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Metaphysics within the Limits of Phenomenology: Balthasar and Husserl on the Nature of the Philosophical Act

INTRODUCTION

In his programmatic essay, “On the Task of Catholic Philosophy in Our Time” (1), Balthasar speaks of the necessity of engaging with the major intellectual currents of one’s age, a necessity borne of the proper understanding of the Church’s roots in, and responsibility for, the world. Given Balthasar’s sense of urgency in this regard, which is evident in the ever-present cultural dimension of his work, it is perhaps surprising how little attention he gives to the founder of phenomenology, one of the most significant schools of thought in Balthasar’s own twentieth century, namely, Edmund Husserl. The scarcity of explicit attention is all the more surprising both because Husserl’s influence clearly reached Balthasar (presumably through Erich Przywara) (2) –an influence we can detect above all in the (1947) work *Wahrheit der Welt* that became the first volume (1985) of the *Theologik*– and because Balthasar’s brief but profound account and assessment of Husserl’s “letzte Haltung” in the third volume of the *Apokalypse* reveals that he knew this thinker quite well (3). Moreover, the influence that reached Balthasar was not at all incidental: the theological aesthetics that represent the hallmark of Balthasar’s style has deep Husserlian overtones, which we detect in the uncompromising resolution to let what is show itself *as* it is in an attitude of obedient expectation. Nevertheless, if we ask after the basic nature of this expectation, its structure and conditions of possibility, in both Husserl and Balthasar, we begin to see that the difference between these two thinkers turns out to be greater than whatever unity they may share. Indeed, a reflection on this difference serves to set into relief what is unique about Balthasar’s fundamental philosophical insight with respect to many of the contemporary currents in philosophy. The following article will

(1) *Communio* 20 (Spring, 1993): 147-87.

(2) Przywara, one of Balthasar’s early mentors, was a friend of Edmund Husserl, and also worked closely for a time with Edith Stein.

(3) Balthasar, *Apokalypse der deutschen Seele: Studien zu einer Lehre von letzten Haltungen*, vol. III: *Die Vergöttlichung des Todes*, 2nd ed. (Freiburg, i.Br.: Johannes Verlag Einsiedeln, 1998), 111-26.

sketch out first Husserl's and then Balthasar's view of the ultimate philosophical act, and suggest how Balthasar's understanding, though never worked out to the extent that Husserl developed his own, nevertheless is capable of accommodating Husserl's insight, while the converse is not the case. As a comparison of the two thinkers' respective views will show, the reason for Balthasar's waning explicit engagement with phenomenology is his deepened interest in the question of being, a question that becomes methodologically eclipsed in Husserl.

THE PHENOMENOLOGICAL REDUCTION IN HUSSERL

As Balthasar observes in his early study, Husserl saw his philosophy as the "Endform," the fulfillment of Western thought, not in Hegel's sense of bringing that thought to a conclusive end, but rather in the apparently more modest sense of having finally brought to clarity its first beginning, that is, of formally defining philosophy in an adequate sense for the first time and thus discovering what has always been its essentially infinite task (4). The heart of this discovery is Husserl's notion of transcendental subjectivity, which represents to his mind the most radical sense of subjectivity conceivable. In general, the act of knowing is an essentially theoretical act: it represents a liberation from the necessarily contingent particularities of experience through the isolation of transcendent essences, i.e., the intelligible objects that remain the same through the variety of concrete contexts. We see this sort of isolation, for example, in the strictures of the scientific method, which attempts to lay bare what is universally the case in physical phenomena irrespective of the times and places of those phenomena or the particularities of the one performing the experiment. Knowledge aims at as direct as possible a grasp of the essential, what Husserl calls "eidetic intuition." It is just this aim that makes it a matter of theory rather than of praxis, for praxis is always *interested*, which means it aims at concrete and particular outcomes. Regardless of the eventual use to which the results of an experiment may be put, or the practical interest the scientist will certainly have in them, within the logical structure of the experiment those dimensions of the phenomena are, so to speak, "bracketed out"—which is not so much their removal as it is a change in one's relation to them, not a modification of the object but a shift in the quality of one's subjectivity. This suspension of interest allows the phenomenon to show itself in its purity, which means to give itself as it essentially is. The theoretical attitude is a necessary condition for insight into essences.

In relation to the general project of knowledge, what specifies phenomenology is the totality of its theory: rather than submitting only an occasional "part" of the world, for example, the objects of science, to the methodological reduction that, so to speak, releases their essences, within an otherwise naive and pragmatic assumption of one's place among things of the world, the phenomenologist's reflection represents a radical transcendence of the whole. His intentional object is the whole spectrum of intentionalities that constitute the human reality precisely *qua* intentionalities. It is no

(4) See *ibid.*, 111.

longer this or that thing in the taken-for-granted existence of the world that is thematized, but the world itself in the sense of the basic roots of all the things that appear. All things at once are “placed in brackets” in what is known as the transcendental *epoché*, the suspension of judgment (5). This new perspective is not really a perspective at all in the strict sense, since “perspective” implies a particular vantage point in contrast to other possibilities; instead, it is in the strictest sense absolute, since it transcends all these possibilities, all the particularities of location in time and space (6). As such, it gives one access to things that is in at least one respect unlimited. The task that lies before the phenomenologist now is to reflect on the various regions of being from within the transcendental attitude, to trace out the constitution of every aspect of reality as it were from the ground up and thus to achieve eidetic insight into the whole. This account shows us why Husserl thought of phenomenology as the *Endform* of philosophy in the way that he did: it represents, to his mind, the most complete form of the theorizing that has characterized philosophy from the very beginning in ancient Greece, and indeed that characterizes all knowing whatsoever, in whatever field or level or experience it is analogously achieved (7). It embodies the ideal of philosophy because it is without presuppositions in the most radical way possible: not that it begins “out of the blue,” without a context, but that it suspends judgment about its own context, and all contexts, and allows the truth of things to show itself within the purest stream of phenomenality (8).

Now, it is crucial in this sketch to avoid a common misunderstanding of the *epoché*: it is not a doubt about the reality of the world, at least not in a normal sense. To place the whole of the world in phenomenological brackets does not mean to treat it as if it does not exist. This would be doubt in a more limited, lower-level sense, a negative belief, the active assent to the notion that something is not there. The *epoché* transcends the alternatives between existence and non-existence, alternatives that necessarily put interest into play, either satisfying it or frustrating it, and thus reveal that we have not yet penetrated to the deepest level of subjectivity. The transcendental ego has no existential interest precisely *qua* transcendental; it represents what we could call a radical indifference, and thus an unbiased readiness for any possibility (9).

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- (5) One of the most succinct accounts of the *epoché* can be found in the *Cartesian Meditations*, trans. Dorion Cairns (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1995), 20-21. As he explains in these lectures, there are different “strategies” for reaching this suspension, some more gradual, some “all at once,” but the end of all is the same regarding the totality of its scope.
 - (6) This statement would have to be qualified to a certain extent in relation to Husserl’s notion of “internal time consciousness,” which reveals that even the intentionality of the transcendental ego displays some of the features of temporality, namely, the purely formal structures of protention, retention, and primal impression (see Husserl’s *The Phenomenology of Internal Time-Consciousness*, trans. J.S. Churchill [Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1964]). But because of the pure formality of these structures, the transcendental ego can still be said to transcend all time and space, i.e., the condition of possibility of time is not itself temporal.
 - (7) Husserl, “Philosophy and the Crisis of European Man,” in *Phenomenology and the Crisis of Philosophy*, trans. Quentin Lauer (New York: Harper Torchbook, 1965), 158-61.
 - (8) See the classic essay by Martin Farber, “The Ideal of a Presuppositionless Philosophy,” in *Phenomenology: The Philosophy of Edmund Husserl and its Interpretation*, ed. Joseph Kockelmans (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1967), 37-57.
 - (9) See Husserl, *Ideas*, book 1: *General Introduction to a Pure Phenomenology*, trans. W.R. Boyce Gibson (London: Collier Books, 1962), 100.

According to Husserl, Descartes had the right idea in realizing that all of philosophy begins with a meditative “turn inward”, but was insufficiently radical in his withdrawal, and so remained within the bounds of empirical interest and the aporia that lies within those bounds: how can we know with certainty the existence of the things of the world to which our representations correspond? (10) Notice: Descartes’ posing of this question presumes what Husserl would call an ultimate “natural attitude,” and thus a failure to achieve complete transcendentality. In a manner similar to Descartes, Kant’s critical philosophy, with its unsurpassable distinction between noumena and phenomena, implies that consciousness remains juxtaposed to “things in themselves.” This reveals that he, too, did not think the structure of intentionality radically enough. While Husserl shares with these thinkers a methodological turn to the subject as first philosophy, his is no longer a “psychologistic” subjectivity that stands over-against objects as another “thing” in the world, but is now a transcendental subjectivity in a radical sense, which is simply identical in a certain respect with the world in its self-manifestations. One of Husserl’s major achievements, according to Robert Sokolowski, is his overcoming of the modern problem of the self-enclosed sphere of subjectivity, the “egocentric predicament” (11).

From what has been said, it should be clear that phenomenology is not a science in the classic sense of a determinate body of knowledge, but rather in the more modern sense of a method that claims neutrality and openness to any possible content. It is, we might say, absolute method. As Husserl often observed, phenomenology represents, not a destination, but a beginning: an infinite task. It was his expectation that his followers would walk through the door he had opened and work together as community of scientists to explore the endless fields to which this method led. Significantly, Husserl’s expectations were frustrated, for most of the discussion in phenomenology was and still is about the very nature of the project, about the status of the transcendental ego and the possibility and implications of the *epoché*. I say “significantly,” because this expectation seems to me to signal a misunderstanding of the nature of philosophy, as we will see in a moment. In any event, toward the end of his life, Husserl interpreted the growing “crisis of Europe,” the disillusionment with the promises of the Enlightenment, and indeed even the promises of the birth of reason in Greece, as resulting from a failure to grasp the truly radical nature of reason, and thus the artificial restriction of its scope, which set reason in opposition to realms of reality more immediately connected with life. Hence the emergence in the twentieth century of a kind of celebration of the irrational in the various versions of existentialism and eventually postmodern philosophy. For Husserl, phenomenology has a mission, namely, to bring to completion the guiding idea that defines Western Civilization, the discovery of truth.

(10) See *Cartesian Meditations*, 23-25, and *The Crisis of the European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology*, trans. David Carr (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1970), 81-82.

(11) Robert Sokolowski, *Introduction to Phenomenology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 8-16.

BALTHASAR AND THE FOURFOLD DIFFERENCE

What Balthasar shares with Husserl is a desire to open subjectivity, to broaden the notion of reason, so that it does not exclude from the outset dimensions of reality that are essential to the *humanum*. Husserl's discovery of the "life-world," which is pretheoretical and yet always already transcendently "constituted," allows areas formerly considered extra-rational to receive serious intellectual attention, and is no doubt in part why religious thinkers have generally been positively disposed to phenomenology. With its attempt to purify its readiness for the self-manifestation of things by setting aside preconceptions (12), it represents a renewed form of realism, much more sophisticated than the premodern, naive version, insofar as it demonstrates a complete awareness of the subject's role in constituting experience (13). The importance of these aspects of the phenomenological method, not only for Balthasar but for many of the most fruitful paths of thinking in the twentieth century, cannot be overstated. Nevertheless, there are three objections to Husserl that Balthasar sketches in his early treatment, objections that he is not the first to raise, but have in some fashion been around as long as phenomenology itself. They are related. The first is the difficult question of intersubjectivity: if the phenomenological reduction eliminates the distinction between being and appearance, what sort of access can we have to the inner life, the non-appearing subjectivity, of another person? Embedded in this question is whether the transcendental ego can have an *other* to itself, and indeed what relationship there is between the transcendental and the empirical ego more generally (14). Second, doesn't the *epoché* represent an extreme form of what Heidegger called the "forgetfulness of being," insofar as it entails, in its bracketing of existence, one of the most complete instances of essentialism that the West has ever seen? Because of this essentialism, it would seem to give its renewed rationalism, no matter how open, an ultimately oppressive form, against which much in contemporary Continental philosophy is right to react (15). The third question is the possibility of *revelation* in both the general and the specifically theological sense (16). This question is associated largely with the work of Jean-Luc Marion, who raises it in a theological form: doesn't the absoluteness of the transcendental reduction set a priori limits on God by establishing the conditions of possibility of his appearing at all, and if this is the case, wouldn't it in fact reduce all religion to idolatry?

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- (12) Balthasar describes Guardini, for example, as taking a basically phenomenological approach to the world, by which he means essentially offering a ready space to the object to reveal itself, and which he contrasts to the Kantian standpoint in which the subject "overpowers" the object: *Romano Guardini: Reform aus dem Ursprung*, 2nd ed. (Freiburg i.Br.: Johannes Verlag Einsiedeln, 1995), 24-25. In the *Apokalypse*, Balthasar describes the *epoché* as a holding of one's breath so that one has the silence to hear the breath of life: 113.
 - (13) Cf., Balthasar's discussion of "naive realism" in *Theologik I* (Freiburg, i.Br.: Johannes Verlag Einsiedeln, 1985), 61-62.
 - (14) *Apokalypse III*, 120.
 - (15) Balthasar observes that, for Husserl, the being of consciousness would remain essentially unchanged if the existence of the world were eliminated: *ibid.*, 115. This means that the world does not stand over against my grasp, but is forced *into* it: 122.
 - (16) *Ibid.*, 123.

Balthasar mentions all of these criticisms in his early discussion of Husserl, but without developing any relationship between them. It is in the light of Balthasar's mature thought that we can see how each of these depends on the others. Although Balthasar no longer deals explicitly with Husserl in his mature work, we can sketch out what Balthasar would make of these questions in Husserl on the basis of what is the most condensed presentation of Balthasar's own philosophical position, namely, the final sections of *Glory of the Lord*, volume V, called "Our Inheritance and the Christian Task" (17). Engaging with this presentation brings to light the centrality of the question of being for Christian faith, and the importance of Christian faith for the question of being.

This final section serves as the conclusion to Balthasar's tracing of the fate of *glory* in the history of Western thought: glory is Balthasar's word for the manifestation of God, a manifestation that retains an analogy to the beauty of the world. God infinitely transcends the world, but the world is for all that not foreign to him, not without some profound intimation of his presence. The possibility of God's glorious self-revelation thus presupposes an expectant openness on the part of the world, and the key to this openness, Balthasar argues, is a sense for the "miraculous" character of being. The miracle of being is a complex unity, which, though simple, can only be unfolded in four stages. Before expounding this fourfold difference, let us note two things about the way Balthasar characterizes it. In the first place, he distinguishes this miraculous character of being from the internal order of the world, the fact that things exist *thus*, which provokes curiosity and admiration. Because the gaze of this admiration does not look, as it were, any higher than this inner ordering, it necessarily absolutizes that order, that is, it cannot help but predicate necessity of it. We see this quite clearly in Husserl's *epoch*: it would betray its purpose if it were not ultimate, and this ultimacy entails a comprehensive eidetic insight, pure "scientific clarity" about the whole, as the inalienable goal of philosophy (18). To be sure, Husserl's *epoch* remains endlessly open itself, since it never claims to be able to exhaust the phenomenality of the world—things always have another side of themselves to show—but this openness is essentially "horizontal" rather than "vertical". As Balthasar puts it in the earlier text, there can be no ultimate receptivity in the transcendental subjectivity as Husserl conceives it (19). The second thing to note is that Balthasar speaks of the *miracle of being* as the principle of philosophy rather than *wonder*, though wonder

(17) Balthasar, *Glory of the Lord*, vol. V: *The Realm of Metaphysics in the Modern Age*, trans. Oliver Davies et al. (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1991), 613-45.

(18) Consider Husserl's rejection of the notion of "depth" in philosophical thinking: "Profundity is a mark of the chaos that genuine science wants to transform into a cosmos, into a simple, completely clear, lucid order. Genuine science, so far as its real doctrine extends, knows no profundity. Every bit of completed science is a whole composed of 'thought steps' each of which is immediately understood, and so not at all profound. Profundity is an affair of wisdom; conceptual distinctness and clarity is an affair of rigorous theory. To recast the conjectures of profundity into unequivocal rational forms—that is the essential process in constituting anew the rigorous sciences. The exact sciences, too, had their long periods of profundity, and just as they did in the struggles of the Renaissance, so too, in the present-day struggles, I dare to hope, will philosophy fight through from the level of profundity to that of scientific clarity;" "Philosophy as Rigorous Science," in *Phenomenology and the Crisis of Philosophy*, 144.

(19) *Apokalypse* III, 123.

is the response that this miracle provokes. This formulation is significant for two reasons: first, it shows that Balthasar's starting point is resolutely objective, which thus stands in sharp contrast to the subjective starting point of what he calls the metaphysics of spirit (within which Husserl clearly stands). In the second place, this very objectivity, as we will see, will inevitably open up the religious depths of the world, for as Balthasar says, "this means –contrary to Heidegger– that it is not only astonishing that an existent being can wonder at Being in his own distinction from Being, but also that Being as such by itself to the very end 'causes wonder,' behaving as something to be wondered at, something striking and worthy of wonder" (20).

Let us now follow out Balthasar's unfolding of the fourfold difference. First, he highlights the difference of the I from all the other things that exist in the world. It is important to see that he does not describe this distinction abstractly, as the universal ego in relation to objects. Instead, he locates this distinction in the child's awakening to consciousness and growing into a mature subjectivity. This beginning is crucial; its importance for the whole of Balthasar's thought cannot be overestimated. It is helpful to contrast Balthasar's notion of the "birth" of the ego to Husserl's notion. For Husserl, the transcendental ego is an absolute spectator; it watches over the genesis of meanings from a privileged place "outside" this generation (21). For Balthasar, by contrast, consciousness comes to be as radically receptive; he calls it a "late occurrence," because it cannot be present at its own coming to be (22). It can only confirm its existence, which has always already been there. This notion contrasts, however, also with Heidegger's similar notion of "thrownness," insofar as this awakening is a birth that occurs as an intersubjective event of love. The interpersonal context of this occurrence is indispensable for Balthasar: the child awakens, ideally, within the community of a family, and specifically inside of the reassuring love of his mother, who has always already turned toward him before he is capable of turning toward her. As a result of this nurturing sheltering, the presence of the Thou actually *precedes* and *enables* the constitution of the self in Balthasar's thought, which is why he never finds himself forced to resolve the problem of intersubjectivity. The originating love in this community *creates* the distance of the I from everything else, and gives this distance a positive character from the beginning. But as a distance that grows and matures, it has room for the inevitable experience of alienation, which however only serves to strengthen the radical experience of the I that it is not absolute, it is not Being itself, but only a part of a larger world, a world indeed that can exist without it.

This realization leads to the second distinction, between that of being and the things that exist. In the mature discovery that the world is independent of me, I see that the same is true not only in relation to me, but in relation to all particular things whatsoever. No matter how many things there are, no one of them can exhaust the possibilities of being, nor can the sum of all of them together. If we could call our first distinction the *personal difference*, this second would be the properly

(20) GL V, 615.

(21) "Outside" is not meant, here, obviously, in any physical sense, but rather in the metaphysical sense of being the condition of possibility of all appearing that cannot itself be counted among those things that appear.

(22) *Glory* V, 616.

metaphysical insight that we might call, borrowing from Heidegger, the *ontological difference*. In its ideal form, this is the recognition of the “unsurpassable abundance of Being” (23) beyond all the existing things in the world, a recognition that coincides with the astonishment over the fact that this superabundant being is nevertheless not a substantial thing in itself, but rather has substance only in the things that remain different from it. This ontological difference, because of the kenotic or donative transcendence it implies, is so to speak the philosophical place wherein glory appears. Here it is what Balthasar calls the glory of being, but it is the necessary condition for the glory of God, since it opens up the analogy that allows God to manifest himself without compromise of his infinite transcendence (24).

The third difference is perhaps the most overlooked. We may call it the “*natural-philosophical difference*,” and describe it as the “non-derivability” of things from being. Basically, this difference consists in the recognition that being is not the ultimate source of what exists, i.e., that being itself is not the “creator.” If it were, then we would be faced with two possibilities. Either the things that exist would be nothing more than relatively incomplete expressions of being, imperfect instances of a perfection that lies beyond them. (Here, we have all of the evolutionary theories, whether primarily biological or metaphysical.) Or being would surrender its perfection to the things that exist, and then we project a fixed necessity onto the cosmic order. The wonder at the miracle of being would dissolve into the admiration of cosmic beauty. Thus, if we end with the ontological difference, we either have to absolutize *being* or absolutize beings; if we do not wish to absolutize one side of the distinction, we must either oscillate dialectically between them (à la Hegel) or artificially – and ultimately nihilistically – suspend the difference and defer the option (à la Heidegger: the later talk of the “*Es gibt*” seems to be an attempt to get beyond this problem). We refer to this here as the “natural philosophical difference” because Balthasar suggests that the sign of a thinker’s recognition of this third difference is a celebration of sub-human, natural forms in their diversity, the presence of a sense for the beauty of nature, which is essentially connected with an ultimate freedom. This sense lies outside of the metaphysics of spirit. The world of nature becomes important for us only when we realize that we can learn something unique about the meaning of the existence of the world from, to quote Balthasar, “beetles and butterflies,” that we cannot simply derive from our reflection on being or on our own subjectivity. The relative absence of a serious philosophy of nature since Galileo and Descartes is not unrelated to the loss of glory in metaphysics and theology (25).

(23) *Ibid.*, 618.

(24) It is crucial to distinguish this ontological notion of condition of possibility from the methodological condition of possibility that one finds, for example, in transcendental philosophy and phenomenology. The ontological condition preserves the primacy of actuality over possibility, and so does not represent an a priori restriction of God’s freedom. The failure to see this difference is arguably the central problem in Marion’s philosophy, which necessarily leads him to attempt to think God “without being.”

(25) Schelling is one of the only defenders of the “philosophy of nature” in the modern period, but as has often been observed, the impulse driving him to this defense does not seem to have been a love of nature for its own sake, but rather a sense that the integrity of spirit requires the integrity of nature. In this respect, there is still an ultimate instrumentalizing of nature in relation to spirit even in his *Naturphilosophie*.

The fourth difference is the religious, or *theological difference*: the difference between God and the world. The “non-absoluteness” of the ontological difference, which gets reflected in the celebration of nature, of course points to something beyond, namely, to God. But the fact that wonder’s movement toward God is not immediate, but is rather mediated through the previous three differences, brings out two things that are absolutely indispensable: first, it reveals God in the personal terms of *freedom*, insofar as the non-closeability, as it were, of the innerworldly differences prevents any final resolution in an unchangeable necessity (God is free because the world cannot be derived from him, nor can he be simply deduced from the structures of the world), and, *second*, the being of the world remains an *expression* of God, its glory is a reflection of his, it does not lie over against God as a thing *outside* of him, but is “inside God” without ever becoming deducible or otherwise derivable from him. In other words, the fact of God’s absolute and indominable freedom does not shatter the analogy of being. Already within philosophy, we approach God as free and personal, and it is just this that allows the personal God to reveal himself in salvation history, and above all, uniquely in the person of Jesus Christ. Metaphysics and theology overlap in this fourth distinction without for all that collapsing into one another.

In order to appreciate the full significance of the fourfold distinction, we have to see how the moments are reciprocally dependent on one another, so that the elimination of any one of the four differences will ultimately entail the loss of all of them. We must also keep in mind that this whole complex unity stands at the service of the preservation of genuine and abiding wonder, the disposition that remains in the question, Why is there something rather than nothing?, and thus that relates to being always as a *gift*. We have already suggested why the theological difference is necessary for the ontological and the natural-philosophical difference. But let us consider a few other relations.

The first difference, we said, is truly pivotal, in the sense that it reveals that difference as such is something positive: it is constitutive of love. The distance between mother and child grows out of an intimacy, and it is what makes in turn a new and deeper intimacy possible. This first difference reveals existence in general as a gift, which there is nothing one can do to earn, and yet which nevertheless belongs wholly to one with “no strings attached” (26). This difference casts a light of personality and of joy over the whole of the metaphysical act, and it is thus what makes the personal and free revelation of the fourth difference, not the intrusion of something utterly foreign (as it is, in different ways, in the thought of Schelling, Barth, and Marion), but the essentially surprising confirmation that personality is not some epiphenomenon of nature, it is not a merely ontic experience or a mere region of being, but is absolute and at least equiprimordial with being itself.

But if the categories belonging to person are so important, why do we need to speak of being at all? Why not simply rest content with the first and the fourth distinctions? Don’t we in fact hear from all sides in contemporary philosophy the call to get beyond metaphysics? The necessity of the second and third difference is, to

(26) See Ferdinand Ulrich’s profound reflection on the child’s “Trennung” from his origin, understood as primordial gift, in *Der Mensch als Anfang: Zur philosophischen Anthropologie der Kindheit* (Einsiedeln: Johannes Verlag, 1970).

be sure, not as immediately obvious to us, perhaps, as the others, but for that very reason bears more emphasis. There are at least two things to say on this point. In the first place, if we eliminate the ontological and natural philosophical differences, then the fourth simply becomes the second, which is to say, we face once again the problem of absolutizing the ontological difference even if this problem appears now in a new light. We thus have to choose between an absolute monism, an absolute dualism, or a dialectical relation between the two. Either the world becomes a “part” of God, an immediate and always inadequate expression of God without substantial reality of its own, without freedom, or God lies absolutely beyond the world and relates to it in the specific form of violence, without the fertile paradoxes of analogy. In the second place, the loss of being and nature would tend to evacuate the personal and theological difference of depth and objectivity. The “locus” of the encounter between man and God would increasingly become the human spirit, the pure subjectivity of the human heart. In the context of such a loss, there is no longer any room for true glory, but only the sublime, which, for all its drama can nevertheless “fit” into purely subjective space, as Kant shows beyond a doubt (27). In describing the immediacy of the God-self relation in the modern metaphysics of spirit, Balthasar writes, “The absolute primacy of the Augustinian (and Newmanian) ‘God and soul’ means however that for me Being, goodness and the Thou emerge only in relation to God as the ‘Other,’ and thus there is no way that leads to God *via* the *being* of the world and the human *thou*” (28).

BALTHASARIAN METAPHYSICS AND HUSSERLIAN PHENOMENOLOGY

Whatever developments and differentiation of content may be lacking in Balthasar’s philosophy, which, though indispensable, always remains a handmaiden to his theology, it seems to me that his starting point –the fourfold difference– is unsurpassable. What is unique about it is that it fully embraces the anthropological turn of modern thought without surrendering the great classical metaphysical tradition, and thus is able to avoid in advance all the excesses into which modern thought typically falls. For Balthasar, the notion of person, and the dimensions of reality attendant upon it (namely, freedom, action, dialogue, narrative, history, and so forth) is always mediated by the categories of being, and the question of being is always in its turn mediated through the concrete drama of personal relations. His ultimate philosophical stance is simultaneously a meta-physics and a meta-anthropology. This stance provides a vantage from which to assess not only Husserl’s phenomenology, but also some of the extensions and developments of it in later thinkers.

(27) David Bentley Hart’s book, *The Beauty of the Infinite* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2003) is an insightful “unmasking” of the pretensions of the postmodern sublime, which has its roots in the Kantian notion.

(28) *Glory* V, 461.

As we have seen, the heart of Husserlian phenomenology is the discovery of the intentionality of consciousness (29), the realization that the ego is not a thing in the world, but is of a radically different nature from all things. Its non-thingness is what allows it to be the “place” in which things can show themselves as they are in truth. Its total transcendence keeps it from being juxtaposed to other things in the world, but for that very reason opens up every aspect of reality—even those aspects formerly dismissed as irrational—to the unintrusive gaze of reason. Although Husserl does not speak of the genesis of consciousness in interpersonal terms, and indeed would reject the notion of the genesis of transcendental subjectivity at all as a contradiction and a slip back into psychologism, we might interpret his elaboration of the intentionality of subjectivity in terms of Balthasar’s first distinction, that between the I and everything else. Now, it is clear that Husserl does not affirm anything like the ontological difference (30), and if there is no second distinction, then the third one, which we have been calling the natural philosophical difference, would not have any sense. With respect to the God-world relation, Husserl is silent (31). But we cannot simply interpret this silence as a “neutral” openness, which simply brackets out the question of God and for that reason does not prejudice our answer to the question one way or another. It is not neutral because, as Marion has shown with great clarity, by establishing the ultimate horizon within and against which whatever is to appear must appear, and thus fixing a priori the conditions of possibility of all appearance whatever, phenomenology forges God—if there is one—into its own image (32). As Balthasar explains in his early analysis of Husserl, if the transcendental ego lies above all worldly phenomena, and *below* nothing at all, it is necessarily the master of whatever appears, even if it should be the absoluteness of God (33). This “subordination” is not a matter of the subjective intentions of the particular philosopher, but is built into the very structure of the transcendental *epoché*, and so can coincide with the most sincere moral piety with respect both to God and to the created world.

What, then, becomes of the first difference without any of the others? We claimed above that no difference can ultimately stand without the others, and we will see that this claim holds paradoxically true in spite of Husserl’s untiring insistence on the radical difference of subjectivity. What seems to be a difference turns out to be illusory if it is wholly unilateral, if, that is to say, A differs from B without B differing in the end from A. Our question with regard to Husserl concerns the possibility of there being in the end any difference of the world of Nature from transcendental

(29) Not that he is the first one to discover this—its discovery is generally attributed to Bernard Bolzano and Franz Brentano—but he is the one to see its radical nature, and to grasp its vast implications. On Husserl’s early influences and his working out of a non-psychologistic notion of meaning, see J.N. Mohanty, *The Philosophy of Edmund Husserl: A Historical Development* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), esp., 3–83.

(30) Some people claim that Husserl’s distinction between things and their appearances or profiles amounts to the same thing: but this is a logical difference in relation to particular things, and does not in any immediate way point to the transcendence of being with respect to all existing beings.

(31) In *Ideas*, Husserl explains why the question of God *must* be bracketed out: 157–58.

(32) See, for example, *God Without Being*, trans. Thomas Carlson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 25–52; and *The Idol and Distance*, trans. Thomas Carlson (New York: Fordham University Press, 2001), 1–26.

(33) *Apokalypse III*, 121–23.

subjectivity (in a sense, the question concerning the third difference appears here once again). In the last book Husserl published in his lifetime, the *Cartesian Meditations*, Husserl discusses what has never ceased to be one of the most frequent objections to phenomenology, namely, that it precludes the possibility of genuine *intersubjectivity*; here, he makes the insightful claim that the objectivity of Nature itself depends on the possibility of the transcendental ego perceiving the Other *qua* Other: “. . . and it has never been recognized that the otherness of ‘someone else’ becomes extended to the whole world, as its ‘Objectivity,’ giving it this sense in the first place” (34). The problem, as Husserl articulates it here, is how to account for the otherness of someone else from within the withdrawal into the “sphere of ownness” that constitutes transcendental subjectivity. The key to the response Husserl gives in these lectures is what he calls “analogizing apperception”: based on the connection I experience as a transcendental ego to this particular body, I can “apperceive” an ego in connection with the other bodies within the phenomena that stream before me in the same way that I “apperceive” the back of a cube when looking at the front (except that the other can never be brought to evidential fulfillment in principle, whereas I can turn the cube around). It is indeed the very fact that the other cannot be brought to direct evidence that makes his otherness evident: “If it were [able to be given ordinarily], if what belongs to the other’s own essence were directly accessible, it would be merely a moment of my own essence, and ultimately he himself and I myself would be the same” (35). Notice, in this passage, Husserl relates presence and absence dialectically, in the sense that the other is other *precisely to the extent that* he is not in fact manifest to me, and thus what *is* directly manifest to me becomes simply a “moment of my own essence.” My *own* transcendental subjectivity is absolute, the otherness of the other is derivative of that, and the objectivity of the world comes third. In the ultimate philosophical act for Husserl, then, there is no originary *positive* difference—as there is in Balthasar’s first distinction, which is the expression of the difference in unity of love—and so there are scant resources in his thought for any of the subsequent differences. He thus asserts plainly: “The Objective world, the world that exists for me, that always has and always will exist for me, the only world that ever can exist for me—this world, with all its Objects, I said, derives its whole sense and its existential status, which it has for me, from me myself, *from me as the transcendental Ego*” (36). With the collapse it entails of the meaning of the world into the transcendental I, Husserl’s philosophy offers a clear example of the interdependence of the stages in what Balthasar calls the fourfold difference.

We might interject here an objection on behalf of Husserl: is not the phenomenological stance perfectly suited to raising the question, Why is there something rather than nothing?, precisely because it is nothing more than a stance of readiness for all possible questions? After all, Husserl himself asserts that “there is no conceivable meaningful problem in previous philosophy, and no conceivable problem of being at all, that could not be arrived at by transcendental phenomenology at some point along

(34) *Cartesian Meditations*, 147.

(35) *Ibid.*, 109.

(36) *Ibid.*, 26.

the way" (37). While it may seem to be a simple method that does not prejudice any particular content, in fact it should be evident that this method nevertheless determines *a priori* the *form* of that content, the way in which it can appear. What is precluded is an encounter that would essentially and as a matter of principle take consciousness "by surprise," which is a necessary precondition for any genuine revelation. In this respect, the question of being cannot be posed *as* the question of being, i.e., as the question of *why* directed at the existence of the world in its concrete particularity, but only as a question of essence, i.e., the description of content. As we see even more in Balthasar's thought than in Heidegger's, this question must be rooted in the question concerning my own existence in its uniqueness and situatedness, the question concerning the coming to be of my own subjectivity. As we observed above, this question has no place in phenomenology—even Michel Henry's attempt to bring the condition of possibility of all phenomenality itself to the *sui generis* manifestation of self-affection remains a description and does not pose the *why* question—and this means that phenomenology is never simply neutral with respect to ultimate questions. It takes a positive position, however implicit, with respect to them, and that position runs at cross purposes to one of the basic aims of the classical metaphysical tradition and the Christian mission.

A full response to Husserl would thus require a recovery of his incomparably rich insights into the structures of intentionality within a more ample, and indeed metaphysical, starting point, though this recovery would require the radical revision of basic principles and a deeper sense of sharing in a tradition. This response remains to be given. It is interesting to consider that some of the best known developments of phenomenology have tended to introduce themes specifically in relation to one of the differences, but generally to the explicit exclusion of others. Thus, we have for example Paul Ricoeur, who was a sharp critic of Husserl's egological reduction, attempting to enrich the first difference through the dialogical, interpersonal dimension—but without a metaphysics (38). We have Hans Jonas elaborating the precious rarity of a philosophy of nature from within phenomenology—but precisely through the rejection of the fourth distinction as necessarily bound up with gnosticism (39). We have Heidegger thinking in and through the second distinction, the ontological difference, with a depth that has no peer in modern thought—but in a way that eclipses the personal dimension of reality that comes to light in the first and fourth distinctions, which ultimately paints this depth an opaque, nihilistic black (40). And finally we have Jean-Luc Marion, who attempts through a "third reduction" to pure given-

(37) *Crisis*, 188.

(38) See Ricoeur, *Husserl: An Analysis of His Phenomenology* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1967), esp., 82-142..

(39) See Hans Jonas, *The Phenomenon of Life: Toward a Philosophical Biology* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2001), esp., 13-17.

(40) Although Heidegger denies that his a-theism decides for or against God, in giving the truth of being, as he understands it, an absolute priority, he sets illegitimate conditions on God, and so willy-nilly precludes the analogy of glory. This eclipse of God is directly related to the unilateral subordination of man as a concrete person, a particular subject over against all objects, to the truth of being, which, as he shows in the "Letter on Humanism," for example, overrides the possibility of ethics, or at the very least empties it of any serious significance. See "Letter on Humanism," in *Basic Writings*, trans. David Farrell Krell (New York: Harper and Row, 1977), 193-242.

ness, beyond Husserl's first reduction to intuition and Heidegger's second reduction to being, to open up *within* phenomenology the absolute and unconditional readiness that alone would be capable of responding to the truly divine and agapic God (41). But Marion's relentless insistence on this fourth difference of God from the world, which trumps, as it were, every other difference and positively excludes the metaphysical dimension of the ultimate philosophical act, ends up making God simply the dialectical opposite of the world: where the world is constituted by intelligible conditions, God is the unconditional; where the world is the realm of possibility, God is the *im*-possible; where the world is a metaphysical entity, God is "without being." But if God, if love, is without being, it means that being is without love, without any *intrinsic* traces of the glory that would make genuine revelation possible. The long-sought goal in one of the currents of modern philosophy, namely, to overcome Pascal's radical separation between the god of the philosophers and the *personal* God of Jesus, ultimately eludes Marion because he *systematically* and as a matter of principle robs the personal categories of ontological depth. While on the surface, Marion's "third reduction" seems to be the most radical possible, and thus the best guarantor of the possibility of revelation and of God's divinity, in fact it collapses into the very subjectivizing it seeks to overcome, insofar as the encounter between man and God cannot take place anywhere in the *real* world, but only in the ever-vanishing secrecy of the heart. The breakdown of the *analogia entis* ultimately means that God's *im*-possibility collapses into *in*-significance (42).

This last point leads us to the question with which we shall conclude: Why does Balthasar insist, in contrast to so many of the major thinkers of the twentieth century in continental thought, on the crucial importance of the question of being, understood particularly in a metaphysical sense? This is a vast question, far too vast to hope to answer it adequately in the present context. But perhaps part of the answer lies in the fact that the ultimate metaphysical act must include without compromise, and at least implicitly, the full complex unity of the fourfold difference –both the depth of the ontological and the drama of the interpersonal, both the intelligibility of worldly being and the pious, attentive openness of the religious– and that the neglect of any one of these features perverts metaphysics in a decisive way, so that it calls for a supplement for the dimensions of reality that demand justice, if it is not simply rejected *tout court*. We must recall that the fourfold difference unfolds within the posing of the question, Why is there a world at all?, which harbors the question, Why should *I* exist at all?, a question that naturally leads to the deeper one: To whom, ultimately,

(41) See Jean-Luc Marion, *Reduction and Givenness: Investigations of Husserl, Heidegger, and Phenomenology* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1998), esp., 4-39; 203-05.

(42) Although at one point Marion concedes the legitimacy of Aquinas's sense of analogy (see "Saint Thomas Aquinas and Onto-Theo-Logos" in *Mystic: Presence and Aporia*, eds. M. Kessler and C. Sheppard [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003]), he appears to have remained uneasy with the notion: according to Christina Gschwandtner, "He [Marion] also remarked to me in personal conversation that he was hesitant to continue employing such metaphysically loaded language. My argument about a recovery of the notion of analogy in his work obviously refers only to his particular definition and interpretation of it and not to the entire (metaphysical) heritage of the doctrine," in *Reading Jean-Luc Marion: Exceeding Metaphysics* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2007), 279fn75.

do I owe gratitude for the gift of existence? (43) A consistent posing of the question cannot avoid reckoning with the love at the root of the child's existence, even as it expands to the reality of being itself, and Heidegger's rejection of this personal dimension is perhaps at the root of his conviction that the explicit confrontation with the theological, the personal creator God, must necessarily dispel the mystery of the *Seinsfrage*. In the end, it is *only* love that does not dispel mystery. And the fact that Husserl's phenomenology remains by its own insistence a *description of subjectivity*, and never asks the radical, and necessarily metaphysical question, Why there should be subjectivity at all?, is perhaps why Balthasar makes no more than passing references to his thought in his mature work. The systematic and principled refusal to pose the question of being is not a fruitful place to start, not a fertile foundation for thinking, if one supposes that thinking desires to reflect as deeply as possible on the world. It is not, in any event, the proper place for a Christian, who is the inheritor, with and within the Church and her tradition, of the task to witness to, and participate in, Christ's mission to save the world and return it to the Father, or in other words, to recover and purify, to elevate and transform, the meaning of the world as a *gift* of love. This mission requires the metaphysical act.

Finally, why does Balthasar say that it is specifically the Christian who is called to be as it were the "guardian" of the metaphysical act? In the final pages of Balthasar's treatment of the fate of metaphysics in the West, we find, after the discussion of the fourfold difference, a section entitled "the theological a priori element in metaphysics," and then a concluding part called "Love as custodian of glory," which ends with a section, "The Christian Contribution to Metaphysics." In these pages, in a nutshell, Balthasar explains that it is ultimately only the personal revelation from above, from inside the fourth difference, so to speak, that confirms difference as such, and thus *a fortiori* the difference that nourishes metaphysics, as thoroughly positive because it is essentially love. And it is only this revelation that ultimately prevents man from projecting his own meaning onto being, which is what Husserlian phenomenology explicitly seeks to do. It is this, then, that keeps the difference open, keeps the heart vulnerable to suffer what is *other* than it because this other always appears within the *hope* of ultimate goodness. We might add, moreover, that the interrelation of the personal and ontological that lies at the heart of the metaphysical act as Balthasar describes it, an interrelation that keeps it alive, receives a unique and surprising confirmation in the content of Christian revelation: the doctrine of the hypostatic union, and even more fundamentally the interplay of being and person in the Trinity, an interplay that does not simply give love but *is* love and so reveals that being and love –*pace Marion*– are ultimately coextensive. If this interrelation is in fact indispensable to metaphysics in the fullest sense, then the Christian does indeed have a particular responsibility for the metaphysical act, he is called in a special way to be a "custodian" of the question of being, on behalf of the world.

(43) We see here, incidentally, how the perspective of the whole fourfold difference, in contrast to the classical metaphysical tradition, allows the posing of the question to acquire a personal dimension.

ABSTRACT

This article compares the accounts Edmund Husserl and Hans Urs von Balthasar offer of the ultimate philosophical act: the transcendental reduction and contemplation of the fourfold difference, respectively. It argues that Husserl's method precludes from the outset the raising of the question of being, and that as a consequence, all four of the distinctions that Balthasar describes must ultimately collapse in his phenomenology. An adequate response to Husserl must attend, at least implicitly, to the whole of the fourfold difference in all of its dimensions. The article concludes with a brief reflection on the significance of metaphysics for Christianity and the significance of Christianity for metaphysics.

Key words: Balthasar, Husserl, Phenomenology, Metaphysics, Being.

RESUMEN

Este artículo compara los relatos que ofrecen Edmund Husserl y Hans Urs von Balthasar sobre el acto definitivo filosófico: la reducción trascendental y la contemplación de la diferencia de cuatro partes, respectivamente. Postula que el método de Husserl impide desde el principio la consideración de la cuestión del ser, y, en consecuencia, todas las cuatro distinciones que Balthasar describe deben derrumbarse en su fenomenología, al final. Una respuesta adecuada a Husserl debe atender, por lo menos implícitamente, al conjunto de la diferencia de cuatro partes en todas sus dimensiones. Este artículo concluye con una breve reflexión sobre el significado de la metafísica para el cristianismo y el significado del cristianismo para la metafísica.

Palabras claves: Balthasar, Husserl, fenomenología, metafísica, ser.