed (and, first of all, by Henri Maldiney) to Francis Ponge, to elaborate texts such as “Le Verre d’Eau” or “Le Savon,” and with good reason.³⁰ Here, though, I would like to cite Wallace Stevens’ poem, “Study of Two Pears”:

I
Opusculum paedagogum.
The pears are not viols,
Nudes or bottles.
They resemble nothing else.

II
They are yellow forms
Composed of curves
Bulging toward the base.
They are touched red.

III
They are not flat surfaces
Having curved outlines.
They are round
Tapering toward the top.

IV
In the way they are modelled
There are bits of blue.
A hard dry leaf hangs
From the stem.

V
The yellow glistens.
It glistens with various yellows,
Citrons, oranges and greens
Flowering over the skin.

VI
The shadows of the pears
Are blobs on the green cloth.
The pears are not seen
As the observer wills.³¹

The poem is indeed a little lesson on how to see—color, shape, texture, surface sheen, and so on—and the first class we take with Husserl often consists of no more than this. We are to look at a phenomenon just as it appears and we can best do that by referring to exactly how it is intended and how it attracts our attention: “an Ego-ray, launched from the pure Ego, goes out toward the Object, and, as it were, counter-rays issue from the Object and come back to the Ego.”³² (The “*pure Ego*,” note; we are not talking about ordinary acts of vision and certainly not solely about volition but about intentional acts, and hence of objects given just as intended.) As he says, each phenomenon addresses us, saying “*Ich bin da!*”; it “calls out to us,” saying, “There is still more to see here, turn me so you can see all my sides, let your gaze run through me, draw closer to me, open me up, divide me up; keep on looking me over again and again, turning me to see all sides. You will get to know me like this, all that I am, all my surface qualities, all my inner sensible qualities.”³³ Stevens ends his poem after six stanzas; yet the great prose poem of phenomenology, even if restricted to two pears, would never end. (Long after they have rotted, one can reflect upon the noema of the pears.) In principle, reduction is infinite; transcendence can never fully be brought into immanence, for the intentional correlation between acts and their objects keeps shifting.

Once the distinction between absolute and real being is accepted, it is impossible even to conceive the idea of reducing transcendental consciousness. Not that this impossibility prevents one from fantasizing about such a thing. Maurice Blanchot does something like that in *Thomas l'obscur* (1941; 1950), although, to be sure, he has already adjusted the nature of consciousness. Thomas encounters “night itself,” and sees both its void and what enables this sight to occur. “Not only did this eye which saw nothing apprehend something, it apprehended the cause of its vision. It saw as object that which prevented it from seeing.” So far this is relatively straightforward, if metaphysically challenging: Thomas can see “night itself.” Yet the narrator continues, “Its own glance entered into it as an image, just when this glance seemed [était considéré] the death of all image.”³⁴ So Thomas sees his own act of seeing. It does not occur by way of a reference to anything outside him (by way of a mirror or a darkened window, for instance), and indeed he is passive with respect to it. It is at that very moment, however, that the “obscure Thomas,” who is real only under the sign of death and who gives his name to the *roman* and *récit*, enters the living Thomas. That this obscure Thomas is taken to be rich in phenomenality is one of the disconcerting themes of the *récit*: as Thomas says, he enters “into absolute dispute” with himself (97). For Husserl, too, the phenomenality in play in transcendental consciousness cannot *itself* appear

unless, of course, one says (against Kant) that the cognition of a number, such as 2, is an appearance.

What strikes the reader of Blanchot's powerful *récit* as a reverie, one that when interpreted along philosophical lines, much as one finds in his essays, seems incredible to anyone convinced by Husserl's program of phenomenology. Yet Blanchot remains at the limit of phenomenology, and proposes an "infinite reduction," one that would allow the approach of the Outside.³⁵ Husserl himself also considers an obscure companion deep within the self. This happens in his acknowledgment of God, and it is introduced in *Ideas* I § 51, seven paragraphs before the deity is formally excluded from phenomenology in § 58:

since a worldly God is evidently impossible and since, on the other hand, the immanence of God in absolute consciousness cannot be taken as immanence in the sense of being as a mental process (which would be no less counter-sensical), there must be, therefore, within the absolute stream of consciousness and its infinities, modes in which transcendencies are made known other than the constituting of physical realities as unities of harmonious appearances; and ultimately there would also have to be intuitional manifestations to which a theoretical thinking might conform, so that, by following them rationally, it might make intelligible the unitary rule of the supposed theological principle. (116-17)

The first thing to consider here is what Husserl means by "God." We remember his discussion of pagan deities in the fifth of the *Logical Investigations*: "If I have an idea of the god Jupiter, this god is my presented object, he is 'immanently present' in my act, he has 'mental inexistence' in the latter, or whatever expression we may use to disguise our true meaning." Yet, as Husserl makes very plain, "the god Jupiter naturally will not be found" in my intentional experience, for he "is in truth not really immanent or mental" and "does not exist at all."³⁶ By the same token, Husserl is not thinking of the Judeo-Christian deity, at least not of any personal God, and he has no recourse to Scripture or any testimony as regards positive revelation of any sort. Rather, God is for him a monad, "all-consciousness."³⁷

Absolute consciousness is irreducible because of its thoroughgoing immanence. The Judeo-Christian God as ecclesiastically conceived would be irreducible, for Husserl, because of the deity's radical transcendence of individual consciousness.

I can attend to the sight of a jet in the air, the sound of a sonata, the taste of a ripe mango, the smell of Cavendish pipe tobacco, and the touch of a cat as she rubs herself against my leg first thing in the morning; but no matter how long or how intently I direct my gaze to the Judeo-Christian God, whether I regard him as ontic, ontological, as event or person, I cannot lead him back to the immanence of transcendental consciousness. I must wait for a theophany, revelation, “mystical experience,” or look to inner dwelling, since neither intentionality nor intuition seems to be of any help to me. Yet it does not follow from the nature of the divine transcendence that God does not manifest himself. The Judeo-Christian God is above and beyond genus, as Lateran IV says (*Denz.* 432). There is no contrast between Creation and God, for his otherness exceeds any distinction we might draw between “same” and “other.”³⁸ There is therefore no contradiction for him in transcending Creation and in being immanent in it. So God can manifest himself in terms of absolute being, not a mental process (which would render human beings divine) but in quite other ways. There would be intuitions of the divine always and already in absolute being, and these acts would have to be recognized before one could engage in theoretical thinking about them.³⁹ That is, Judeo-Christian theology would turn on an acknowledgement of God as irreducible in his radical transcendence but not in his radical immanence, and a doctrine of God would have to disentangle the absolute character of immanent being from the absolute character of divine being. The same would be true, in quite another way, for phenomenology if it were to be pursued without reference to theology.

If we ask ourselves what these “intuitional manifestations” of the divine are, we might answer by way of Anselm’s ontological argument in the *Proslogion*, or, closer to home for Husserl, Descartes’s version of the same thought experiment in the third of the *Meditations on First Philosophy* (1641). So we recall Descartes testifying, that “in some way I have in me the notion of the infinite earlier than the finite—to wit, the notion of God before that of myself” [*ac proinde priorem quodammodo in me esse perceptionem infiniti quam finiti, hoc est Dei quam mei ipsius*] and we also recall his reflection on this claim:

[W]hen I reflect on myself I not only know that I am something [imperfect], incomplete and dependent on another, which incessantly aspires after something which is better and greater than myself, but I also know that He on whom I depend possesses in Himself all the great things towards which I aspire [and the ideas of which I find within myself], and that not indefinitely or potentially alone, but really, actually and infinitely; and that

thus He is God [*hoc est, dum in meipsum mentis aciem converto, non modo intelligo me esse rem incompletam & ab alio dependentem, remque ad majora & majora sive meliora indefinite aspirantem; sed simul etiam intelligo illum, a quo pendeo, majora ista omnia non indefinite & potentia tantum, sed reipsa infinite in se habere, atque ita Deum esse*].⁴⁰

This notion of God goes back to St Gregory of Nyssa's blind sighting of Eunomius, namely in arguing that the defining trait of God is the infinite (ἄπειρον), not the unbegotten, but it is Descartes's view that we have intellectual intuition that the infinite precedes the finite.⁴¹ Later, of course, Michel Henry will contest that the intuition is intellectual at all; for him, it is an intuition of phenomenality, understood as a primal movement of life, namely, pathos and joy.⁴²

Husserl implicitly draws from St Gregory of Nyssa in thinking of the deity as infinite, but it is not by way of event, as with Aquinas, or by way of substance, as with Descartes, but by way of infinite reason and, indeed, as a teleology directed to that reason. God, understood as "all-consciousness," is the end point on which all human values finally converge. (The same thing is urged in the *Kaizo* essays.) So this is not "the infinite" in a positive sense but at best only in a regulative sense, kin to the Kantian Idea. "Naturally," Husserl writes, "we extend the phenomenological reduction to include this 'absolute' and 'transcendent' being," and then adds, "It shall remain excluded from the new field of research which is to be provided, since this shall be a field of pure consciousness."⁴³ Taken together, the two sentences seem more than a little peculiar. For how can one lead back to immanent consciousness that which transcends it so radically so as to evade any gaze, however well trained? One can bracket the deity as offering any explanation of phenomena, as part of the natural attitude (if the all-consciousness is conceived within the realm of the natural) or as part of what we might call the supernatural attitude (if the deity is imagined as supernatural). And perhaps there are ecclesial conceptions of the deity that are subject to reduction. (To go down that path is to encounter Rudolf Bultmann along the way.⁴⁴) Yet we must be careful. The deity, as Husserl conceives him, would be always and already within consciousness but not as consciousness; and so there would be a mode of transcendence that in principle would be open to reduction. God's transcendence, perhaps unlike Jupiter's, would abide in my intentional experience, as *modus sine modo* (as Bernard of Clairvaux might say).⁴⁵ We would not be able fully to lead the Judeo-Christian God back to pure immanence by dint of the radical nature of his transcendence (at the very least it would be an all-embracing inter-subjectivity), but we would be able to

conceive him as a teleological limit, and in that restricted sense the reduction would extend to him, in principle although not in fact.

The third candidate for being irreducible is language, and Fink alerts us to the problem of language for Husserl more sharply than anyone else. The phenomenological onlooker, who has performed ἐποχή and reduction, must have recourse to language in order to express his or her cognitions. “He must *take over from the constituting I* the habituality of language and participate in the latter’s constitutive life, against his own wish to be non-participant. But this participation is merely *apparent* [*scheinbare*], inasmuch as in taking over language the phenomenologizing onlooker *transforms* its natural sense as referring to what is existent. If this kind of *transformation* did not occur, then the phenomenologist would *slip out of the transcendental attitude* with every word he spoke.”⁴⁶ To which Husserl responds in a marginal annotation: “I always speak natural language, but in a transcendently altered sense.”⁴⁷ What could this change possibly be? How would it be marked? A moment later, in another marginal annotation, we are given an answer: “A phenomenological language in principle only has sense, only has possibility, as transformed natural language, just as the transcendental phenomenon, world, only has sense as the transformed sense-of-being” (86 n. 295).⁴⁸ We are thus taken back to the *Logical Investigations*, and first of all to the warning in the “Prolegomenon,” that language “represents a most imperfect aid towards strict research. The pernicious influences of ambiguities on the validity of syllogistic inferences are familiar.”⁴⁹ Then we recall Husserl’s early way of overcoming these “pernicious influences,” namely, by distinguishing expression from indication, and seeking a pure language of sense. We should also remember his stricture in *Formal and Transcendental Logic* (1929) that not all of one’s psychic life is actually expressed in language: intentions are directed through words, and are not in and of themselves part of language.⁵⁰

Finally, we find a fuller answer in Husserl’s late essay “The Origin of Geometry” (1936), edited by Fink, where a distinction is drawn between writing that is *Leib* (constituting, giving sense) and writing that is *Körper* (constituted, factual); and it is the former that the geometer or philosopher writes: an embodiment of living truth (*Verleibichung*) rather than a material inscription (*Verkörperung*). Only logic, mathematics and rigorous philosophy—phenomenology—could be truly pure in the sense of being written in a thoroughly reduced language, Husserl thinks, a language in which materiality would not bother the reader because of the clarity of the author’s intentions as they are embodied in conventional signs, whether

logical, mathematical or linguistic. He is close to Frege here. Writing in a reduced language is straightforward in logic and mathematics, Husserl thinks, because their objects are free idealities and therefore above and beyond time and history. The scholar can, as it were, look straight through language to the objects that interest him or her. What, though, of philosophy? If its object is to analyze truths that are universal and invariant with respect to time, then it will address free idealities; but even the most exacting phenomenology, since it must concern itself also with the mundane, will frequently produce texts that address bound idealities, which belong to the cultural world, and even the most free of free idealities is bound to the extent that it is marked by *Erstlichkeit*, having been discovered at a time and in a place: we speak of Pythagoras' Theorem, Newton's Laws, Euler's Theorem, Gauss equations, and so on.⁵¹ And then there are of course natural phenomena, which display their content to us by way of the irreality of noemata. As one passes from logic to nature to poetry the idea of a reduced language becomes less and less plausible.

It may be that we should not expect the same degree of rigor in all cases of reduction, much as we do not expect the same degree of *Evidenz* to be available with all phenomena. If so, phenomenology, as Husserl practices it, has a varying limit. Of more concern, I think, is one's conviction that phenomenology is valuable precisely because it leads us to a concrete understanding of phenomena, and that it is in art (including poetry) where we find such concreteness in an exemplary way. It is not language that is the problem of reduction here so much as what prompts reduction in the first place and indeed the very direction of reduction. Blanchot evokes this situation in his enigmatic remarks about "infinite reduction," though for him language is regarded solely by way of its ability to hollow out lived experience and alert us to the approach of the Outside.⁵² It seems to me, though, that language need not evacuate phenomenality but rather focus it. Let me consider a fairly complex example, Wallace Stevens' early lyric "Nomad Exquisite." Part of the poem's complexity abides in its rendering its condition of possibility as a theme.

When I read the poem I am led back, through the very luxuriance of the language, to something that is prior to me and that lays a claim on me. Yet that is not quite how we first read the lyric:

As the immense dew of Florida
Brings forth
The big-finned palm
And green vine angering for life,

As the immense dew of Florida
Brings forth hymn and hymn
From the beholder,
Beholding all these green sides
And gold sides of green sides,

And blessed mornings,
Meet for the eye of the young alligator,
And lightning colors
So, in me, come flinging
Forms, flames, and the flakes of flames.⁵³

When we first read this poem we encounter a lyric about the contemplative gaze of a “beholder” who grasps, from one bodily perspective, the essence of life in the Deep South. Yet the lyric gaze does not end in leading transcendence back to a final immanence; and in fact in its final line the poem passes from consciousness to imagination. The imagination reverses the movement from transcendence to immanence; it “flings” a response back into the world. The fecundity of the landscape prompts a reaction in the one beholding it; it elicits a storm of imaginative force, a desire to create (which ends with the spent energy of that desire), which is caught in the very lyric we have been reading. The poet sees the essence of tropical life, at least from one perspective, and supplements that perceptual act with an account of human creativity. It may be that the poem ultimately turns on the ambiguity of “tropical”: a climactic state and a figural situation.

Were Stevens writing in a fully reduced language “Nomad Exquisite” would run more or less as follows: “Climactic conditions in the Deep South of North America produce luxuriant vegetation and support exotic aquatic life, the fecundity of which resembles the human impulse to create art, an impulse that is quickly exhausted and leaves the artist feeling desolate.” Now such a text, if recorded in a work of phenomenology, would indicate little or nothing of the concreteness of life in Florida. Yet when one reads “Nomad Exquisite” one is led back to something independent of one’s existence, something that precedes it, namely the force of

life itself; and one also senses a claim on oneself: to be answerable to that force, to be as creative in one's response to life as is possible in the ways that are given to one. It is the richness of the language of the poem that prompts reduction: not only particular phrasings, such as the evocation of "*immense* dew" and the "green vine *angering* for life" [my emphases], but also the phonic play of the lines, and the repetitions that bespeak the sunlit luxuriance of Florida.

Something similar could be said of how religious texts have the ability to prompt reduction in those who read them. To evoke all too fleetingly an example I consider in detail elsewhere, when I hear one of the parables of Jesus I am led back, through the narrative, to the absolute claim that the Kingdom of God has on me.⁵⁴ In neither case, however, is reduction a mental *ἄσκησις*. Rather, it is *I* who am reduced, led back, to what radically precedes me—the force of natural life or the Kingdom of God—and can recognize it in a pre-thetic manner, in all its concreteness. That is, the force of life or the Kingdom becomes *thinkable* by dint of the poem or the parable, regardless of whether it remains difficult, mysterious, enigmatic, or whatever. Not all poems, and not all parables (for there are many outside the Gospels) have the strength to prompt reduction; and we may well take reduction as an index of poetic or religious force. In thinking of the irreducible, as it might be for Husserl, we come partly to understand what he means by "reduction" and partly to grasp why that very notion needs to be reconceived more thoroughly than has been done so far. It is not a matter of modifying reduction, or prematurely halting it, so as to stem a tide of idealism; nor is it a question of colonizing the meontic so as to save reduction from circularity. Instead, it is being led back into concreteness, with all its ambiguities and difficulties, being lead back so that, as Stevens says, we might "be / In the difficulty of what it is to be."⁵⁵

—University of Virginia and Australian Catholic University

NOTES

1. See Edmund Husserl, *The Idea of Phenomenology*, trans. William P. Alston and George Nakhnikian, intro. George Nakhnikian (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1973), 4.
2. I use the word “reduction” and its cognates in the phenomenological sense of the word throughout. I do not propose to consider Bruno Latour on “irreductions” in his *The Pasteurization of France*, trans. Alan Sheridan and John Law (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993).
3. See Roman Ingarden, *On the Motives that Led Husserl to Transcendental Idealism*, trans. Arnór Hannibalsson (Den Haag: Martinus Nijhoff, 1975), 38-43.
4. See Husserl, *Erste Philosophie. Zweiter Teil: Theorie der phänomenologischen Reduktion*, ed. Rodolf Boehme, II (Dordrecht: Springer, 1956).
5. Heidegger’s remarks on reduction may be found in his *The Basic Problems of Phenomenology*, rev. ed., trans. and intro. Albert Hofstadter (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988), 21, and his *History of the Concept of Time: Prolegomena*, trans. Theodore Kisiel (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985), 100, 109.
6. See Martin Heidegger, *Zollikon Seminars: Protocols—Conversations—Letters*, ed. Medard Boss, trans. Franz Mayr and Richard Askay (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2001), 120. Jean-Yves Lacoste insists on the transcendental role of place in *Being and Time* in his *Experience and the Absolute: Disputed Questions on the Humanity of Man*, trans. Mark Raftery-Skeban (New York: Fordham University Press, 2004), ch. 1.
7. See Heidegger, “My Pathway Hitherto,” *Mindfulness*, trans. Parvis Emad and Thomas Kalary (London: Continuum, 2006), 366.
8. See Heidegger, *Basic Concepts of Aristotelian Philosophy*, trans. Robert D. Metcalf and Mark B. Tanzer (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009), 45, 47, 64.
9. See Heidegger, “The Onto-Theo-Logical Constitution of Metaphysics,” *Identity and Difference*, trans. and intro. Joan Stambaugh (1969; rpt. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 72, and *Contributions to Philosophy (Of the Event)*, trans. Richard Rojcewicz and Daniela Vallega-Neu (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2012), 36.
10. See Heidegger, “Ἀγγιβάσις: A Triadic Conversation on a Country Path between a Scientist, a Scholar, and a Guide,” *Country Path Conversations*, trans. Bret W. Davis (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010), 76.
11. Eugen Fink, *Sixth Cartesian Meditation: The Idea of a Transcendental Method, with textual notations by Edmund Husserl*, trans. and intro. Ronald Bruzina (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), 30.
12. See Fink, *Sixth Cartesian Meditation*, 156, 1.
13. See Husserl’s comment on Fink’s reformulation of the reduction in *Sixth Cartesian Meditation*, 130. It is worth drawing attention to Heidegger’s emphasis that “the human being is a human being,” *Zollikon Seminars*, 178.
14. See Husserl’s comments throughout the *Sixth Cartesian Meditation* and the appendices to the text.
15. Fink, *Sixth Cartesian Meditation*, 40 n. 112.
16. See Fink, *Sixth Cartesian Meditation*, 144.
17. See Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Colin Smith (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1962), xiv.
18. See Paul Ricœur, “On Interpretation,” *Philosophy in France Today*, ed. Alan Montefiore (Cam-

- bridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 188, and Jacques Derrida, *Edmund Husserl's "Origin of Geometry": An Introduction*, trans. and pref. John P. Leavey, Jr. (Stony Brook, NY: Nicolas Hays, 1978), 153, and *Speech and Phenomena: And Other Essays on Husserl's Theory of Signs*, trans. and intro. David B. Allison, pref. Newton Garver (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973), 86.
19. For Hyppolite's remark, see M.-A. Bera, ed., *Husserl: Les Cahiers de Royaumont, Philosophie No. III* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1959), 323.
20. Derek Attridge, "This Strange Institution Called Literature': An Interview with Jacques Derrida," *Acts of Literature*, ed. Derek Attridge (New York: Routledge, 1992), 46.
21. See Heidegger, *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics: World, Finitude, Solitude*, trans. William McNeill and Nicholas Walker (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), §§ 19-38, and Jean-Luc Marion, *Reduction and Givenness: Investigations of Husserl, Heidegger, and Phenomenology*, trans. Thomas A. Carlson (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1998), 192-98, and *Being Given: Toward a Phenomenology of Givenness*, trans. Jeffrey L. Kosky (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002).
22. See Husserl, "The Amsterdam Lectures," *Psychological and Transcendental Phenomenology and the Confrontation with Heidegger (1927-1931)*, trans. and ed., Thomas Sheehan and Richard E. Palmer (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1997), 218.
23. See Lacoste, *Experience and the Absolute*, 174-75.
24. David Woodruff Smith is admirably clear about this issue in his *Husserl* (London: Routledge, 2007).
25. For Husserl's logic, see his *Formal and Transcendental Logic*, trans. Dorion Cairns (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1978) and *Experience and Judgment*, rev. and ed. Ludwig Landgrebe, trans. James S. Churchill and Karl Ameriks, intro. James S. Churchill, afterword Lothar Eley (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973). For the all-encompassing consciousness, see, for instance, Husserl, *The Basic Problems of Phenomenology: From the Lectures, Winter Semester, 1910-1911*, trans. Ingo Farin and James G. Hart (Dordrecht: Springer, 2006), 177-78.
26. René Descartes, *Principia Philosophiæ* in *Oeuvres de Descartes* (Paris: Charles Adam and Paul Tannery, 1964), VIII-I, 24.
27. Husserl, "The Amsterdam Lectures," 218. Also see his *Phenomenological Psychology: Lectures, Summer Semester, 1925*, trans. John Scanlon (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1977), 179. There, however, Husserl does not even speak of phenomenality marking "the thing that appears."
28. See F. C. Brentano, *Psychology from an Empirical Standpoint*, ed. O. Krause and L. L. McAlister, trans. A. C. Rancurello, et al. (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1973), § 3.
29. See my *Kingdoms of God* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2014), ch. 2
30. See Francis Ponge, *Oeuvres complètes*, 2 vols, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade (Paris: Gallimard, 1999), I, 578-611, II, 355-421. Also see Henri Maldiney, *Le legs des choses dans l'œuvre de Francis Ponge* (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 2012) and *Le vouloir dire de Francis Ponge* (Paris: Encre marine, 1993), Jean-Paul Sartre, *Situations* (Paris: Gallimard, 1947) and Jacques Derrida *Signéponge* (Paris: Seuil, 1988) and *Déplier Ponge: Entretien de Jacques Derrida avec Gérard Farasse* (Villeneuve d'Ascq: Presses Universitaires du Septentrion, 2005).
31. Wallace Stevens, "Study of Two Pears," *Collected Poetry and Prose*, ed. Frank Kermode and Joan Richardson (New York: The Library of America, 1997), 180-81.
32. Husserl, *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy, II: Studies in the Phenomenology of Constitution*, trans. Richard Rojcewicz and André Schuwer (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1989), 104.
33. Dorion Cairns, *Conversations with Husserl and Fink*, ed. Richard M. Zaner (The Hague: Martinus

- Nijhoff, 1976), 40, and Husserl, *Analyses Concerning Passive and Active Syntheses: Lectures on Transcendental Logic*, trans. Anthony J. Steinbock (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2001), 41.
34. Maurice Blanchot, *Thomas the Obscure*, trans. Robert Lambertson (New York: David Lewis, 1973), 15.
35. See my essay, “Une réduction infini,” *Cahiers de l’Herne: Maurice Blanchot*, ed. Eric Hoppenot and Dominique Rabaté (septembre, 2014), 323-28.
36. Husserl, *Logical Investigations*, trans. J. N. Findlay, 2 vols (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1970), II, 558-59.
37. Husserl, *The Basic Problems of Phenomenology*, 177.
38. See Bonaventure, *Commentaria in quatuor libros Sententiarum*, 3, d. 2, a. 1, q. 1 ad 2.
39. Marion goes in another direction from the one I follow here. For him, the idea of “God” is irreducible. See his *Figures de phénoménologie: Husserl, Heidegger, Levinas, Henry, Derrida* (Paris: Vrin, 2012), 188.
40. Elizabeth S. Haldane and G. R. T. Ross, trans., “Meditations on First Philosophy,” III, *The Philosophical Works of Descartes*, 2 vols (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972), I, 166, 170.
41. See Gregory of Nyssa, *Contra Eunomium* I, 167-71.
42. See, for example, Michel Henry, *I am the Truth: Toward a Philosophy of Christianity*, trans. Susan Emanuel (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 25.
43. Husserl, *Ideas* I, 134.
44. See Rudolf Bultmann, “New Testament and Mythology,” in *The New Testament and Mythology and Other Basic Writings*, trans. Schubert M. Ogden (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984).
45. See Bernard of Clairvaux, *On the Song of Songs*, trans. Irene Edmonds, intro. Jean Leclercq, 4 vols (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1980), IV, Sermon 74. II. 5.
46. Fink, *Sixth Cartesian Meditation*, 86.
47. Fink, *Sixth Cartesian Meditation*, 86 n. 293.
48. Also see Husserl, *Crisis* § 59.
49. Husserl, *Logical Investigations*, I, 68. On Husserl’s drive to be unambiguous, *eindeutig*, see Suzanne Cunningham, *Language and the Phenomenological Reductions of Edmund Husserl* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1976), 28-34.
50. See Husserl, *Formal and Transcendental Logic*, trans. Dorion Cairns (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1978), 22.
51. See Husserl, *Experience and Judgment*, ed. Ludwig Landgrebe, trans. James C. Churchill and Karl Ameriks, intro. James S. Churchill, afterword Lothar Eley (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973), 267.
52. See my essay “Une réduction infini.”
53. Stevens, “Nomad Exquisite,” *Collected Poetry and Prose*, 77.
54. See my *Kingdoms of God*, ch. 4
55. Stevens, “Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction,” *Collected Poetry and Prose*, 330.