

Postmodern Revelation: Placing Levinas And Derrida In Line With Transcendental Methodology

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Abstract

How should a philosopher of religion from the continental tradition respond when someone like Žižek asks “do you believe in some form of the divine or not?” For the phenomenologist, this question can be answered with a yes only if it is possible for human experience to receive real revelation. This essay argues that the work of Levinas and Derrida, together, fall in line with Husserl’s late notion of transcendental methodology in such a way that human beings are shown to be structured in their intentional experience in such a way that revelation of the absolute is possible.

Keywords: Phenomenology, Continental Philosophy of Religion, Transcendental Methodology, Revelation, Levinas, Derrida, Eugen Fink, Husserl

Postmodern Revelation

1 – The Future of Continental Philosophy of Religion

In April of 2011, the last “Postmodernism, Culture, and Religion” conference met in Syracuse, New York. The focus of the conference was the future of the continental philosophy of religion. Indeed, this was a concern. Cornerstones of the discipline like Emmanuel Levinas and Jacques Derrida were both dead, Levinas having passed in 1995 and Derrida having passed more recently in 2004. Other figures like John Caputo and Merold Westphal were retiring. New challenges to a continental, religious perspective were being raised by Agamben, Badiou, and Žižek.

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The conference sought to ask what path would be taken in light of the changes and challenges of the 21st century.

With respect to the future of the continental philosophy of religion, for that part that is phenomenologically based, the future is always in the past. Phenomenological method dictates the need to go back again with the information that has been newly acquired and start over, removing even more improper presuppositions. The need to return should be signaled by a question that places in question the work heretofore done, and, perhaps, no question asked in recent years has struck me with as much power and importance as Slavoj Žižek's question in *The Puppet and the Dwarf* put to philosophers of "radical Otherness" who attempt to go "beyond the ontotheological God": "OK, let's cut the crap and get down to basics," he writes, "do you believe in some form of the divine or not?" (Žižek, 2003, p. 5). Respondents, according to Žižek, typically dissimulate, holding real, religious views secretly while only admitting to a certain ethical enlightenment. In terms of the divine, however, they usually just say Žižek has asked the wrong question.

Indeed, there is good reason for claiming that the question is misguided: 1. Phenomenologically, Husserl includes the transcendence of God under the reduction, seemingly reserving the divine to a world of faith rather than phenomena (Husserl, 1982, §58). 2. Levinas, who has often been fingered as the instigator of mixing theology and phenomenology (Janicaud, 2000), clearly agreed with Husserl that God was an "inadmissible abstraction" and that his own philosophy was truly an "austere humanism" (Levinas, 1996, p. 29). 3. Derrida, who has followed in Levinas's apparent free use of the term God, offers up his own confession that "I quite rightly pass for an atheist" (Derrida, 1993, p. 156). Seemingly, some of the most important continental philosophers of the 20th century have utilized the name of God without actually intending to make theological claims that would lead someone to a belief in God. Under these auspices, the philosophers of "radical Otherness" might declare Žižek's question to be invalid.

Further complicating matters was the reaction of 20th century theologians who held any philosophical movement they deemed to be post-modern to be highly suspect and utterly detrimental to faith; the philosophy of Derrida was most often the target of this suspicion.

The Challenge of Postmodernism, published in 1995, records the proceedings of a symposium held one year earlier at the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary whereat “evangelical statesmen” and a “cadre of seasoned scholars” met to decry postmodernism as simply an “ultra-modernism”, a flip side of the modern perspective’s claims to certainty which amounted to a full embrace of skepticism or, worse yet, relativism (Dockery, 1995). That same year, Ingraffia’s book, *Postmodern Theory and Biblical Theology*, hit shelves to declare that postmodern theory was synonymous with modern atheism (Ingraffia, 1995). This visceral, negative attack prompted a response from philosophers defending postmodernism from both the accusations of relativism and atheism. John Caputo’s *Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida* in 1997 acts in much the same way as Plato’s *Apology*; the student defends the teacher against atheistic claims by signaling a new understanding of what it means to be religious. In the case of Plato, Socrates has his *daimon*. In the case of Caputo, Derrida has “Religion without Religion.” Derrida is a believer in the apophatic, a prophet of the impossible which can only be asked to “come.”

Into the back and forth of philosophers and theologians Žižek responds, “Let’s cut the crap,” possibly the best rendering of Husserl’s famous phrase “*zu den Sachen selbst*” ever given. Does anything remain of the divine? Can someone have religion without religion while yet believe in God, or is the idea of God so qualified now that the divine is unrecognizable? Is there any way to return to the idea of God without the onto-theological baggage and find something in which to believe? In order to continue moving forward in the continental philosophy of religion, we need to recover the themes of the past constantly. Only with a fresh start, having returned to our starting points, can we proceed to answer philosophically ways in which the divine may be revealed. We need a proper recovery of transcendental methodology; a way to view how Levinas and Derrida properly employed such method; and from this employment, a right beginning for recovering theological themes that could invoke revelation.

2 – Phenomenology at the Origin

Moving forward in continental philosophy of religion surely means appropriating a philosophy that will allow investigators to engage theological themes.

Interestingly, Husserl makes just such a claim about phenomenology near the end of his life, "In spite of everything I once believed – today it is more than belief, today it is knowledge – that exactly my phenomenology, and it alone, is *the* philosophy that the Church can use because it converges with Thomism and extends Thomistic philosophy" (Jaegerschmid, 2001, p. 338).

While philosophers like Levinas and Derrida feel somewhat at home with phenomenology, the idea that it is "exactly" Husserl's phenomenology that can illuminate experience, and specifically the idea of God, is in question. Specifically, Husserl's transcendental phenomenology is seen as problematically re-inscribing a foundational consciousness that would eliminate otherness rather than disclose it as outside the ego.

Levinas attests to avoiding the term "transcendental" because it seeks what is foundational. Consequently, the method remains tied to an ontological framework: "Foundation is a term from architecture, a term made for a world that one inhabits; for a world that is *before* all that it supports, an astronomic world of perception, an immobile world; rest *par excellence*; the Same *par excellence*" (Levinas, 1998, "Questions and Answers," p. 88). The same discomfort is reemphasized by John Caputo when discussing the hope for the impossible that is expressed in Derrida's *oui, oui*. "I (Caputo) said that Derrida must beware of turning *oui, oui* into a transcendental in the strong sense, of letting it become the alpha and omega of language . . . such a transcendental encircling would constitute a certain circum-vention of the event" (Caputo, 1997, p. 257). With the proper caution in mind, Caputo explains that deconstruction is limited to dealing with a *quasi*-transcendental at best. *Quasi*-transcendentals escape what has been, heretofore, seen as transcendental methodology's attempt at pinning down conditions in favor of descriptions that allow for the possibility of seeing horizons overflow previously inscribed limits.

Critiques such as those offered against transcendental phenomenology necessitate a going back again to the beginning of this philosophy, for Husserl's work at the time of his statement about phenomenology and the Church came late in his life as he was working on a series of unpublished manuscripts and working hand in hand with Eugen Fink. The outcome of this late work will redefine the transcendental in ways that converge with the philosophies of the dissidents from above, Levinas and Derrida.

From Husserl's manuscripts on time, Fink begins to define the problem with transcendental method: how does one make present that which is ultimately responsible for making present in the first place. The only possible answer is that the originated must be used to make the origin explicit.² Such a description, however, ontifies that which is necessarily non-being; however, having done so, the process of description must constantly designate the originating condition as *me-ontic*. At this point, transcendental methodology already recognizes its own process as one of saying and un-saying its object, but the method comes even closer to recognizing the overflowing of horizons with the manner in which *me-ontic* reinterpretation is conceived. The proper construction of a *me-ontically* recast transcendental is not a simple stair-step movement toward a final realization. As Ronald Bruzina describes it, "The logic of ultimate discovery is the logic of 'foundering,' . . . as Fink once termed it, 'a logic of failure'" (Bruzina, 1997, p. 80).

Foundering enters as the phenomenologist attempts to disclose the transcendental absolute. When the absolute is conceived as a condition, a customary rendering, the condition appears as an agent that produces an ontic result, determining that which it constitutes by virtue of being the condition for its possibility. While it is this condition as agent that Caputo warns against as that which all too majestically nails down its object, rendering the transcendental absolute in this way is not its ultimate disclosing but, rather, a positive rendering paradoxically conceived. The paradox arises because the agency and activity of the transcendental are not elements of an absolute but are concepts applied to the absolute made in the image of the one conceiving, for agency and activity are moments of the ontic experience. Put as simply as possible, when the phenomenologist endeavors to disclose a transcendental origin, the origin is cast in the image of the phenomenologist because that which is responsible for creation is inevitably described in the terms belonging to the created. Biblically speaking, scripture recognizes this when it unapologetically uses anthropomorphic language while, at the same time, reminding the reader that God is not like human beings. Fink expresses this difficulty in phenomenology in the following way:

²Because such absolute conditions like time do not appear within Being, they have often been referred to by Being "s contrary – Nothing. Fink, however, recasts this, "The thesis: The Absolute is the Nothing, is to be abandoned in favor of this one: The Absolute is the Origin." Eugen-Fink-Archiv Z-VII 5a. Quoted from Ronald Bruzina, "The Transcendental Theory of Method in Phenomenology; the Meontic and Deconstruction," *Husserl Studies* 14 (2), 1997, 78.

“Absolute” being is not in any way a being that would be found alongside of or outside that-which-is. Rather it is only accessible at all from the ontical as a point of departure. It is, in a certain way, the ontical itself, but inquired into so radically that it is the ontical, in a certain way, before its εἶναι. – The relation of “the absolute” to the ontical we shall call the “origin”. “Origin” is not an intra-worldly beginning but is seen in an intra-worldly way always *according to* that of which it is precisely the origin. “Origin” has an antecedency τῆ φύσει [by nature], and not πρὸς ἡμᾶς [to us] (Fink, 2006, Z-IV 112b).

Fink began to see clearly this realization while paying attention to what Husserl was doing with phenomenology in his C-Manuscripts wherein the nature of the transcendental subject was radically reconfigured in a way that no longer allows for egoic determination, that very activity that eliminates otherness by seeing what is radically not the phenomenologist in the image of the phenomenologist.³ The first reconfiguration is realized with the non-place of “absolute” being as neither alongside of or outside. The origin does not “exist” across a border between non-being and being, but, rather, it is “the ontical itself.” The second reconfiguration has to come with the realization that the ego at the center of the reduction is not capable of disclosing a true absolute like “proto-temporalization,” which is the task of the manuscripts. Problematically, the I becomes recognized as that which originates *in* the streaming of proto-temporalization, and, as a result, the most basic level of disclosure possible is at the level of the temporally constituted stream of experience as experienced. The absolute origin that “conditions” remains ultimately undisclosed, profoundly other. “At this stage, all one can do is acknowledge that the only way to characterize the absolute ultimate of origination is precisely *in terms of* the figure that *results from* the ever-absent ‘transcendental absolute of original constitution,’ the figure that each of us is” (Bruzina, 2010). Any expectation of further grasping the absolute simply fails.

Putting together Husserl’s belief about phenomenology’s legacy as the philosophy of the Church with Fink’s radical reconceptualizing of the transcendental reduction reveals an interesting possibility for revelation. Insofar as God would be the ultimate original condition of creation, the possibility of knowing anything about God in a phenomenological fashion would have to be done in a way that utilizes what is observed in creation to disclose something about the conditions of that creation.

³The C-Manuscripts are now published as Edmund Husserl, *Späte Texte über Zeitkonstitution (1929-1934)*, Die C-Manuskripte, Husserliana Materialien Bd. VIII, edited by Dieter Lohmar, Dordrecht: Springer, 2006.

Fink describes this disclosure in the following manner: "God is not a transcendent idol, but rather is the me-ontic depth of the world and existence" (Fink, 2006, Z-IV 36a). In this disclosure of the manifestation of God, there is an "un-nihilating of the Absolute" which Fink recognizes as "true theogony" (Fink, 2006, Z-VII XIV 4a). For Fink, a proper discussion of God would be the philosophical rendering of the origin, which would be equivalent to describing the birth of God in consciousness. The very possibility of such disclosure suggests an openness to the absolute, which indicates that the human structure is one open to this recognition of God: "philosophizing is breaking into God, and the awakening of God in the world" (Fink, 2006, Z-VII 92a).

3 – Origination in Levinas and Derrida

Moving forward in the continental philosophy of religion, now, will be to see if Levinas and Derrida can be read in light of a radically reconceived transcendental methodology. If so, then we can begin to see their work in light of a recovery of theological themes. My goal here is not to go into detail but to show evidence of dependence on transcendental origination for these two philosophers who have attempted to avoid strong transcendental arguments.

In the 1960s, Levinas begins a new line of inquiry that has sometimes been understood as a turn in his philosophy. Such a reading would, in part, figure Derrida's essay, "Violence and Metaphysics," as responsible since it brings into question work that had been done prior, especially in *Totality and Infinity*. Levinas takes time to defend his position on the other with his paper, "Wholly Otherwise." However, he takes another look at his own understanding of the ego. The problematic that surrounds the ego is the realization that oneself "is already constituted when the act of constitution first originates" (Levinas, 1981, p. 105). This means that the act of constitution performed by consciousness is being performed by that which is already constituted, presenting a problem for Levinas's philosophy in the following way: if the coming of the other constitutes the self in such fundamental terms that the formation of the ethical should be metaphysics' first philosophy, then how is there a self in the first place already there capable of receiving the other. It is not, then, the ontological presence of the other that is problematic for Levinas, but the ontologically constituted self that encounters the other. What we should see here is a clear convergence with Husserl's own problem of the ego in the C-Manuscripts.

We must, now, solidly reassert that the analysis of *Totality and Infinity* is not placed aside, for the movement Levinas makes in the 1960s is absolutely dependent upon the basic interpretation of the face as that which interrupts the ego and breaks into the ego's home. Levinas's post-*Totality and Infinity* and post-Derrida essays reflect this earlier position when they claim that consciousness "loses its first place" in favor of the order of the other, but because the ego was then and there already fully involved in the world, a new question could surely arise, one which Levinas did not ask in his first major work: "How is the face not simply a true *representation* in which the other renounces his alterity?" (Levinas, 1988, p. 352). What this question suggests is that the analysis of the face's interruption is phenomenologically accurate, but it does not explain why the ego, temporarily displaced from home, could not simply shore up the rent with a reconstituted home that now includes the other as revealed by the face. The answer to this question is already investigated in *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*: The other is not that which breaks into the home but is that which is already there structuring the home in its human manifestation providing, at least in part, the structural meaningfulness of experience. If such is the case, then the face of the other does not signify alterity but signifies what Levinas calls the trace of the other.

"A trace signifies beyond being" because it signifies that which is utterly transcendent to consciousness, that which can never be made to appear as present (Levinas, 1988, p. 356). This definition echoes so much of what was said about the face it is hard to see why a new term is necessary. What is at issue for Levinas and the question just posed is explained in Derrida's essay ". . . that Dangerous Supplement . . ." where "the sign is always the supplement of the thing itself" and the supplement adds its own positivity (Derrida, 1975, p. 141-164). The term "face", before a language-ready ego, acts as just such a supplement undoing the otherness in the breach of consciousness. What was needed for the self at the moment of primal impression was a word that already implies absence even in its positivity. The very presence of a trace is already the signaling of an irrevocable absence. Levinas, however, denies that this should be conceived as designating a transcendental, for the trace does not signal "a world behind our world" (Levinas, 1988, p. 355). Such a worry on Levinas's part presumes that the transcendental lies across a border, constituting from an other-worldly position, but in light of Fink's reconfigured transcendental methodology gathered from what Husserl was doing in his late manuscripts, Levinas's trace appears as that very use of the ontic to designate what has originary "power" for the ego.

For Derrida, the link between his philosophy and Husserl's idea of origination comes early, 1953-1954, in what has since been translated as *The Problem of Genesis in Husserl's Philosophy*. The issue was also front and center in his landmark text, *Of Grammatology*, (p.9) where he endeavors to uncover "the origin of meaning [sens] in general." Of course, Derrida's intrigue with origin may have begun with Husserl, but his understanding of how to investigate origin was certainly not Husserlian as Derrida, himself, understood it. His critique of an ego-centered phenomenology remains important for what is customarily called Husserlian; however, we can see Derrida's work on *différance* as exhibiting a philosophy of origination in a vein that converges with Husserl and Fink's late work.

When Derrida delves into the "origin of meaning," he often critiques any philosophy of meaning as an achievement of presence. His casual readers are certainly aware of his philosophy of *différance* and the manner in which the achieving of presence is frustrated by the movements of differing and deferring such that the full presence never arrives and meaning is left to emerge out of the play of the two movements. It would seem, then, that after all terms have been deprived of presence, the only clearly present meaning left is the name of that condition, *différance*, which is somehow responsible for meaning not being present. Ronald Bruzina, however, clarifies this particular issue: "That responsible something, therefore, must not itself be thought to be successfully made present; it is the radically *other* that, as the generative source of the movement aiming to achieve presence, is anterior to (or beyond) the efficacy of any such effort, whether experiential or conceptual" (Bruzina, 1997, p. 87). *Différance* is nothing more than another name that must annul itself even as it brings to light a condition of experience.

Derrida's consistent work that brings out the manner in which terms are able to be deconstructed follow right in line with Husserl's work on proto-temporalization as both work out more and more instances of the origination process at work. These continual descriptions reinforce the fact that determination of a transcendental cannot be absolutely made for more reasons than simply being unable to take up a position outside the constitutive horizon but because the unfolding of experience can always bring about a heretofore unrealized permutation of the transcendental in the living subject.

The process of disclosure must be an ongoing recovery of an origin that is always being revealed and is always imbuing the world as experienced with meaning, effectively undermining any understanding of *différance* as that which delivers anything absolutely (Bruzina, 2001).

3 – The Possibility of Revelation

If we are willing to grant that Levinas and Derrida have actually captured something of Husserl and Fink's later transcendental method while critiquing the canonical Husserl, the question remains as to what is gained. In the first place, both philosophers are doing something far more positive than discussions of the trace or wholly other or *différance* or *khora* might lead one to believe. Placing these philosophers within a logic of origins helps to see their work as one of disclosure, a genuine bringing to light. However, the disclosure does not try to communicate across boundaries, as though the transcendental conditions from a position outside.⁴ The transcendental is immanently near but unapproachable as originary absolute. Reducing any of these philosophies as a discussion of a *quasi*-transcendental makes the results of their description *too* slippery. If we understand this work as Caputo understands Derrida's, who declares the *quasi*-transcendental of *différance* to be "too poor and impoverished, too unkingly, to dictate what there is or what there is not," we might well end up with a question like Žižek's. Is there anything really there, or does it all too easily slip away?

Coming full circle with Žižek allows us to answer the questions concerning belief on both ends of this paper while dealing with our own issue of recovering theological themes. When putting the question of otherness in terms of origin, allowing that the disclosure will always be incomplete, under construction, and constantly seen as needing to be undone, the transcendental method still allows for that which is originally transcendent and yet immanent as being the "ontical itself" to be positively revealed. Even if the description, by necessity, remains in the terms of the experiencer, the experiencer still has achieved a measure of ἀποκάλυψις.

⁴Here, I have in mind Caputo's problem with the transcendental method as he writes in the Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida on page 13 where he declares "The problem in a transcendental philosophy is how to establish communication across the borders." Hopefully, with a better understanding of origin as that which is intimately tied to the ontic but undisclosable in a direct way, the notion of the transcendental as across a boundary has begun to be dispelled.

Theology depends upon revelation, upon being able to grasp in intentionality the absolutely other, and seeing the work of Levinas and Derrida to be on the order of transcendental methodology allows for a recovery of their work in more revelatory terms than has been previously stated. The point here seems to me to be summed up by Levinas when he declares "The idea of God is an idea that cannot clarify a human situation. It is the inverse that is true" (Levinas, 1996, p. 29). In the clarification of the ontic life of human experience, the idea of God can be revealed, not unlike Fink's philosophizing breaking in on God.

"So do you believe in some form of the divine or not?" Neither Derrida's nor Levinas's philosophy seeks to prove the existence of the god of theism such that one could and should believe in this god. Levinas writes in the preface to the second edition of *Of God Who Comes to Mind*:

We have been reproached for ignoring theology; and we do not contest the necessity of a recovery, at least, the necessity of choosing an opportunity for a recovery of these themes. We think, however, that theological recuperation comes after the glimpse of holiness, which is primary (Levinas, 1998, "Preface," p. ix).

The glimpse of "holiness" or, if this religious word were to be rendered philosophically, "radical otherness", is the site for the beginning of a theological recuperation. Such an action can only take place if such a seeing is possible in the first place, which is precisely what I have argued is going on in Levinas and Derrida's use of transcendental method, a recovery of the absolute, a revelation of the possibility of transcendence. Even if God never appears as a pure object of intentionality, the human structure is one open to the idea of revealed transcendence, making it possible to believe, in fact, in some form of the divine.

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“The Trace of Levinas in Derrida.” In Wood, David and Bernasconi, Robert (eds.), *Derrida and Difference*. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1988, pp. 13–29. Bernasconi, Robert, and Wood, David (eds.). *Ethics, Politics, Subjectivity: Essays on Derrida, Levinas and Contemporary French Thought*. London: Verso, 1999. Critchley, Simon. *Moyn, Samuel. Origins of the Other: Emmanuel Levinas Between Revelation and Ethics*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2005. Mulhall, Stephen. Derrida calls such a centre, the “transcendental signified” because it is a signified that transcends all signifiers, and is a meaning that transcends all signs. Various examples of such logocentrism or hitherto transcendental signifiers can be found in Plato’s notion of “eidos” or “form”, Hegel’s concept of the “absolute idea” or Kant’s categories of the understanding. All these terms function as what Derrida calls the “transcendental signified” or concepts invested with absolute authority, which places them beyond questioning or examination. Deconstruction endeavours to show the operation of logocentrism in all its forms, and to show that the transcendental signifieds are constructed within the province of language and textuality in relation to other concepts.