

From Phenomenology to Theology: You Spin Me Round*

Sergiu Sava
Al.I. Cuza University of Iasi

Bruce Ellis Benson, Norman Wirzba (eds.), *Words of Life: New Theological Turns in French Phenomenology*, New York: Fordham University Press, 2010, IX + 311 p.

Keywords: phenomenology, theology, Jean-Luc Marion, Michel Henry, Jean-Louis Chrétien

Without any trace of doubt one of the most important and influential movements of the recent continental philosophy is represented by the new French Phenomenology, and by this I have in mind authors like Emmanuel Lévinas or Paul Ricoeur, but also Michel Henry and Jean-Luc Marion, Jean-Louis Chrétien and Jean-Yves Lacoste. Their main characteristic is, of course, not the fact that they were conducted somewhere in France, but mainly their care and predilection for those phenomena that supposedly were inappropriately described or even completely neglected by the classical phenomenology – for instance those phenomena that belong to the theological discourse. It is precisely this expansion of the field of investigation that also gave rise to critiques such as the one formulated by Dominique Janicaud who spoke of an *illegitimate* “theological turn of French phenomenology”. Replies came both

* This paper was supported by CNCSIS – UEFISCSU, project number PNII – IDEI 788 / 2008, code 2104.

from some of the authors mentioned above and from those researchers sympathetic with the so-called “theological turn”. A part of the recent reactions from the latter category, together with some contributions concerned not so much with Janicaud’s critical position, but with some questions regarding the concrete investigations of the extended area of phenomenality, are to be found in *Words of Life: New Theological Turns in French Phenomenology*. The volume is edited by Bruce Ellis Benson, Professor at Wheaton College, and Norman Wirzba, Research Professor of Theology, Ecology, and Rural Life at Duke Divinity School, and published by Fordham University Press, New York, 2010, in *Perspectives in Continental Philosophy Series*.

The aim set forth by Benson in the *Introduction*, which also transpires from the very articles that constitute the volume, is to take the specificity of the new phenomenological investigations to be their possibility of a radical reformulation of phenomenology itself, and not their presumed theological dimension. Therefore, the first section of the book – *Reflections on the Theological Turn* – is dedicated to some theoretical matters regarding phenomenology and its correlation with theology, first of all, but also with literature. The issues taken into consideration range from a new way of approaching the “theological turn”, to rethinking the relationship between God and Being, as well as the relationship between *epochê* and God or *epochê* and poetry. In the paper *Continuing to Look for God in France*, J. Aaron Simmons addresses some of the perspectives over the interaction of phenomenology with theology, arguing that neither Janicaud’s separatist view – which in order to protect a Husserlian point of view assumes a worldless subject for phenomenology and thus neglects its hermeneutical dimension –, nor the one opposed to it, advanced among others by Peter Jonkers – which, in his effort to reject Janicaud’s position, comes to perpetuate a radical difference between phenomenology and theology – would do justice to the new French phenomenology. In reply, Simmons proposes a “reconstructive separatism” according to which we cannot speak of a radical difference between phenomenology and theology – on the ground of the rationality of phenomenology and the

fideism of theology –, but only of a distinction between the content of the presuppositions which structure both of them. But if their presuppositions are different in content, how can we speak of a real interaction between phenomenology and theology? For instance, if we choose, as point of departure, the *ontological difference*, apparently we are left with no possibility of relating to God in an adequate manner. The problematic aspect of such a situation, considered by Jeffrey Bloechl in his article, *Being Without God*, resides in a false perspective – one which does not account for the knowledge of God as prior to what Heidegger defines as human understanding (p. 34). What is requested in order to correct this error is our openness to God, permitted by our humanity which aims at transcending the relation to Being (p. 41). The last two articles of the first section of *Words of Life* are concerned with the limits of phenomenological reduction. In his paper, *The Appearing and the Irreducible*, Jean-Yves Lacoste takes into account the *radical otherness* of God and the impossibility of adequately conceiving Him in the context of the phenomenological reduction. Just as the appearance of the other's face, as described by Lévinas, would be distorted, if we were to treat it as a mere correlate of our intentions, so would happen, due to His irreducible dimension, with God's existence in the eventuality of our endeavour to know him otherwise than “in the element faith” (p. 66). Precisely the same irreducible character of the face of the other – the unbreakable injunction it launches: “Thou shalt not kill” – is what entitles Kevin Hart, in “*it/is true*”, to dismiss Derrida's view according to which a poem can always be assimilated to a phenomenological reduction. The face withholds under any circumstance its irreducible coordinate.

The following sections concentrate on some specific questions concerning the phenomenological investigations of Jean-Luc Marion, Michel Henry and Jean-Louis Chrétien. Thus Jeffrey L. Kosky deals, in *The Human in Question*, with Marion's regard to human finitude and the Augustinian roots of this particular regard, insisting on the “incomprehensibility of human, grounded in the incomprehensibility of God” (p. 114), which prevents him from falling to an objective level; Anthony

J. Steinbock focuses on a topic obscured by the inflated concern for the saturated phenomena, *The Poor Phenomena*, and on a possible taxonomy which leaves room for a certain saturation in their case also; an important paper of this section is the article written by Marion himself with regard to *The Phenomenality of the Sacrament – Being and Givenness*. The next section of *Words of Life* opens with Jeffrey Hanson's article on *Michel Henry's Theory of Disclosive Moods*, regarding the tonalities of suffering and joy, as described in *The Essence of Manifestation*, as well as anxiety, and their role in revealing the self and its radical immanence. In her text, *Can We Hear the Voice of God?*, Christina Gschwandtner does not agree with Henry's belief that, due to the immediacy of the words of God, there is no need for any exterior hermeneutics or phenomenological horizon in order to receive them. Another critical position towards Henry's conception of an immediate experience of God can be found in Ronald L. Mercer's *Radical Phenomenology Reveals a Measure of Faith and a Need for a Levinasian Other in Henry's Life*. On the same critical ground is situated Clayton Crocket's paper on *The Truth of Life* and its problematical connection with the world in Henry's work. Finally, the section consecrated to Jean-Louis Chrétien deals with the shortcomings of a phenomenology indebted to theological categories, such as *grace*, which come to jeopardise its intelligibility (Joshua Davis, *The Call of Grace*); with what is a call (Joseph Ballan, *Between Call and Voice*); with the openness to the ambivalence of the other's call, which wounds and blesses altogether (Bruce Ellis Benson, *Chrétien on the Call that Wounds*); with the privilege of touch over the senses of sight and hearing (Brian Treanor, *Embodied Ears: Being in the World and Hearing the Other*); as well as with accepting humility as a result of accepting our dependence on God (Norman Wirzba, *The Witness of Humility*).

Aside from the quasi-theoretical considerations with regard to the relationship between phenomenology and theology, the background of the articles from *Words of Life* is a very specific one, dealing with concrete situations where classical phenomenology seems to find its limits and, almost all the time, the new phenomenology finds its legitimacy. Due to this, but also due to the detached, rigorous analyses, which do

not hesitate to put into question the whole approach of the French phenomenologists, the reader of *Words of Life* is provided with an accurate, as well as with an accurate and complex image of the most important sectors of the recent phenomenological research.

Nevertheless one may feel, after reading *The Words of Life*, that there still remains an answer to be given to the issue of phenomenology's relationship with theology, as well as to the issue concerning the phenomenological authenticity of the investigations conducted by the Jean-Luc Marion, Michel Henry or Jean-Louis Chrétien. Insofar as such a claim would be legitimate, it would not expect a yes or no answer. Thus one would have to return to some articles – like those of J. Aaron Simmons or Joshua Davis, which deal particularly with these issues – and try to piece together all the presumed answers, including the hints and the perspectives contained by them. At the same time, due to the same legitimacy of the claim, in order to get a clearer view on the aforementioned issues and their possible answers, one would have to leave *The Words of Life* and gain a deeper insight, for instance, into the relationship of the phenomenological investigations of the new French philosophy with classical phenomenology, as well as into the *potential* metaphysical dimension of Marion's *phenomenology of givenness* or Henry's concept of *Life*.

Address:
Sergiu Sava
Al.I. Cuza University of Iasi
Department of Philosophy
Bd. Carol I, 11
700506 Iasi, Romania
Tel.: (+) 40 232 201284
E-mail: sergiu_sava@yahoo.com