Back to the Things They Make Themselves
Consider the following phenomenological landscapes, chosen at random:
You approach a table outdoors at dawn, in total silence. The table holds numerous flowers and a single lemon. In the background looms the crater of a dead volcano.
You stand in an alley, stroked insolently by an aggressive beggar. Somewhere a door slams, glass shatters, and an ironic remark is heard.
You stagger through a marshy plain, your feet soaked to the point of misery. Half a mile ahead is a raging windmill surrounded by marble pylons. Suddenly, the columns of an armored division blitz across your left, and you notice that the air has the smell of mint.
Phenomena and Infinity

While most of Husserl's examples are more prosaic than these, this is not always the case with Merleau-Ponty; in the case of Levinas, many of the descriptions are at least equally dark. If something of philosophical interest can be found in such concrete situations, it is phenomenology that ought to be able to show it to us. In each of the listed examples, we intend our troubled surroundings rather than standing at a sanitized distance from them. Sound, light, and the strange contours of dormant entities fold into one another, colonizing the world with a highly concrete drama. In each case, the cosmos is populated with a very distinct set of events: the world takes shape as a very specific struggle of things against their background horizons, as well as against the consciousness that might somehow liberate itself from them. No phenomenon is just one among others, since each is a unique incarnation that no other can replace. The world of concrete figures and shapes is where the philosophical action is, no matter what reductions might take place later. Let's call this the "phenomenological standpoint." To avoid for now the dispute over whether or not Husserl was an idealist, let's follow Dominique Janicaud in referring to a kind of phenomenology which, although it "overflows the intentional horizon," never loses sight of the occluded depths of all perception, and also never exits the concrete world.

But from another point of view, it might be said that all concrete phenomena suffer from the same defect. However different the three aforementioned scenarios may be, all are merely discrete appearances filling our view. All are but surfaces guarding an infinite depth that exceeds all presence, a single "Most High" or Most Transcendent Divine that trumps all the multitudes of phenomena like a fist pounding a table. Let's call this the "theological standpoint." It too aims to overflow the intentional horizon, but toward a point altogether outside the world of specific appearances. The shared ground between these two positions seems to be minimal. As Janicaud puts it: "Between the unconditional affirmation of Transcendence and the patient interrogation of the visible, the incompatibility cries out; we must choose." Phenomenology and theology make two, and Janicaud makes his own sympathies admirably clear: for a phenomenology that is patient and worldly, and against a theology that intimidates philosophy by means of capital letters. He refers to the Other with a capital 'O' and Desire with a capital 'D.' One is tempted to add a famous capital 'B' from Heidegger, so famous as to be almost banal. Patient in the face of the world, Janicaud is highly impatient with all pistol-shots from beyond it. In his work the earthliness of phenomenology finds an eloquent defender against the "loaded dice" of the Infinite, as he puts it.

I would agree that if one must choose, then Janicaud is closer to the true choice. Any philosophy that attempts to dwarf the phenomenal world with a single almighty imperative or single withdrawn X deserves to be resisted. Such a position only sucks the marrow out of specific entities and events in the cosmos, reducing them not only to a play of lights, but to an empty play of lights. But I also think that Janicaud pays a price for his resistance. If the theologians favor a Transcendence beyond all concreteness, the phenomenology Janicaud advocates saves the phenomena by voiding them of all transcendence. It grants them no other escape from the world than through an interwining invisibility of the flesh, one that always teeters on the brink of becoming visible. As in most phenomenology, metaphysics is discarded in the name of ontology, since it seems inconceivable that a thing could be both concrete and outside the world.

I will argue briefly that phenomenology and theology as defined by Janicaud share one central mistake: both are too loyal to an artificial split between transcendence and concreteness. I will argue that the theological idea of a transcendent Capital X is wrong, not because it turns out to be immanent, but because there are transcendent Capital X's numbering in the trillions rather than just one of them. The entire field of reality is laced with infinity, not with the single infinite of Alterity (that unattractive and paralyzing word), but with the countless infinities of water, silk, dynamite, airplane engines, sea mammals, and sugar cubes. If phenomenology and theology make two, I will propose a third.

To keep things simple, let's confine the discussion to Levinas, leaving aside Janicaud's interesting discussions of Jean-Luc Marion and Michel Henry. Levinas is a philosopher who tends to awaken either serenity or irritation in his readers, and Janicaud is among the irritated. The phenomenology of Levinas is "above all negative, almost banal. Patient in the face of the world, Janicaud is highly impatient with all pistol-shots almost banal. Patient in the face of the world, Janicaud is highly impatient with all pistol-shots from beyond it. In his work the earthliness of phenomenology finds an eloquent defender against the "loaded dice" of the Infinite, as he puts it.

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To keep things simple, let's confine the discussion to Levinas, leaving aside Janicaud's interesting discussions of Jean-Luc Marion and Michel Henry. Levinas is a philosopher who tends to awaken either serenity or irritation in his readers, and Janicaud is among the irritated. The phenomenology of Levinas is "above all negative, yet ultimately precious." It "comes down to the edifying and airy evocation of a disembodied caress and a display-window eroticism." Ultimately, the subject becomes the "hostage of the Other." He goes so far as to refuse Levinas' claims to be a phenomenologist at all. For a brief
moment," he does seem to grant that there is some version of this hypothesis seems to be inevitable.

If this proposal turned out to be true, one ramification might be that either phenomenology or theology would be able to live up to the task of doing justice to things. Whether we regard them solely as appearance, or drawn in an Infinite Light, we risk the same mistake: namely we risk the assumption that inaccessible transcendence, if it exists, can exist only outside of individual things. In the first case, the reality of the volcano or the windmill is but a series of adumbrations linked together in no real unity; in the second case they are mere ontic nullities snuffed by the alterity of the Great Other. Where is the standpoint that treats the volcano or the windmill or the tumbleweed or the armored division as autonomous powers inflicting their blows in the cosmos? If Janicaud is right that phenomenology and theology make two, then a object-oriented philosophy would have to make three.

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2 Ibid.
3 Ibid., p. 27.
4 Ibid.
5 Ibid., pp. 71-74.
6 Ibid., pp. 78-80.
7 Ibid., p. 46.
8 Ibid., p. 49.
9 Ibid., p. 47.
10 Ibid., pp. 48-49.
11 Ibid., p. 66-7.
12 Ibid., p. 46.
13 Ibid., p. 42.
14 Ibid., p. 47.
15 Ibid., p. 103.
16 Ibid., p. 98.
17 Ibid., p. 103.
18 G.W. Leibniz.
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Published on the occasion of the inaugural exhibition at Assembly Point, 2015.

Printed in an edition of 500

Designed by work-form

Art Directed and Published by Assembly Point in collaboration with Cassochrome who have kindly supported this publication.