

## BOOK REVIEWS / COMPTES RENDUS

**Catherine Mills, *The Philosophy of Agamben*. Montreal and Kingston: McGill/Queen's University Press, 2008; 153 pages. ISBN: 978-0773534889.**

**Leland de la Durantaye, *Giorgio Agamben: A Critical Introduction*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009; 463 pages. ISBN: 978-0804761437.**

*Review by Jonathan Short, York University.*

That ontological concerns feature prominently in the work of the Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben has undoubtedly complicated his reception, particularly in North America. To say that the intellectual heirs to pragmatism and empiricism view ontological claims with a suspicion bordering on hostility is almost to understate the situation. This is particularly true when it comes to political philosophy, where a moral justification is available to bolster an intellectual aversion. If ontology aims at comprehension at a level of abstraction or separation from empirical specificity, if its task is to unite disparate phenomena in terms of a subsuming instance or principle, the specifics are inevitably neglected or treated violently. In this vein quite diverse thinkers, from Rawls to Derrida, have urged that ontological thinking in political philosophy opens onto politically troubled terrain—as the association between the name and political orientation of the last century's greatest thinker of ontology is alone enough to suggest. Thus, sticking to the empirical specifics and abjuring the temptation to make sweeping ontological claims appears not only intellectually respectable but ethically prudent, an insurance policy of sorts against “dangerous” forms of political thought that might be associated symptomatically with the kinds of sweeping claims philosophies with strong ontological commitments seem to impose.

If something like this view orients much of recent social and political philosophy over the last several decades, the work of Agamben appears to fly directly in its face. In this Agamben certainly does himself no favours, as his persistent rhetoric of seeking the “original” sense of a

word, concept, or practise attests; likewise, startling and unsettling claims, such as that in contemporary times we are all virtually reduced to a state of bare life or that it is the concentration camp rather than the city which provides the paradigm of modernity, have appeared to many critics as bombastic, and perhaps nihilistic, excess rather than as carefully reasoned propositions. Be that as it may, the jarring effect of Agamben's apparently reductive and extreme views are also the product of an intellectual climate in which the patience to entertain such views is decidedly lacking. Perhaps for this reason, despite an immense interest in Agamben as a thinker, most secondary literature continues to display either isolated borrowing of certain concepts ("state of exception" or perhaps "bare life" chief among these), or a rather sceptical and negative type of criticism, all the while remaining mostly fixated on the predominantly political concerns of the *Homo Sacer* series of books.

This is not to say that among Agamben's readers there are not to be found those who believe that scholarly reception to date sidesteps, rather than treats adequately, his main concerns. The two books on Agamben under discussion here clearly share this belief. Mills and de la Durantaye are both of the opinion that the key obstacles to an adequate appreciation of Agamben's *oeuvre* are the diversity of subjects it treats and the level of difficulty at which it does so. It is the apparent view of both authors that these obstacles demand broad introductory works which depart significantly from premature critique as well as overly narrow focus in order to facilitate a richer understanding of Agamben's significance and what he may offer to contemporary philosophy. Indeed, Mills states near the beginning of her book that, "[she] firmly believe[s] that Agamben's work requires perspicacious, non-dogmatic and critical analysis before his version of political liberation and radicalism can be accepted." (7) While far from an unreserved endorsement, this at least prioritises the need for careful reading and an expanded tolerance for theoretical complexity. While de la Durantaye never offers his readers such a direct statement of his position, he points out in the introduction to his book that most of the secondary literature to appear thus far remains tightly focused on *Homo Sacer* and its related volumes, such that even in those rare instances when such literature explores earlier writings, it does so in a reductive manner. (10-11) For de la Durantaye, then, most literature on Agamben displays a (contradictory) tendency both to position Agamben's concern with politics as initiating a decisive break

with his earlier literary and aesthetic concerns, and, at the same time, to see the latter only insofar as they contribute to his political writings.

While Mills and de la Durantaye agree on the need to expand the scope of Agamben scholarship, and while each examines approximately the same range of texts spanning Agamben's early career in the 1970s up to his quite recent work, they do so in very different ways. Mills' account of Agamben's thought is oriented toward making sense of his political writings; while she does grant some conceptual autonomy in her treatment of early works such as *The Man Without Content* (1970) and *Stanzas* (1977), her gloss on most of Agamben's texts depicts them as a developmental unity. In many respects this is extremely useful, and Mills is to be commended for her exceptional clarity of exposition. The only problem with her approach is, as she is the first to admit, that it necessitates overlooking a lot of the difficulty and detail that Agamben's work contains. However, Mills' book succeeds admirably in its intention to serve as a philosophical introduction to those with little or no knowledge of the range of Agamben's work, presenting the main concerns and arguments that would enable a new reader to navigate Agamben's texts, doing so in a remarkably compact 144 pages.

Mills begins her first chapter with Agamben's theory of language as the ground of the human awareness of being, conceived as pure indication and intention to signify but understood as mysterious and "negative" by the tradition of Western metaphysics. In treating Agamben's understanding of language as the ontology of the potential, she delves into early works to show that for Agamben aesthetics is always implicitly an engagement with politics, understood by Agamben in the sense of putting into play the possible ways of being human. Mills' final chapter on Agamben's Messianism as a resolution to the problem of splitting the ground of potentiality from its particular actualisations is thus anticipated in the earlier work on language. The chapter on (bio)politics which lies between them situates Agamben's account of sovereignty as the obstacle which must be overcome if a humanity truly "fulfilled" (i.e., no longer split between potential and actual), is to be imaginable. Whether such a notion of fulfillment is tenable (and many have argued it is not) is left open by Mills, despite some suggestion in the conclusion of her book that she finds Agamben's project of liberation too removed from the concrete determinations of embodied subjectivity (such as sex, gender, race, and class). Such

abstraction threatens, in her view, Agamben's project of liberation with emptiness, since it would be difficult to see just what a liberated subject would be like if we could not specify its practical situation with respect to these concrete social markers. This criticism, of course, is aimed at Agamben's understanding of politics (and the Messianic) in terms of ontology, which, as Mills claims, appears to "relegate characteristics such as race and gender to the level of the ontic." (136) While there might be rejoinders to this criticism which would hinge on what Agamben says about the Messianic politics he envisions, that is, about how the relationship between potentiality and actuality might function, Mills does not discuss these. This is disappointing but highlights that the purpose of this work is to introduce us to the main features of Agamben's work.

For his part, de la Durantaye, despite presenting his book as a "critical introduction," has written at a length that is bound to be daunting for the uninitiated reader; at 440 pages, this book is better appreciated by those with some familiarity with Agamben's work and who already have a grasp of its main ideas. Unlike Mills, de la Durantaye abjures the centrality of politics, and while insisting that there is as much commonality of theme as diversity of interest to be found in Agamben's writings, positions the latter to win out. Beginning with an account of Agamben's treatment of potentiality, de la Durantaye provides a chronological gloss on most of the key works translated into English, supplementing these with untranslated material and doing a real scholarly service to readers confined to these translations in pointing out several of their inconsistencies and gaps. While potentiality is shown to be the abiding concern of Agamben's different fields of inquiry over time, de la Durantaye takes care not to impose a unifying structure on the different works while highlighting points of overlapping concern. While this approach is informative, it is also somewhat idiosyncratic. For instance, even though de la Durantaye refers to the important *Language and Death* several times in the course of discussing Agamben's other works, he does not provide a separate chapter on it, despite the key role it plays in the development of Agamben's thought. Similarly, the chapter devoted to *The Open* provides at best a rough overview, despite the rather obvious ways it is continuous with the concerns Agamben takes up in *Homo Sacer*, *State of Exception* and *The Time That Remains*. Some of the impression of fragmentariness is created by the inclusion of "scholia"

among the main chapters; essentially these are short asides on issues connected with but apparently not directly relevant to the main glosses of major works. Several of these provide quite valuable background material, especially beneficial for advanced readers wishing a deeper understanding of Agamben's texts and in particular of his relationship to several major philosophical influences, Heidegger and Benjamin chief among them, but also including figures such as Derrida, Debord, and Warburg. However, several of them it seems to me are distracting or unsatisfying or both. The scholium on Agamben's inconsistent readings of Nietzsche's eternal recurrence, while interesting, is at best tangentially related to the chapter on *Remnants of Auschwitz* with which it is associated, just as the many discussions of Adorno would be better left to a separate chapter on the relationship between Agamben and Adorno or omitted altogether. It is as though de la Durantaye wanted to include absolutely everything his obviously extensive research into Agamben's thought has brought to light, despite the disjointedness and lengthiness this imposes on the book. Not entirely unaware of this difficulty, de la Durantaye provides a justification of sorts drawn from Agamben's work itself. According to de la Durantaye, in *The Idea of Prose* Agamben abjures conventional modes of academic presentation in favour of indirect approaches to his subject-matter, pursuing a fragmentary and elliptical style of writing. This style we are told is inspired by Benjamin's attempt to write in fragments that conserve a potentiality to align with other fragments, presenting an image that "flashes up" at an appropriate moment when its capacity to be read emerges. While this is an important theoretical point for understanding what Agamben is up to, it appears that de la Durantaye has taken it over as his mode of presenting Agamben's work. It is one thing to call attention to Agamben's mode of presentation but to begin using it oneself in a work of this length surely adds to the sense of clutter and at times extraneous detail.

This is not, however, to say that de la Durantaye's treatment does not provide more reliable interpretations of several issues in Agamben's work than that of Mills. One area where de la Durantaye's deeper engagement appears is on the subject of Agamben's use of the concentration camp as "paradigm" of the present. It is fair to say that no other feature of Agamben's work has provoked his critics as much as the claim that the concentration camp provides the paradigm of modernity.

But what is meant by this? Both Mills and de la Durantaye attempt to put this claim in the context of the larger methodological issue of the connection between the paradigm as a method and the position of the specific example within it.

For her part, Mills draws attention to the topological as distinct from topographical figure that for Agamben characterises the camp. As she articulates the distinction, “the camp reveals an abstract logic that is by no means limited to the geographical space of internment.” (85) That the camp embodies an abstract logic entails that any space of internment (topographical figure) can become part of the topological logic of the camp, thus including airports, stadiums, or perhaps even entire cities hosting international gatherings such as the G20. In these cases, all such places exemplify the political logic of internment in which whatever happens takes place beyond the purview of ordinary law, a veritable space of exception, which has become the rule and where the law legally places what occurs outside itself. This is the point at which Agamben appears to be painting too many discreet phenomena with the broad brush of the logic of the exception. Mills suggests that it is important to appreciate the deeper methodological significance of Agamben’s claims about the camp as topology, and these in turn necessitate an examination of Agamben’s discussion of the paradigm. As Mills claims, the “paradigm allows for the intelligibility of a generality by virtue of the knowability of a singularity.” (86) Pointing out that Agamben “likens” his use of paradigms to “the approach taken by Foucault,” Mills shows that for Foucault in *Discipline and Punish* Bentham’s Panopticon was used in precisely this paradigmatic way, although Foucault refers to it as a diagram. The blueprint of this architecture was a specific instance that made intelligible an entire logic of confinement and a new form or diagram of power. As an instance that constitutes or makes intelligible the class to which it also belongs, paradigms (or diagrams) are recursive or self-referential structures, and thus depart from standard conceptions of historiography, in which events follow one another in a causal chain. But at this point, while acknowledging the similarity between Foucault’s notion of a diagram and Agamben’s notion of the paradigm, Mills describes the latter’s comparison with Foucault as a “usurpation of Foucault.” (86) What she seems to mean by this is that while Foucault “steered away from the search for ‘originary’ relations,” Agamben on her view does precisely the opposite. As she goes on to claim, Agamben

“presupposes a temporal continuity on the basis of a ‘conceptual fundamentalism’ in which the origin of a concept determines its subsequent meaning, purpose, and valency.” (87) As Mills concludes, whatever the merits of Agamben’s paradigmatic approach, in extending it backward into the distant past where the *homo sacer* of ancient Rome becomes the paradigm case of all life exposed to sovereign violence, Agamben “overstretches the notion of a paradigm along with historical credibility.” (87) To this criticism she adds, consistent with the idea of “overstretching,” that even if we accept the methodological claim that the camp is the paradigm of modernity, this does not justify the claim that its violence is an unavoidable consequent of the unfolding of an underlying logic of Western politics.

There seem to be two points of dispute here, each generated by Mills’ assumption that Agamben is moving from the specific to the general. The first is that Agamben’s borrowing from Foucault is flawed because it imposes a logic of similarity from part to whole that is absurd. The specificity of the camp cannot be generalised to somehow characterise all of society or even those aspects of it where sovereign power is in play. The second point is aimed at Agamben’s political ontology. The method of paradigms cannot be employed to construct a sense of historical inevitability by showing the present to be the unfolding of an ancient original instance; the latter move generates the charge of an analysis that is unhistorical.

In his account of Agamben’s use of paradigms in his chapter on *Homo Sacer*, de la Durantaye challenges both these points. Against the first he argues, drawing on several interviews and Agamben’s recent text *Signatura rerum* (recently translated into English as *Signature of all Things*), that the paradigm as used by Agamben does not display a logic of part to whole but rather, following Aristotle’s understanding of analogy, moves from part to part. Agamben is thus engaged in an active transposition of what defines one historical singularity to what plays the same role in another, a transposition that also establishes the relation of commonality between singularities. Thus, as de la Durantaye claims, “the paradigm resembles more closely the ‘semantic structure’ of allegory than that of metaphor.” (224) Far from imposing on the whole an element derived from a subsumed part, Agamben is composing a series on the basis of an analogous element found in each item of that series.

Regarding the second point, de la Durantaye shows, convincingly, I believe, that far from simply overstressing the paradigmatic method, Agamben (on his own admission) is utilising Benjamin's technique of constructing a dialectical image. De la Durantaye aptly summarises Agamben's use of Benjamin: "dialectical images represent a dynamic constellation of past and present where a moment of the past is not a simple element in a historical archive but a potentially dynamic means of understanding...the present situation." (245) In this sense Agamben's idea of origin is not causal in any conventional historical sense—there is no inevitability being posited between the *homo sacer* of ancient Rome and the inhabitants of the modern state. Instead, Agamben is linking an historical element in the distant past with a similar element in our present, where, guided by an experience in that present, he seeks to put the historical archive to a new use. It should be noted that, contra Mills, because there is no linear causality suggested here between past and present, she is incorrect to claim that there is something "unavoidable" being entailed.

Even though the plausibility of Agamben's methods is not automatically resolved by understanding them, both authors are right to suggest we must understand before we can judge the issue.

**Dominic Desroches, *Expressions éthiques de l'intériorité. Éthique et distance dans la pensée de Kierkegaard. Avec une préface d'André Clair. Québec, Presses de l'Université Laval, 2008; 384 pages. ISBN : 978-2763786254.***

*Compte rendu de Martin Provencher, Collège de Rosemont, Montréal.*

Si nous voulions comprendre pourquoi le thème de la réception a fini par s'imposer dans la philosophie continentale contemporaine, nous pourrions prendre comme point de départ les grandes catastrophes politiques du 20<sup>e</sup> siècle et montrer ensuite comment la méditation sur les nouveaux pouvoirs que la technologie procure à l'être humain a conduit des philosophes aussi différents que Heidegger, Jaspers, Adorno, Levinas, Arendt et Jonas à faire le deuil de l'ambition prométhéenne de transformer le monde au profit d'une attitude de recueillement et d'ouverture à l'autre. Dans cette histoire, le nom de Søren Kierkegaard

devrait figurer en bonne place. Si on sait l'influence que le penseur danois a exercée sur les divers courants de l'existentialisme, on sait moins à quel point il est un penseur de l'éthique, du langage et de la réception de l'autre. On ignore encore trop souvent, en effet, le rôle majeur que cet auteur a joué dans le renversement de l'idéal de l'autonomie qui domine l'imposante production philosophique du 18<sup>e</sup> siècle et, en particulier, les travaux de l'idéalisme allemand, ainsi que dans l'établissement d'un nouvel idéal de réceptivité pour penser le sujet de l'éthique et la responsabilité de l'homme dans le monde. Il y a à cela de nombreuses raisons, dont la moindre n'est pas la difficulté d'accéder à l'œuvre. Le premier livre de Dominic Desroches pourrait bien avoir le mérite insigne de changer cette perception de manière définitive. Mais d'abord un mot sur l'auteur.

Dominic Desroches, qui présente ici sa thèse revue pour publication, a complété ses études doctorales à l'Université de Montréal. Cela explique sans doute en partie la maîtrise dont il fait preuve dans sa discussion des penseurs associés à l'idéalisme allemand, Kant, Fichte, Schelling et Hegel. Sensible aux langues, il avait auparavant effectué un séjour d'études en Allemagne. Après sa thèse soutenue en 2003, cet intérêt l'a conduit à Copenhague, au Danemark, où il a poursuivi des recherches sur l'éthique au Center for Etik og Ret dirigé par Peter Kemp, un interprète bien connu de Ricœur et Levinas. Dominic Desroches a publié plusieurs articles sur des auteurs associés au romantisme (Hamann et Herder), tandis qu'il paraît montrer, depuis qu'il est devenu professeur au Collège Rosemont de Montréal, un intérêt grandissant pour les travaux de Peter Sloterdijk et Daniel Innerarity.

Privilégiant le thème central de l'éthique pour interpréter l'œuvre du plus grand penseur danois, Dominic Desroches soutient dans *Expressions éthiques de l'intériorité* que le concept de distance permet de rendre compte non seulement de toute la richesse, la complexité et la subtilité des analyses morales et éthico-religieuses de Kierkegaard, mais aussi de la cohérence exemplaire de sa pensée de l'existence. La distance—il n'est pas le premier à dire qu'elle est décisive pour le solitaire de Copenhague, mais le premier à le démontrer—joue le rôle de pivot entre la « première » et la « seconde » éthique chez Kierkegaard. La démonstration, claire et rigoureuse, comporte quatre étapes qui représentent autant de sections du livre.

L'auteur commence tout d'abord par s'enquérir des conditions

ontologiques de l'éthique dans la philosophie kierkegaardienne et les trouve dans le choix de soi et la continuité dans le temps. Cela lui permet d'établir d'entrée de jeu que le registre de l'éthique est bien celui de l'existence individuelle dans la temporalité et non, comme dans l'idéalisme d'un Hegel par exemple, celui du savoir et de la logique. Kierkegaard est un penseur du singulier, du concret et non d'une prétention injustifiable à l'universel. Desroches montre que la « première éthique » de Kierkegaard ne se pense pas en dehors d'une réflexion herméneutique sur la temporalité. Voilà pourquoi il met l'accent sur l'analyse de la continuité. Le choix de soi implique une continuité, un effort éthique jamais terminé. Cette continuité éthique aura fort affaire avec la métaphysique mais aussi avec la psychologie, car le choix et la continuité demeurent des concepts que l'individu doit trouver au fond de lui-même et sans cesse réactualiser. Dans cette première partie, l'auteur s'appuie surtout sur les textes éthiques comme *Ou bien... Ou bien* et *Les stades sur le chemin de la vie*, sans renoncer, quand l'occasion se présente, à réinterpréter certains passages peu commentés des *Papirer* (journaux, notes de lecture et papiers non publiés par Kierkegaard).

Fort de ce développement sur le choix et la continuité, Desroches entreprend ensuite l'exploration des limites de cette première version de l'éthique dans la pensée de Kierkegaard à la lumière du problème inévitable que crée la distance inhérente au concept. Celle-ci menace en effet, à chaque fois, de déraciner l'exigence éthique du monde concret dont elle semble provenir en la réduisant à un idéal abstrait imposé par la raison. Comment penser l'éthique si le discours nous éloigne toujours de sa réalité ? Ici, l'auteur formule le problème à partir d'un passage du *Post-Scriptum* où Kierkegaard analyse l'autobiographie de Goethe, *Dichtung und Wahrheit*, pour y dénoncer cette mise à distance (par la poésie) de la réalité éthique. Une éthique réduite à la seule dimension de l'immanence est une éthique qui perd le sens de la distance. Elle court alors le risque de devenir « acosmique » ou de disparaître dans l'histoire mondiale, si on la projette sur un plan plus large—c'est la critique que formulera Hegel. Ce dernier, aux yeux d'un Kierkegaard allergique à l'*Aufhebung*, utilise la distance de l'histoire pour édulcorer le caractère existentiel des problèmes éthiques : rapportée à l'histoire universelle, la faute individuelle perd de sa force et devient un détail sur lequel la marche de la raison n'entend pas s'apitoyer.

Or Kierkegaard, en romantique, choisit de défendre le « je », non

sans manquer toutefois de critiquer Fichte au passage parce que celui-ci absolutise la subjectivité. Cette radicalisation de l'éthique à la subjectivité fournit à Desroches l'occasion d'examiner un ensemble de questions connexes (le subjectivisme, le rapport à la norme, le fondement de l'éthique et l'intersubjectivité) et donne lieu à quelques-unes des passes d'armes les plus mémorables de cet essai. Il ressort, de ces sections, entre autres, que les insuffisances de la première éthique seraient dues à l'usage irréfléchi ou abusif du langage : par sa prétention à l'universalité, ce dernier ne peut rejoindre l'éthique. De là la nécessité de redonner une place positive à la distance dans l'éthique et, par conséquent, d'étudier les différentes expressions de la subjectivité à l'intérieur des limites du langage ou en conjonction avec celles-ci. Le privilège chrétien (luthérien) accordé par le théologien Kierkegaard à la souffrance et au silence parmi les expressions de la vie intérieure du sujet le conduit naturellement à repenser sa démarche à l'aune de la transcendance de la Parole de Dieu. Ainsi, nous découvrons qu'il est avant tout un penseur du langage. Dans les deux séries de livres croisés (textes pseudonymes et discours édifiants) publiés par des pseudonymes entre 1843-45 et les textes de maturité, le prolifique écrivain présente et réinterprète en situation les figures exceptionnelles que sont Abraham (dans *Crainte et tremblement*) et Job (dans *Répétition*) pour réhabiliter le silence derrière tout langage. Desroches a certainement raison de souligner, dans son commentaire de *La dialectique de la communication*, que l'interprétation de la distance est essentielle, voire décisive pour comprendre l'unité de la réflexion éthique kierkegaardienne. Dans les *Œuvres de l'amour* enfin, c'est la distance entre le « prochain » et Dieu qui est l'objet de l'analyse. C'est donc bel et bien une distance, en l'occurrence celle de l'homme à Dieu, qui, en fin de compte, permettra à Kierkegaard de refonder l'éthique devenue une seconde éthique—et de lui assigner comme idéal la tâche de la réception.

Il y aurait beaucoup à dire sur cet essai admirable dont la préface, signée par André Clair, situe clairement les enjeux. Nous nous contenterons de rappeler pour conclure que le passage de la première à la seconde éthique est moins un renversement que l'approfondissement d'un même mouvement dialectique, celui précisément du double sens de la distance. La distance est un concept qui, d'un côté, fragilise l'éthique mais qui, de l'autre, peut l'alimenter et lui permettre de se ressourcer dans un horizon éthico-religieux. Nous pouvons remercier l'auteur de

l'avoir si bien démontré. En dépit de son programme, il est peut-être regrettable que Desroches n'ait pas jugé bon de poursuivre ce travail de reconstruction remarquable en interrogeant la place (ou l'absence de place) de la politique dans l'œuvre du penseur danois et qu'il n'ait pu en tirer les conclusions qui s'imposent pour la pertinence de cette conception de l'éthique dans la société pluraliste qui est la nôtre aujourd'hui. C'est peut-être ce que nous sommes en droit d'attendre de son nouvel intérêt pour les auteurs contemporains.

**Angela Ales Bello, *The Divine in Husserl and Other Explorations*. Dordrecht: Springer, 2009; 170 + xiv pages. ISBN: 978-1402089107.**

*Review by Jeff Mitscherling, University of Guelph.*

Interest in religious and theological themes in continental philosophy has grown so rapidly over the last few decades that we now speak of its “theological turn,” most often with particular regard to developments in French philosophy. While it has been argued by some that religion and theology are presupposed in phenomenological research, and by others that religion and theology have perverted its method and misdirected its research, these themes remain prominent. Angela Ales Bello has no need even to mention this debate in her excellent study of *The Divine in Husserl and Other Explorations*, but she does recall to our attention that religious and theological concerns were fundamental to the thinking of Husserl himself. She also outlines a manner in which Husserl’s phenomenological method, when supplemented by Edith Stein’s contributions to a phenomenologically grounded philosophical anthropology, might be applied in the further examination of religion and religious experience, both in western and non-western cultures. Translated by Antonio Calcagno, this ninety-eighth volume of Tymieniecka’s *Analecta Husserliana* series comprises three Parts, respectively entitled “Thinking God,” “Believing in God,” and “Some Explorations in the Phenomenology of Religion.” In the first two parts Ales Bello offers a series of probing critical examinations of not only such well-known major works as *Ideas* but also numerous less familiar essays that compel us to reassess the extent to which religious concepts and beliefs motivated and sometimes even guided Husserl’s research.

She opens the third part with anthropological observations and what she refers to as “archeological excavations” before proceeding to offer a preliminary phenomenological exploration of religious experience, focusing on its hyletic and noetic elements.

Part I contains two chapters, and the first chapter, “Phenomenology as Philosophy *sui generis*,” contains in turn four sections, the first three of which present helpful introductory discussions of central features of Husserlian phenomenology—namely, “The Phenomenological Method,” “The Analysis of Lived Experience: Immanence and Transcendence,” and “Phenomenological Reductions: The Cartesian Way and the Way of Psychology.” The fourth section of this chapter, “The Phenomenological Approach to Anthropology,” deals with an intriguing yet not so well-known portion of Husserl’s work, and it is here that Ales Bello locates the starting point for both her further investigation of Husserl’s texts and her subsequent development of an outline for further research in the phenomenology of religion. After noting the confusion that has surrounded the use of the term “anthropology” in the human sciences and philosophy—a confusion already underlined by the observation “that Husserl and Heidegger exchange charges of ‘anthropologism,’ that is, an absolutization of the theme of the human understood within a naturalistic or scientific vision” (15)—Ales Bello writes that she has found it helpful in this regard to recall Edith Stein’s lectures on the philosophy of pedagogy in *The Structure of the Human Person*. The author’s work on the thought of Edith Stein has long been recognised as definitive, and given her expertise and erudition in the field we could ask for no better guide not only to the thought of Edith Stein, but also to the employment of Stein’s writings in the interpretation of her master’s view of the relation between phenomenology and philosophical anthropology. In the present study of Husserl on the divine, Ales Bello notes how Stein clearly distinguished between cultural anthropology, or anthropology understood as a natural science, and philosophical anthropology, and how Stein further distinguished between two separate tasks of philosophical anthropology:

The first makes use of the essential analyses carried out from a phenomenological point of view. The second is an integration operated on by the substantialization of the concept of soul in the Thomistic vein. She sees the possibility of agreement between

and even integration of the two positions, and she thinks that by using these two streams she can delineate the fundamentals of a philosophical anthropology. (15)

Ales Bello maintains that Stein's approach to philosophical anthropology, combining as it does the strictly phenomenological task of essential analysis with attention to the religious dimension of human experience, not only sheds considerable light on Husserl's own approach to philosophical anthropology but also provides us with what she calls a "theoretical conduit" for the further development of a phenomenological approach to the study of religious experience.

Ales Bello devotes the five short sections of the second chapter of Part I, "Husserl's Question of God as a Philosophical Question," to the description of five different "ways" in which Husserl's thought leads to the consideration of the nature of God, and she identifies features of each of these "ways" that she will be recalling in her subsequent construction of a phenomenological approach to religious experience. Central to this chapter are her analyses of less well-known Husserlian texts that are especially provocative regarding the phenomenological approach to religion, particularly the 1908 texts "Empathy of the Foreign Consciousness and Divine All-Knowing Consciousness," in which Husserl "proceeds to establish the relation between consciousness that is found in humans and the divine" (37), and *Monadology*, both of which make apparent the great extent to which Husserl's thought is indebted to Leibniz, "the thinker that most inspired Husserl's research on divinity." (46) Ales Bello further examines the Leibnizian elements in Husserl's thought, and with regard specifically to the divine, by reference to later texts found *Husserliana* XIV and XV. Quoting a passage from the latter (Appendix XLVI), she observes:

Behind all this there is also a great ethico-religious effort...but already in this text the ultimate justification remains in the fact that the originary force of monads finds its basis in God: "God is not simply the totality of monads but also the entelechy that finds itself in the totum as the idea of the telos of infinite development, that is, the idea of humanity as absolute reason, understood as that which necessarily regulates monadic being and does so according to a free decision. Insofar as this is

intersubjective, this process is necessarily expansive; without it, notwithstanding episodes of decadence, universal being could not exist, etc.” (45)

Part II, “Believing in God,” contains only two short chapters. In each of them, Ales Bello introduces a set of themes that she will subsequently develop, in Part III, in her “explorations” in phenomenology of religion. Perhaps the most significant theme advanced in “The Husserlian Approach to Religion” is that of mysticism and the mystical experience. Noting Gerda Walther’s recollections of Husserl’s response to her work recorded in the introduction to her *Phänomenologie der Mystik*, Ales Bello affirms that only the mystical experience itself could be established, according to Husserl, not the object of this experience. She is perhaps somewhat hasty in concluding from this remark that Husserl himself “doubts that one really places oneself in relation with a divinity” (68), but what is of chief importance here is her statement of the contrary claim voiced by both Walther and Stein, who, as the author observes, “are convinced of the objective validity of this type of experience and its specificity in relation to other experiences and knowledge.” A good part of her discussion of religious experience in Part III will revolve around precisely this claim. Most of the second chapter, “Religion as the Object of Phenomenological Analysis,” is directed toward what Ales Bello calls “phenomenological archeology,” and she here acknowledges the achievement of Gerardus van der Leeuw, who explicitly purported to be following the method of Husserlian phenomenology. This leads the author into interesting discussions of the “new disciplines” of phenomenology of religion and “‘the archeological phenomenology’ of religious experience” (83), in the course of which she announces that “both phenomenology of religions and cultural anthropology do not succeed in entering into the intimate structure of the phenomenon of the sacred, which remains uninvestigated.” She continues: “On the part of the phenomenology, there directly arises a not unimportant suggestion to deal with the question of method again, going beyond all the research that till now configures itself as ‘phenomenology of religions’ or ‘phenomenology of religion,’ even that one performed by van der Leeuw.” (88–89) She follows this bold suggestion in the next part of her book, in which she leads the reader to exciting conclusions that are themselves suggestive and provocative in radically new ways.

In Part III, Ales Bello draws from all of the preceding analyses in her own phenomenologically grounded investigation of particular and distinctive features of religion and religious experience. The first chapter in this part has more to do with cultural anthropology than with philosophy, as its title (“Examples of Archeological Excavation”) might already suggest, and in fact Ales Bello occasionally speaks in a way that could easily be misunderstood. In the first section of this chapter, for example, she writes, “Even temporality assumes a particular configuration. The past and the present do not represent two distinct moments of linear process. The past is a sedimentation that can be “reactivated” and lived through in its actual presence.” (104) She could here be interpreted as suggesting that the goal of the anthropologist (be she cultural or philosophical) is to somehow reconstruct a historically distant world in order that it may be “lived through” just as it was in the past. Indeed, many anthropologists continue to regard this task as essential to their research. But this is not what Ales Bello is actually claiming. Her position remains rigorously phenomenological, as becomes clear when she adds a couple of paragraphs after the passage just quoted: “Hyletics, noetics and the sacred, which I have distinguished in the foregoing analysis, configure themselves in a particular way in the archaic mentality. They are understandable in their reference to lived experiences that are at the base of those cultural expressions.”

The need for a preliminary reconstruction of the world of the religious believer has been maintained almost universally in the literature on phenomenology of religion, in the recent neo-phenomenology of Jacques Waardenburg no less than in the much earlier, groundbreaking work of van der Leeuw. In order to pursue the sort of phenomenological analysis of religious experience that Ales Bello is suggesting, however, there is no need first to reconstruct the world of the believer. This marks the central and distinguishing feature of the sort of phenomenology of religion that she is here advancing. The long-familiar criticism that it is impossible to reconstruct a historically or culturally distanced world simply does not apply. Her analyses of the hyletic and noetic moments of Christian mysticism, Sufism, Shamanism, and Hinduism—which she offers in the second chapter of Part III—make this abundantly clear. This point should be stressed: It is not the case that phenomenological analysis relies on any prior reconstruction of the lived world of existentially situated subjects. Rather, just the opposite is the case: It is

the phenomenological identification and analysis of the individually constitutive moments of the life-world of the existentially situated subject that will first render possible any reconstruction of that world by anthropologists, historians and other researchers. The importance that Ales Bello finds in Stein's conception of properly philosophical—that is, phenomenologically grounded—anthropology again becomes apparent here, as does the relevance of Stein's (and Husserl's) critique of Heidegger's conception of *menschliches Dasein*, whose existentially and historically situated character Heidegger saw as the starting point for any phenomenological analysis. The most remarkable and valuable contribution of this book is located precisely here, in Ales Bello's development of an approach to phenomenology of religion that remains in strict adherence to the most basic tenets of Husserlian phenomenology while at the same time following the inspiration of Stein. It is perhaps ironic that this radically new way of pursuing phenomenology of religion should find its foundation in the works of the father of phenomenology and one of his earliest disciples, and that this foundation should only now, after a century of research, be clearly indicated. Indeed, it is certainly unfortunate that this “way” should be radically new at all. As Ales Bello's research makes clear, the foundation has been there all along, and what we really ought to be asking ourselves is, How did we ever miss all of this? In the future, historians of the phenomenological movement will recognise Angela Ales Bello as having helped put phenomenology back on track after more than a half century of confusion. For the moment, all we can do is thank her for this magnificent effort.

**Philippe Grosos, *L'ironie du réel à la lumière du romantisme allemand*. Lausanne : Éditions L'Âge d'Homme, 2009; 164 pages. ISBN : 978-2825139608.**

*Compte rendu de Dominic Desroches, Collège Ahuntsic, Montréal.*

L'ironie est souvent comprise comme une critique négative. Apparaît ironique en effet l'insatisfait qui ne trouve plus son bonheur dans la réalité et qui le dit indirectement. Sont ironiques par extension ses propos, car celui-ci n'hésite pas à jouer avec les mots pour révéler

l'absurdité d'une situation. On pourra renforcer cette perception habituelle en se rappelant le premier sens de la figure de style : l'ironie est l'art de dire le contraire de ce que l'on pense afin de faire entendre un message, souvent négatif, une sorte de désapprobation. Ainsi l'ironie apparaît à première vue négative et ne paraît pas prometteuse sur le plan philosophique. Or, dans ce constat, Philippe Grosos voit un défi, à savoir montrer que de l'ironie émerge toujours une réalité qui ne se laisse récupérer dans aucune entreprise de totalisation du sens. La lecture des auteurs romantiques permettra au professeur en philosophie continentale de l'Université de Lausanne de rendre concrète l'intuition voulant que le réel conserve en lui sa part d'ironie et que la fameuse « ironie du sort », souvent, soit plus ironique que l'image que nous renvoie la figure de l'antiphrase. Mais avant d'entrer en matière et de montrer en quoi consiste l'ironie du réel, peut-être est-il utile de dire un mot sur un auteur encore trop peu connu du public littéraire et philosophique.

Tout d'abord, Philippe Grosos n'en est plus à ses premiers ouvrages et élabore désormais une pensée originale. L'ancien étudiant de J.-F. Courtine, spécialiste des systèmes de l'idéalisme allemand, a en effet cheminé depuis la publication de *Système et subjectivité*, chez Vrin, en 1996. Il se penche à présent sur les limites des systèmes fermés à rencontrer la totalité du sens. On osera dire—c'est bien sûr une image—que sa recherche consiste à repérer des courants d'air dans les systèmes fermés, c'est-à-dire à travailler des thèmes qui ne s'associent pas commodément et qui interrogent la réalité en fuite. La principale faiblesse du système, on le sait entre autres depuis les écrits de Kierkegaard, se trouve dans son intolérance envers la différence, dans son manque d'hospitalité à l'égard de ce qui résiste, plus précisément dans son incapacité à reconnaître les possibilités ouvertes par des concepts dont le sens n'est pas fixé ultimement. Cette vérité, Grosos l'a bien sentie et veut en montrer la fécondité. On en trouvera une preuve dans la manière avec laquelle, dans son *Inquiète patience*, un essai paru en 2004, il pensait déjà le temps au moyen de concepts peu apparentés, mais pourtant coexistants: la patience et l'inquiétude. La publication d'un *Péguy philosophe* l'année suivante confirmait sa volonté de penser avec la littérature, alors que la publication, en 2008, de son essai sur la phénoménologie de la musique traduisait sa capacité d'ouverture aux arts. Pensant aux limites des concepts, plus sensible à la réception du sens qu'à sa construction en système, Philippe Grosos s'impose depuis

comme un rénovateur du concept d'ironie, ce concept exigeant appartenant à la riche tradition de la rhétorique classique, réactualisé au XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle chez les Romantiques, dont la pluralité de sens est presque tombée dans l'oubli aujourd'hui.

### **Une ironie en dehors du langage ?**

L'ouvrage démontre, en trois chapitres assez égaux, la thèse voulant que l'ironie soit beaucoup plus qu'une figure de style. En effet, il défend l'idée que la lecture des auteurs romantiques permet de dégager chez eux une attention soutenue à l'ironie du sort, au renversement de situation, à l'ironie du réel. Pour développer cette thèse voulant que l'ironie prenne pied dans la réalité, l'auteur étudie l'ironie sous l'angle du sérieux, du paradoxe et de la tragédie. L'objectif est d'entrée de jeu très clair : montrer en trois chapitres ce que peut être une philosophie de l'ironie attentive aux renversements existentiels. Dit autrement, la lecture des Romantiques, avec Shakespeare en fin de compte, peut nous guider dans la découverte d'une véritable « ironie du réel » (22).

### **L'ironie romantique chez les Schlegel et Jean Paul**

L'ironie est d'abord sérieuse. Elle est sérieuse en ce que son étude exige plus que l'attention aux concepts. Si Hegel s'intéresse peu à l'ironie, c'est parce que sa puissance conceptuelle lui apparaît limitée. Grosos ne nous cachera pas longtemps que la première philosophie de l'ironie, en réponse à Hegel, est à trouver dans le premier cercle dirigé par l'influent Friedrich Schlegel autour de la revue *Athenäum*. Mais pour bien faire comprendre son développement dans ce cercle « romantique d'Iéna », l'auteur retrace chez Kant et Fichte la construction du concept. Ici, le spécialiste des systèmes veut montrer que le sérieux de l'ironie a partie liée avec le *Witz* et la mauvaise plaisanterie, non sans se référer à l'existence d'une ironie du sort. S'il est vrai que le *Witz* reste un jeu d'esprit, Schlegel n'ignorait pas pour autant l'existence de la réalité, Kierkegaard l'avait bien relevé, bien qu'il se montre incapable d'y retrouver positivement la trace de l'ironie.

La lecture de Jean Paul (Johann Paul Richter) permet de franchir un pas de plus car sa *Vorschule der Aesthetik* (1804), marquée par les catégories de Baumgarten et inspirée par le style de Swift et Sterne,

revient sur le sérieux ironique pour dévoiler une ironie sans amertume. Dans son rapport à l'humour, l'ironie—qui est à entendre comme une critique sociale—s'érige en modalité d'existence, contre la totalisation : « Humour et ironie renversent ici la totalisation devenue inachevable, précise Grosos, ils l'annihilent » (49). Il y a donc bien chez Jean Paul un début de philosophie de l'ironie, notamment dans les §§ 37–38 de la *Vorschule*, ce que refusait Kierkegaard dans sa thèse, et qu'il convient de mettre à jour dans le but d'explicitier une ironie du réel. Après s'être rendue infinie, l'ironie côtoiera le rêve et la révélation, et deviendra « monde ». L'auteur aura donc montré comment l'ironie est devenue, chez Jean Paul, une préfiguration de l'ironie du réel (61).

### Ses reprises critiques chez Tieck, Kierkegaard et Solger

Le chapitre II est consacré à Tieck et à l'ironie paradoxale. Or, associer ironie et paradoxe, n'est-ce pas déjà penser en termes kierkegaardiens ? Certes, la lecture de Tieck, critiqué par Kierkegaard dans sa thèse, culminera dans la conception kierkegaardienne de l'ironie. Ce que Tieck apporte au dossier, c'est d'abord un intérêt renouvelé pour l'idée d'ironie elle-même. En effet, l'analyse des trois périodes de son œuvre illustre que Jean Paul et lui partagent l'idée que l'ironie peut avoir deux sens ; elle peut être superficielle ou authentique. Mais Tieck n'est pas Jean Paul : s'il propose une critique sociale, il s'approche du terrain existentiel à travers le thème de l'amour. Tieck impose au concept d'ironie une radicalisation, une descente vers la réalité. Car distinguer l'illusion du réel, c'est accomplir un pas de plus—et Kierkegaard ne le reniera pas—en faisant du moment ironique un *discriminen* existentiel. La lecture des *Amours de la belle Maguelonne et de Pierre de Provence* illustre les liens entre l'ironie et les renversements potentiels de l'amour puisque les épreuves qui lui sont imposées traduisent un rapport à la réalité, c'est-à-dire la possibilité d'un destin imprévu, donnant sur un malheur ou un bonheur. Le réel, et la preuve est facile à faire, est ironique en ce qu'il comporte toujours une part paradoxale, la possibilité d'un retournement.

La thèse centrale se dit alors ainsi : « *Ressaisi hors système*, écrit l'auteur en italique, *le réel n'est pas possible avant que d'être*, et c'est pourquoi, ne relevant d'aucune maîtrise, il n'est anticipable (sic) que pour existence s'étant déjà soustraite à toute temporalisation et ouverture, au risque de son propre effondrement. *Mais énoncé en sa vérité, c'est-à-*

*dire ironiquement, le réel est alors incroyable [...]» (76). Dans ce contexte, l'intérêt pour Tieck réside dans l'ivresse de l'amour traduisant l'ironie du réel car l'amour ne se contrôle pas, il apparaît réellement sous forme d'épreuve : « La troisième épreuve que fait encourir l'ivresse amoureuse, c'est enfin et fondamentalement celle de l'ironie, non bien sûr au sens de l'ironie langagière qui fait habituellement l'orgueil de son locuteur [...], mais à l'inverse au sens d'une *ironie du réel*. La rencontre amoureuse et passionnelle tient en effet sa réalité d'être, note Grosos, comme tout ce qui est effectif, aussi injustifiable qu'imprévisible. [...] Une chose arrive, puis son contraire : on croit une situation stable, elle se renverse » (88). L'ironie n'est donc pas seulement une figure, un point de passage, c'est la manifestation paradoxale de la réalité.*

Ce paradoxe, on l'a dit, est l'affaire du solitaire de Copenhague. Dans sa thèse de 1841 intitulée *Le concept d'ironie constamment rapporté à Socrate*, Kierkegaard fait de l'ironie l'objet d'un débat décisif entre les Anciens et les Modernes, précisément chez les Romantiques allemands. Appliquant lui-même l'ironie au concept d'ironie qu'il veut étudier, il critique l'oubli « *de la vérité de l'ironie* » chez Hegel (*Le concept d'ironie*, p. 240), afin de proposer une perspective existentielle capable de corriger les excès d'enthousiasme des Romantiques de la nature. Dans la thèse, l'ironie est paradoxe. Elle est paradoxe car son essence ne correspond pas à sa manifestation. L'originalité de la relecture de Grosos consiste entre autres à montrer que Kierkegaard, poursuivant son travail à partir du commentaire de la *Symbolik des Träumes* de G. H. Schubert, met l'accent sur la critique des Romantiques, tout en distinguant aussi les ironies exécutive et contemplative de l'ironie de la nature à laquelle elles font écho. Si l'auteur ne retrace qu'un seul passage de l'ironie du réel chez Kierkegaard, bien que celui-ci écrive par exemple que l'ironie « peut se retourner contre la vie entière » (*Le concept d'ironie*, p. 232), c'est sans doute parce que Kierkegaard la situe dans la subjectivité. Elle a d'ailleurs pour lui un sens négatif en ce qu'elle relève du romantisme—une tendance moderne qui manque résolument du sérieux socratique—associée au moi et à l'élévation abstraite de la subjectivité. Si l'ironie fait l'objet de distinctions théoriques, elle demeurera toujours l'affaire de la subjectivité aux prises avec la réalité, ce qui nous amène à la comprendre à l'intérieur de la topologie existentielle.

Point de départ de la pensée de Kierkegaard, l'ironie devient un concept structurel. Si l'ironie existentielle répond à la pensée socratique, au système idéaliste de Hegel, au romantisme des Schlegel, Tieck et Solger, elle vient aussi servir de pont vers l'éthique dans la topologie. C'est par l'ironie en effet que le sujet réalise les limites de sa conception de vie, les failles de sa personnalité, et se voit obligé d'accomplir le saut dans l'éthique, c'est-à-dire dans la réalité, face aux contradictions de l'esthétique. Si Kierkegaard s'est intéressé à l'ironie en la situant dans une perspective existentielle, en l'opposant à l'humour, il l'a mobilisée aussi et surtout—l'auteur aurait pu en parler davantage—dans le but de construire une pseudonymie pouvant communiquer un message indirect, non sans ironie avec la vie elle-même. L'ironie travaille donc à plusieurs niveaux et sert plusieurs causes à la fois. L'auteur aura eu la présence d'esprit de noter à la fin de son chapitre que l'ironie kierkegaardienne n'est pas réconciliatrice. Si Kierkegaard cherchait à retrouver la conversion au cœur du christianisme, une théologie de la réconciliation n'aurait pu cohabiter avec le projet philosophico-littéraire, baigné de *Naturphilosophie*, des Romantiques (114). La relecture attentive de la thèse de Kierkegaard aura permis à l'auteur de mettre en lumière des points qui échappent aux spécialistes de Kierkegaard, tout en lui faisant franchir une étape décisive dans la démonstration de sa thèse.

Le dernier chapitre se penche sur la tragédie propre à toute réalité. La lecture de Solger implique une analyse esthétique et philosophique. Car non seulement chez lui la beauté est attirante, mais elle anéantit aussi ce qu'elle éclaire. Produite par l'esprit de l'artiste, l'ironie embrasse tout le réel au point d'anéantir la chose belle. Le penseur de l'Idée ne peut pas ne pas voir dans la beauté la présence de l'ironie; pour lui, le plaisir et le malheur sont à trouver dans l'expérience du beau. Il a vu que la synthèse recherchée par les idéalistes est impossible et que l'ironie appelle toujours déjà une conscience tragique. Grosos profite de cette œuvre peu connue pour lier enthousiasme et ironie, comme Kierkegaard dans sa thèse, afin de montrer que chez Solger, l'existence même s'érige en art et que l'ironie, aux confins de l'essence et de la réalité, est le fruit le plus parfait de l'entendement artistique. Aux yeux de Solger, il y a plus encore : le poète doit non seulement concevoir son œuvre ironiquement, mais il doit aussi transformer l'existence de Dieu en ironie.

À la fin de ce chapitre, l'auteur nous réserve une belle surprise puisqu'il nous propose un développement sur l'ironie tragique chez Shakespeare. Les passages retenus de la vie d'Henry V montrent que la distance critique chez Shakespeare appartient à la théâtralité et que, bien avant les Romantiques, l'auteur de *Hamlet* avait saisi le rôle décisif de l'ironie propre à la réalité dans la représentation de ses intrigues. La belle étude du grand dramaturge anglais se résumera ainsi : « Le théâtre shakespearien est donc trop conscient de l'ironie du monde pour croire naïvement à l'héroïsme des héros, et c'est pourquoi, avant même de les faire parler ou d'exposer leurs faits d'arme, il les met ironiquement à distance » (152).

En retournant la quatrième de couverture, on réalise que ce petit livre de Philippe Grosos n'est pas une exégèse de plus des écrits romantiques, ni un règlement de compte avec les penseurs systématiques, mais s'inscrit plutôt dans une démarche originale visant à ressaisir les rapports complexes entre l'individu et les retournements existentiels auxquels il est forcé de participer. Rompu à la phénoménologie de l'art, précis dans son argumentation, Grosos nous livre ici un essai stimulant et réflexif dans la lignée des meilleurs textes de Henry Maldiney. S'il est synthétique et bien écrit, il mérite de tomber dans les bonnes mains, à savoir celles de lectrices et de lecteurs sensibles à la vie, passionnés par une existence qui peut blesser et guérir aussi. Car l'ironie du réel qu'explicite l'auteur—redisons-le autrement—ne peut apparaître qu'à des herméneutes ouverts à la nouveauté et capables d'hospitalité, des individus disposés à recueillir les enseignements d'un réel qui peut certes décevoir, tout en rendant aussi et en même temps terriblement heureux.

**Tanja Staehler, *Plato and Levinas: The Ambiguous Out-Side of Ethics*. London & New York: Routledge, 2010; xii + 284 pages. ISBN: 978-0415991803.**

*Review by Sarah Allen, Concordia University.*

Levinas' thought is known as one of extremes, radically separating self from other, singularity from universality, and ethics from overarching political structures and philosophical concepts. A critical question that often arises is how one can move from one extreme to the other if they

are indeed so radically separate. There is no doubt that for Levinas these extremes are intimately related, co-conditioning each other through an odd combination of potential exclusion and interruption. However, one often gets the sense that intermediary phenomena—which could help us to understand the relation between extremes and the relation of these extremes to our everyday lives—are either lacking or do not receive enough attention in Levinas’ writings. It is into this ambiguous in-between space of Levinas’ thought that Tanja Staehler takes us in her original and thought-provoking book, *Plato and Levinas. The Ambiguous Out-Side of Ethics*. Focussing on erotic love, art, and politics, Staehler brings to the fore both the explicit and latent possibilities for thinking ambiguity in Levinas through a creative confrontation of his thought with Plato and the 20<sup>th</sup>-century phenomenological tradition. In the process, a less radical, but perhaps more believable Levinas unfolds before the reader’s eyes.

The book is divided into four parts, developing Levinas’ conception of the self or interiority in Part I, his approach to the other and ethics in Part II, the movement from ethics to a universal “politics” in Part III, and the place of art, history, and culture in Part IV. A word of advice to the reader: Though the first two parts of the book might, at first glance, appear to reiterate material that has already been extensively covered in Levinas scholarship, Staehler’s insightful reading of interiority against the backdrop of Plato’s Myth of Gyges, the prominent place she gives to the body, and her interesting interpretation of apology in Levinas along the lines of Socratic apology are all well worth one’s time. The true heart of her book and its most important contributions, however, lie in her reflections on politics, history, and culture in the second half of the book, and in her concluding—highly creative—“genealogy of ambiguity.”

In broaching the topic of politics, Staehler argues that “Levinas does not examine communities that are larger than two people yet smaller than all of humanity.” (149) In other words, Levinas has a tendency to jump in his thought from the ethical relationship between two singular beings to universal laws, concepts, and institutions relating all human beings. These latter are what are associated with politics and social justice in his thought. Yet, as Staehler rightly points out, most (if not all) political communities are not universal in tenor; Levinas thus seems to conflate universality and politics. (112) To develop a richer

sense of political community and to make room for the smaller familial, artistic, and cultural groupings that mediate between singularity and universality in actual human communities, Staehler suggests that we dwell on the sites of erotic, artistic, and political ambiguity in Levinas, and that we supplement his thought with a deeper reflection into his philosophical influences.

Of particular note is the influence of Plato. In a novel reading of the meaning of Levinas' "return" to Platonism in his essay "Meaning and Sense," Staehler presents us with a convincing picture of a Levinas both concerned with an ethics that calls for universality (following in the line of Plato's "Good beyond being") and aware of the unavoidability of some level of cultural and historical relativism. While this second direction is associated more readily with the existential and phenomenological tradition than Plato (even Levinas himself associates it to the "anti-Platonism" of his contemporaries), Staehler gives a reading of the relationship between philosophy, ethics, and politics in Plato that could provide an explanatory bridge from universality to relativism and particularity without necessarily overstepping the bounds of Levinas' Platonism. Among others, she draws in her interpretation on: (i) the ambiguous relation between politics and philosophy across Plato's various dialogues, comparing for instance Socrates' claim to be a stranger to politics, and his call for a critical standpoint outside of politics in order to ensure justice in the *Apology*, to his vision of philosophers as the best suited to political rule in the *Gorgias* and *Republic*; (ii) Plato's ambiguous position with respect to the writing of laws in the *Statesman* and to writing in general in the *Phaedrus*; and (iii) Plato's separation in the *Laws* between what Staehler interprets as universally applicable, "quasi-ethical" laws and more particular and limited "political" laws.

Through this reading, it becomes apparent that Staehler interprets Plato as a quintessential philosopher of ambiguity, and she thinks some of the lacunae regarding ambiguity in Levinas' thought can be resolved by deepening his Platonism. At the same time, she borrows from the phenomenological tradition in order to go further with ambiguity both within and beyond Levinas. Her analyses of history and culture in Chapter 11 offer some interesting food for thought. She argues for a more positive sense of history in Levinas, beyond his criticism of what he interprets as totalizing approaches to history in the

phenomenological tradition, by drawing parallels between Heideggerian historicity and intersubjective time in Levinas and by suggesting that we look for Levinas' conception of history in his approach to fecundity. (This last point is in fact addressed in some depth in the literature on erotic love and Judaism in Levinas, for example, in the works of Claire Elise Katz and Stéphane Mosès). Basing herself on Husserl's distinction between homeworlds and alienworlds, Staehler also draws the outline of a horizontal asymmetry and irreversibility between various historical-cultural communities that could come to complement the vertical asymmetry of Levinasian ethics.

In her final chapter, "Concluding Remarks on Ethics and Ambiguity," Staehler brings together the many threads of her reflections in a diagnosis of the problem with ambiguity according to Levinas—ambiguous phenomena have a "tendency towards self-enclosure" (210)—and a genealogy of the ambiguity of erotic love, politics, and art as arising out of corporeality. Our corporeal nature is in fact both a source of power and independence for us, and a source of exposure, passivity, and vulnerability. Because we are vulnerable, we have a tendency to try to protect ourselves, to close ourselves off from what threatens us, or—what amounts to the same thing—to try to encompass unpredictable others into our projects and interests. One can observe this tendency, Staehler argues, directly in the erotic desire to possess the loved one, but also in political concerns to ensure a minimal level of material comfort and security for the members of a community, and (in a somewhat less direct way) in the material nature of artworks. Yet, the fragility of being embodied means that these ambiguous phenomena are never fully self-enclosed and protected, but always potentially open to exposure. This exposure is a danger—a potential exposure to harm, misinterpretation, and destruction. But it is also an openness to ethical criticism and interruption, to goodness in a Levinasian sense. For these reasons, Staehler thinks we should not overlook the importance of ambiguity in Levinas' thought: even though he himself sometimes seems to be seeking an ultimate escape hatch from ambiguous phenomena, what he really wants, Staehler writes, is "to make us aware of the consequences that arise when these areas of life are cut off from ethics and left to themselves." (208)

In sum, one might say of Staehler's book that it remains constantly oriented by the spirit of Levinas' thinking, while sometimes

diverging somewhat from the precise letter—which is to be expected in any original piece of work. The issue of ambiguity is indeed central in Levinas, and becomes more and more prominent as one moves from his earlier to his later works. At the same time, the treatment in his thought of ambiguous phenomena such as love, art, and politics is often summary or seemingly contradictory (e.g. his various positions on eros). Clearly, more needs to be said, and Staehler’s book goes a long way in specifying this “more” through an engaging dialogue with Plato and the phenomenological tradition. One might contribute even further to this discussion by addressing in greater depth the ambiguity that comes to characterise the ethical relationship itself and its related terms—desire, proximity, love without eros, transcendence—in Levinas’ later works: ambiguity between God and *il y a*, sense and nonsense, goodness and madness.

**Graham Harman, *Prince of Networks: Bruno Latour and Metaphysics*. Melbourne: re-press, 2009; 247 pages. ISBN: 978-0980544060. Open access version available via free PDF download at <http://www.re-press.org/content/view/63/38>.**

*Review by Peter Gratton, University of San Diego.*

Bruno Latour has long been a specter hovering on the edges of recent Continental philosophy: his work is cited frequently enough to accord him the (sometimes dubious) status of famous French philosopher, but he tends to fall as a shadow figure outshined by his contemporaries. Readers have long not known what to make of him. For some, he is a relativist worthy of scorn alongside other “postmodern” philosophers such as Jacques Derrida and Jean-François Lyotard. For others, his theory of assemblages is excessively ensconced in science studies, making him too tricky a philosopher to meld easily alongside the more literary bent of his peers. Latour’s prose is part of the problem, since he purposely crosses a number of academic fields—writing on nature, the social, and semiotics together—that have been treated as wholly separate enterprises in the French academy and elsewhere. The work under review delves deeper than his work in these fields to ascertain the metaphysics operative in his “actor-network theory.”

Harman's book should have the effect of moving Latour center-stage in discussions on the future of Continental philosophy. *Prince of Networks* is divided into two parts, and this division of labor means that readers of Harman's previous works will likely head for Part II, while those looking to figure out just what has been lurking in Latour's writings are going to find much to like in the work's first half. In the first chapter, Harman covers Latour's "irreductionist" approach to reality, and then moves in the proceeding chapters to describe how this metaphysics bears fruit in terms of Latour's sociology of science. In the second half of the book, Harman lays claim to Latour as an "object-oriented" philosopher, an area of the contemporary scene that Harman has in previous books championed. This is where Harman's book enters its critical stage.

Latour's fundamental claim is to a relational realism, one that argues against any hidden essence behind the appearance of things. Each thing, as such, is but a "black box" that is to be broken into by the theorist in order to tease out the relations that tie each given thing to a whole range of other things. In his *Laboratory Life: The Construction of Scientific Fact* (1986) and *The Pasteurization of France* (1988), Latour argued for thinking the reality of scientific facts in terms of the network of alliances made among the various objects of the laboratory, the scientists undertaking a given study, and the facts that arise out of these interactions.

Latour claims that there is no scientific set of facts that is not borne from a trial of strength made among a set of figures, including the apparatuses of the scientific profession. This is where the charge of social constructionism often enters the scene, since Latour argues that bacteria, for example, did not pre-exist Pasteur's discoveries, since their reality is only thinkable through the set of relations brought about by Pasteur's discovery. For Latour, these set of facts are but another actant (what we normally call objects) among others, and he argues, as Harman notes, that "all entities are on the same ontological footing." (14) Thus, Pasteur's bacteria are not real until they enter into alliances, though presumably Latour would have to argue more precisely that the bacteria were previously real as actants in relation to other organisms and whatever else to which they related before becoming another fact of human knowledge. Pasteur's discovery, though, was not an objective fact, but itself was thrown into relation in trials of strength among other

biological ideas at the time, and he was but one actor in a series of alliances among “might politicians who grant him funding, pieces of glassy or metallic equipment, and even bacilli themselves.” (19) This discovery becomes more true through the ever-expanding alliances this crucial idea of modern medicine would have. “Against the traditional gesture of isolating the real from all its distorting associations,” Harman writes, “Latour holds that a thing becomes increasingly real *the more* associations it has.” (75) Harman will defend Latour time and again from the charge that he is a “relativist, a power politician, or a social constructionist,” but it is hard to see how scientific realists will take any comfort in the construction of scientific facts coming from both the social and the things of nature, instead of just a given cultural assemblage.

What should be clear by now is that Latour’s account does not leave room for some unseen Platonic realm where entities hide without relations waiting for their day in the sun. But this does not mean that Latour is not a realist, since his argument is that the relation to the human being, or between human beings and the world, is but one set of relations among others; that is, it is independent of human concerns. Of course, human beings confront things, translate them (you describe things to others), and reduce them (you use your CD collection for music, not coasters) to one level of reality, but this too is just what actants do to one another: fire burns cotton, while other levels of reality interact that are no less real. To trace any *x*, one must work out its hybrid existence as a set of relations within ever-widening networks: “to follow a quasi-object,” Latour writes in *We have Never Been Modern*, “is to trace a network.” (64)

This is Latour’s key idea of irreductionism, and Harman’s first chapter marks out well just how much our philosophical landscape would be upended if Latour’s own work were to make many more alliances. What one finds is an “actualism” that can grant reality only to the shifting relations of the world and not to hidden forces that hide without relating to the things of existence. What is more is that Latour, since he cannot grant reality to anything that is not acting upon other things, must give the same level of reality to accidents (color, shape, size, etc.) as to the thing itself.

The question that Harman introduces in the second part of *Prince of Networks* is whether such an actualism can account for change. To use

my own example, Latour offers a relationism with *nothing* between or among the different alliances, which is like trying to imagine bouncing balls suddenly shifting directions even when hitting nothing at all. Harman thinks that Latour's irreductionist account must be supplemented with a thinking of the interiority of objects, which he argues is the something more to things beyond their relations.

What Harman gains from Latour is greater traction for his critique of the "philosophies of human access," such as one finds in Kantianism or philosophies after the linguistic turn that see languages and conceptual schemes as the prison-house holding human beings from the world. (103) Thus, Harman parts ways from Latour to argue that there are things beyond any given set of relations: "an actor must already exist if other actors are to exist in the first place." (111) In this way, for example, the microbes of the type discovered by Pasteur must have some kind of existence before their discovery, even if, crucially for Harman, this means that this "latent substance hidden from public view beneath an actor's overt performance" is literally indescribable, since it has not yet made such alliances (namely the alliances of publicity). Another way to put this is that Harman argues that "a thing is real beyond its conditions of accessibility," even if this "access" is not only made by human beings, but by other things as well. "Things," he writes, "must be partially separated from their mutual articulations. If this were not the case, they would never be able to enter new propositions." (131)

The story of just what to think of these things means following Harman down a busy road littered with signposts to the works of Leibniz, Husserl, Merleau-Ponty, and others. For my part, I am likely to get off at certain places where I sense the hyperbole Harman uses against would-be allies is too strong. For example, Derrida and Foucault come in for withering asides, but surely there is room to think Latour alongside Foucaultian notions of apparatuses of power, or against Derrida's relational thinking. These thinkers will do no more, I suspect for Harman, than Latour's relationism, but it leaves one wondering what the criteria is used to make Latour a realist, while others remain pseudo-skeptics unable to escape linguistic discourses to see the world around us, other than Latour simply stating such. Put otherwise, as Harman's object-oriented project grows in the coming years, perhaps there are as-yet unseen alliances that could strengthen this developing theoretical network.

This is in the end a minor quibble. Harman's writing is clear and purposely vivid. If there is a clichéd example that comes to mind, Harman is likely to opt for one involving Civil War battlefields or self-whipping nuns. I could think of no better companion to ally myself with in reading through the underutilised texts of Latour. This book, I imagine, will also cut down on the abuses of mentions of actor-network theory by those who misunderstand Latour's basic premises, since his would-be allies in sociology and elsewhere often describe him as a protean thinker of power. Lastly, it would be wrong to end this review without mentioning the networked existence of the book under review, which the publisher, re.press, along with its whole catalogue of books, allows to be downloaded for free online, while regular printed versions are sold through its website and booksellers. A book on relational ontologies (with something more) deserves just such a home.

**Sarah Borden Sharkey, *Thine Own Self: Individuality in Edith Stein's Later Writings*. Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2010; xxxiv + 254 pp. ISBN: 978-0813216829.**

*Review by Antonio Calcagno, King's University College at The University of Western Ontario.*

Sarah Borden Sharkey's latest book tackles one of Edith Stein's hardest texts and one of her more controversial personal and philosophical periods. *Thine Own Self: Individuality in Edith Stein's Later Writings* focuses on what Edith Stein called her "magnum opus," *Finite and Eternal Being*. This work, originally published as *Endliches und ewiges Sein*, was Stein's mature reworking of her original *Habilitationsschrift*, *Act and Potency*. The work tries to bring together her phenomenology with her work on mediaeval Christian thought, especially Augustine of Hippo, Thomas Aquinas and Duns Scotus.

Considered by classic phenomenologists as somewhat unorthodox, as Husserl himself thought it was more a work of Christian philosophy than phenomenology, and viewed as not wholly accurate and consistent *qua* certain views of mediaeval scholarship, Stein's work has been the object of much critique and debate. And though Stein wishes to reconcile aspects of both philosophical schools, her project is not one of

trying to make phenomenology fit with mediaeval thought or vice versa. Rather, she wishes to present a philosophical understanding of the relation between finite and infinite being, always drawing upon both schools of thought. She does so, as Borden Sharkey makes amply clear, in various ways. Whereas traditional Husserlian phenomenology does not concentrate much on the category of the infinite, it still has something to say about how we make intelligible the lived-experience of our finite being in the world. Furthermore, though mediaeval philosophy can certainly yield categories and concepts that may be used to understand the infinite being that we normally associate with God, it does not do justice to the value of conscious lived-experience, especially in terms of consciousness and the finite I-ness of such consciousness.

Stein maintains that there is an intimate relation between finite and infinite being, the human being and God. Rather than use traditional arguments concerning the analogy of being or participation to mediate the relations between human beings and God, Borden Sharkey maintains that a fuller discussion of individuality reveals how humans and the divine can relate. In particular, it is the discussion of form, understood as a principle of intelligibility (xvii–xvii), that serves as the key philosophical framework whereby one can begin to understand individuation and personhood as both affirming and distinguishing the relation between finite and eternal being.

Borden Sharkey's treatment of form and individuation in Stein's later work is both thorough and philosophically illuminating. I believe this to be the best treatment of the topic that we have to date. The book seeks to achieve two fundamental things. First, it wishes to expose and lay out for its readers how we can grasp and read Stein's very difficult treatise. This is a welcome commentary and makes much sense of what I have found to be dense and sometimes obscure passages in Stein's thought. Borden Sharkey does not hesitate to identify where Stein is unclear, but she insists that we must try and read these passages within the larger structure of the work. The second aim of the book is to take up the argument concerning the role of individuation in Stein's later works while not neglecting relevant passages on individuation in Stein's earlier, more strictly phenomenological works.

Chapters one and two define the problem of individuation and set it within the general context of forms. One question that immediately comes to this reader's mind is how and why we should employ a so

seemingly out-dated concept such as form to discuss human identity. And if we do discuss such a concept, are we simply not engaging in issues within the history of philosophy? Borden Sharkey makes an important argument here, maintaining that form is a viable concept today, if we understand it in conceptual terms as a principle of intelligibility. She avoids lapsing into idealism, however, because she admirably shows how form, understood in intellectual terms, has existential and real import. Chapters three through six address the problem of individual form from various aspects: Individual forms are considered from the perspectives of essential structures, being, principles of individuality, and mereology (the study of parts and wholes). The latter treatment of mereology certainly has deep resonances with Husserl's *Third Logical Investigation*. It is in the aforementioned chapters that the core expository chapters of Stein's doctrine occur.

The remaining four chapters take up various challenges to Stein's theories of individual forms, offering alternative readings of various problems raised. For example, Stein's theory of formal individuation raises problems concerning possible ensuing hierarchies, especially given that Stein's ontology draws from traditional Scholastic frameworks that were rich with such concepts as grades of being or the great chain of being. Borden Sharkey notes that Stein's response to the hierarchisation of being can be applied to the relation between God and humans as both are very different beings and God is traditionally considered a higher being, but when it comes to human beings, we all share one nature and belong to one human race and human community. (160–3) Political, ethical, social and theological challenges are raised by Stein's notion of individual form. Borden Sharkey not only delineates such challenges but she also offers us possible solutions to the challenges; she also admits there are times when Stein's philosophy falls short of delivering adequate or clear answers.

In general and by way of conclusion, four significant points stand out as important for Stein scholarship and philosophy in general. First, there is the tension between idealism and realism, which follows Stein throughout her whole life. If individual form is understood as a principle of intelligibility that purports to be able to explain what one finds in individuals and communities of human beings, one wonders how the relation between mind and world is to be negotiated. Borden Sharkey is very right to claim that Stein sees a deep corresponding relationship

between mind and world, but Stein herself never fully gives an account of how these two realities come together and condition one another except by way of her small essay and dialogue on Husserl and Thomas Aquinas, written on the occasion of Husserl's 70<sup>th</sup> birthday. For the most part, Stein assumes there is a mind-world correspondence and works from this assumption, but no systematic account of how these two very intimate but distinct realities coincide is given.

Second, Borden Sharkey raises the issue concerning the role of time as it relates to essences. (70ff.) How can an essence be both subject to time and timeless? And how can our very essence change through time and endure? Drawing on the work of Hering and Stein, Borden Sharkey makes the distinction between essence and essentiality—the double doctrine of essence. (65ff.) Stein accepts the Husserlian position that though essences or *Wesenheiten* can show the identity of something over a period of time, they can also change. But there is a more encompassing sense of essence that bespeaks more perduring realities, including the essence or being of God and the essence of what it is to be human across the ages. This double doctrine of essence allows us to have both a shared or common human essence that crosses borders and cultures, and a particular, individual essence that is unique to the individual human person. Here, essences overlap and are enfolded one into the other.

Third, Sarah Borden Sharkey makes an important contribution regarding the Steinian treatment of empathy (*Einfühlung*). While it is true that Stein discusses human individuation in her early texts as stemming from a personality core that is understood through empathy, Borden Sharkey reminds us that even in this purely phenomenological account the essence or idea (read: form) of how another is re-presented to me in consciousness comes to the fore. In this way, Stein's early phenomenology that deals with the question of individuation is not seen as split from her later Christian philosophy. Borden Sharkey reminds readers that the phenomenology is taken up again in Stein's later texts but one can also read backward and see Stein's later work as an elaboration of her earlier work on human individuation.

Finally, I would like to draw the reader's attention to Borden Sharkey's alternative readings of individual forms. Drawing from Stein, the author sketches possible ways of conceptually framing the question of identity, including adverbial individuality. (190) Interesting is Borden

Sharkey's defence of Aquinas' matter as the principle of individuation. (230) Stein rejects material form as individuating, showing her proclivity to Scotus' position. Though Stein has much to say about the lived-experience of the body in her earlier work and in her Münster lectures, the body does not occupy such a prominent place in her later work, especially *Finite and Eternal Being*. Borden Sharkey challenges Stein on this point and invokes Thomistic arguments on the importance of matter for form—essences and individuation require deep differentiation within the material realm.

*Thine Own Self: Individuality in Edith Stein's Later Writings* marks an important contribution to Stein scholarship, phenomenology and philosophy in general. Borden Sharkey captures the spirit of Stein's project, which is not only some kind of proposed synthesis of Christian mediaeval thought with Husserlian phenomenology but also a genuine attempt to understand the nature of finite and infinite being. Key to understanding this structure, so Borden Sharkey argues, is the question of individual form. This work is scholarly, rigorous and will serve as a guide for those interested in understanding the philosophical itinerary of Edith Stein and those interested in approaching the question of personal identity from rich, philosophical, and creative perspectives.

**Catherine Malabou, *Plasticity at the Dusk of Writing: Dialectic, Destruction, Deconstruction*. Translated by Carolyn Shread. New York: Columbia UP, 2010; 96 pages. ISBN: 9-780-231145244.**

*Review by Peter Gratton, University of San Diego.*

“We should be certainly engaging deconstruction in a *new materialism*,” Catherine Malabou writes in *Plasticity at the Dusk of Writing*, a conceptual self-portrait of her notion of plasticity. Malabou in the past has gained the admiration of not just Jacques Derrida, her former teacher and eventual collaborator, but also Slavoj Žižek, who cites her approvingly in his *Parallax View*. In the present work she manages to shake loose of tired debates over textual theory and the Hegelian dialectic in order to diagnose the “motor scheme” of the contemporary era, which she conceives as a quasi-Hegelian correlation of philosophical reaction to what has “gradually asserted itself as the style of an era.” (1)

*Plasticity*, first published in French in 2005, opens with a consideration of the transformational masks discussed by Claude Lévi-Strauss in *The Way of Masks*. These masks provide an apt metaphor for the shifting faces Malabou has taken on in her academic career. Her tack is to provide something of an intellectual autobiography, one that is less a personal history than a reenactment of the conceptual struggles she has gone through and which mirror those of philosophy in modernity. The transformational mask itself is metamorphic and is not form-fitting, such that it can never reveal the face underneath. Split in two halves that fold in the middle to reveal one mask and then fold back out to reveal another, this mask is really a mask of masks, a play between the veiling and unveiling of what can never be revealed underneath. Inasmuch as the difference between the two masks within the mask is only thinkable in relation to its mutability, and inasmuch as the sign function (the particular “face”) of any given mask is similarly *a posteriori* to this mutability, Malabou finds in these strange objects an apt expression of the “*interchangeability or conversion relation between plastic and graphic, image and sign, body and inscription.*” (3)

The mask is also a fitting image for the play of Hegelian dialectic (the mask’s coming together after a temporal delay) and Derridean *différance* (the endless deferral and differentiation between and within the masks) in her work. Malabou notes that these two logics are irreconcilable, and her early writings, such as *The Future of Hegel* (Routledge, 2005), were an attempt to tease out the relation of these two systems of thought. I can not do justice to the entirety of Malabou’s analysis here, and readers are warned that the very movement of Malabou’s thought, its own plasticity, is more beneficial to follow than her conclusions.

She argues that her thinking of plasticity, first found in Hegel’s *Phenomenology*, gained coherence in *Le Change Heidegger*, where she rethinks plasticity as the change and trans-formation that is the motor scheme of Heidegger’s philosophy. The play of masks in Malabou’s philosophy has been the confrontation of the logics of Derrida and Hegel, but also those of Heidegger and Freud, and she has presented each of these faces in turn, using one to read the other, eventually “showing [her] the incredible contemporaneousness of philosophy, its closure, and beyond its closure.” (8)

It is Malabou's contributions to thinking the beyond of the end of the metaphysics that will be the focus of the remainder of this review. "We need, in the wake of deconstruction," she writes, "to bring the trace up to date" (77). What Malabou proposes is that previous motor schemes are in some sense *passé*. What is needed now is not a thinking of negativity of the self-relation (Hegel) or the temporal delay of writing (Derrida) but a thinking of mutability where form and content, as in the transformational masks, fold in on one another. (20) Her claim is not simply philosophical: she reads plasticity as at the heart of Hegel's dialectic and a certain change to be found in Heidegger's account of temporality, but she is also arguing that "*plasticity is the systematic law of the deconstructed real*, a mode of organization of the real that comes after metaphysics and that is appearing today in all the different forms of human activity." (57) This is where Malabou's new materialism appears in the most danger of a certain idealism, since she implies that the scheme by which philosophical concepts are adumbrated help bring about the end of writing and a change of era: "to think," she writes, "is always to schematize, to go from the concept to existence by bringing a transformed concept into existence." (1, 13)

Malabou is not asserting the absolute end of writing—just as Derrida's discussion of the end of the book did not obviate the need for libraries—and for this reason she turns to the notion of dusk in her title, which has resonances with post-structuralist depictions of the closure of metaphysics as well as Hegel's flight of the owl of Minerva. Occupying the shaded ground at the end of history, the motifs of deconstruction, dialectics, and plasticity mutually *transform* one another, and it is this very mutability that is the mark or, better, *form* of the latter. The Hegelian period was marked by what Foucault called in *Les mots et les choses* the empirico-transcendental doublet of subjective identity, and Derrida's project was announced in response to the transformations underway with the ascent of non-phonetic writing. Malabou takes seriously Derrida's claims about an epoch of writing in the beginning sections of *Of Grammatology*, where he argues that it is not simply his choice to focus on the science of writing, since it is the paradigmatic sign—our metaphors are purposeful here—of an era in which genetics, computer programming, and set theory question the originary myth of writing as subservient and linked to a self-present speaking subject.

Thus we are led to ask, given Derrida's own metaphorology of signs, differential marks, traces, etc., if another set of metaphors is not more apt today, given the historical transformations since 1967, the year *Of Grammatology* was published. Reading Derrida closely, Malabou claims there is an unspoken mutability at the heart of deconstruction; not least in Derrida's notion that *archi-écriture* is a transformation of the meaning of writing in the everyday sense. In this way, she argues plasticity offers a new reading method, since it is attuned to the mutability and "trans-formation" of concepts themselves. (51) Ultimately, this leads Malabou to question the Derridean trace structure, since she argues that the trace, as a trace of the Other, points not just to the past, but also to the Other of any given system. Malabou's analogue to Derrida's use of writing in the everyday sense as a pass key into originary difference as *archi-writing*, as she argued in *What should We Do with Our Brain?* (Fordham, 2008), is neuroplasticity.

Following up on a Jean-Pierre Changeux's *Neuronal Man: The Biology of the Mind*, which is now twenty-five years old, Malabou argues that the plasticity of the brain symbolises its ability to form or reform information and its very structures. As Malabou notes, there has been a transformation in the structures of thinking about the brain in the last forty years, namely from one in which the brain and its parts are inexorably programmed by DNA—a model that Derrida notably utilises in *Of Grammatology*—to a notion of plasticity in which supposedly gene-based characteristics such as gender, sexuality, and even the ability to perceive different types of objects mutate and change as a result of experience. Thus, what we have is an ontological underdetermination of the brain whereby "plasticity forms where DNA no longer writes." (60)

Plasticity therefore provides a self-transformative conception of being that marks the place of transference between Hegelian self-identity and Derridean *différance*. As Malabou notes, the Greek *plassein* means both to receive a form and to mold or give a form, and the plasticity of the brain both gives and receives any particular conception of self-hood. And this self-transformation operates, she argues, without the necessity of a trace, since as often happens for example in patients who lose all short memory, there is a complete loss of the self, such that one cannot even mourn what is lost. This points to the third meaning of *plastique* to which Malabou refers, namely the type of plastic explosive used in various badly plotted action movies. In light of this explosive plasticity,

“neuronal traces don’t proceed as do writing traces, *they do not leave a trace*; they occur as *changes of form*.” (79)

Malabou pivots from these discussions to provide enriching alternatives to Levinasian transcendence. She argues for an immanent materialism in which there is no Other of the world, but simply and inexorably the world as it is. It is here that her favored example or metaphor, however, breaks down, since there is no neuroplasticity without the outside, without an experience of that outside reshaping and utterly transforming the mind. There is much to Malabou’s attempt to treat the brain as an immanent set of mutable circuitry, but it is notable that this self-transformation is always done in response to the Other, for example, as found in the use of the prosthesis of a cochlear implant that in some experiments helps some of those who are deaf to form in other parts of the brain the cells used for hearing. How this should attenuate Malabou’s chosen paradigm, she does not say, except to argue that the brain is itself transformative of the other to which it responds (presumably brains are the inventors of particular prostheses, or affect the environment outside any given brain). It is also unclear why an immanent, materialist philosophy would stop at the brain in the first place, since most of what is discussed in her work in terms of the brain are, of course, faculties of neurological systems that are throughout the body.

What Malabou offers, despite these caveats, is a thinking of transformability inherent, but not made explicit in the thinking of Hegel, Heidegger, and Derrida. Her work is relatively short in length at ninety-six pages, including a preface by Clayton Crockett and her own afterward. But slipped into what may seem a modest autobiography is a work that seeks to do nothing less than transform the intellectual landscape around it. This work is transformative enough that it might just succeed in doing so.

**Sarah Allen, *The Philosophical Sense of Transcendence: Levinas and Plato on Loving Beyond Being*. Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 2009; 330 pages. ISBN: 978-0820704227.**

*Review by Tanja Staehler, University of Sussex.*

Sarah Allen's book is concerned with the philosophical sense of transcendence, understood as a movement which exceeds or crosses boundaries. Some take this notion to be incomprehensible, while others believe that it belongs to theology rather than philosophy. In view of this, Allen wants to explore the relation between religion and philosophy, the definition of philosophy, and the sense philosophy can give to transcendence. Throughout the book, Allen explains her questions and ideas in general rather than technical terms; this is one of the many features that make her work so clear and enjoyable to read.

Emmanuel Levinas is singled out to address the question of transcendence because he brings a radical, vertical sense of transcendence into philosophy by relating it to the infinite or God. Such transcendence is the object of Desire. On the subject of transcendence and desire, Levinas finds a great predecessor in Plato. For both, Allen wants to show, Desire involves a dimension of affectivity, and at the same time, the movement toward transcendence appears to be a process of purification.

Allen's book thus pursues the topics of Desire and transcendence from Levinas' early works to *Totality and Infinity (TI)* and finally to *Otherwise Than Being or Beyond Essence (OB)*. The study provides a coherent and convincing narrative of the development of Levinas' philosophy; such a comprehensive narrative is still a rare accomplishment in Levinas studies. The book is divided into two parts, comprising four chapters each. The first part is devoted to the themes of being and totality. Chapter 1 turns to Plato and explores connections between becoming, being, the Good beyond being, and erotic love. Particularly convincing in this chapter is a careful discussion of the Good beyond being. Allen points out that despite Levinas' insistence that the Good beyond being was Plato's greatest insight, the concept of the Good beyond being is far from clear in Plato himself. It is only mentioned once throughout the Platonic corpus, in the *Republic* (509b); moreover it is not clear how much weight can be placed on this thought, given that the other allegories appear to identify the Good with being. (19) It is therefore reasonable to

ask whether the Levinasian emphasis on the Good beyond being might rather be a result of the Judeo-Christian concept of God as creator *ex nihilo*. (52)

Chapters 2 and 3 pursue an insightful discussion of suffering and enjoyment as the darker and lighter sides of being. The significance of these ideas for Levinas' early and middle work is brought out well, with the help of links to Heidegger. Through these different dimensions of affectivity, we arrive at the notion of a separated subject. However, in order for this subject to remain in separation, a relation to transcendence is required. The need for a relation to transcendence has thus been established, but there is no opening toward it yet; death functions as a preparation in this respect. Chapter 4 concludes the first part with a discussion of death, which is seen as totalising in traditional philosophy (that is, as endowing our existence with a sense of completeness), but functions as a preparation for the openness to transcendence in Levinas.

In the second part of the book, Allen discusses Levinas' treatment of love from his early philosophical writings to later developments in his work. Chapter 5, appropriately shorter, traces the development of love in the early texts as it emerges from a more general discussion of affectivity and is concerned mostly with fecundity. In this context, Levinas mostly refers to Plato in a negative or critical fashion. The two subsequent chapters are concerned with the extensive treatment of *Eros* in *Totality and Infinity*. Chapter 6 locates *Eros* in relation to other main topics of *Totality and Infinity* such as affectivity, desire, and thought. In particular, this chapter carefully attends to the tension between Desire as affectivity and Desire as thought. According to Allen, there are "metaphysical, ethical, and religious approaches to Desire in *Totality and Infinity*" (209) and Levinas compromises the clarity of his account by not really differentiating between them.

Chapter 7 opens with a helpful overview of the literature on *Eros* in Levinas, including works by De Greef, Marion, Thayse, Mosès, Katz, Sandford, Bergo, and Chalier. Allen outlines the position of her research in relation to the literature in a nuanced fashion, attending also to the difficult issues surrounding fecundity and femininity. In this discussion, Allen returns to the three different approaches she has outlined in the previous chapter, and traces difficulties that emerge from insufficient attention to the differences between metaphysical, ethical, and religious dimen-

sions of *Eros*. Allen argues that, in both Plato and Levinas, love emerges as a process of purification.

This purification takes a more explicit shape in Levinas' later philosophy when he starts looking for a "love without *Eros*," as discussed in Chapter 8. In *Otherwise than Being*, "Desire does not arise out of a gradual purification of erotic love that would lead toward transcendence, but rather comes as a shock or trauma that purifies by turning the self inside out or reducing it to its utmost passivity." (265-66) According to Allen, the treatment of love and transcendence in Levinas' late work is superior to the middle phase because *Totality and Infinity* was plagued by a "lack of clarity" (310-11), which stems specifically from the way in which metaphysical, ethical, and religious approaches are not clearly distinguished from each other. *Otherwise than Being* provides a more unified account of transcendence. This account at first seems to result in a more substantial rift between 'being' and 'otherwise than being' that can no longer be bridged by erotic love. However, the language of erotic love comes back into the account of *OB*, especially in the treatment of sensibility. The path of purification leading to transcendence is now replaced by an oscillation between the different realms (exemplified in the oscillation between the 'saying' and the 'said'), thus resolving the problem of the apparent rift.

It seems to me that Allen's study runs into the same difficulty as the one encountered by Levinas: from the perspective of *Otherwise Than Being*, the project of *Totality and Infinity* may appear somewhat redundant. However, the analysis of *Eros* and especially erotic affectivity in *TI* appears indispensable for realizing how the erotic elements of love come back into the analysis of *OB*. Given that the central characteristic of *Eros* in *TI* is ambiguity, as Allen points out (227), it becomes questionable whether there ever was a path of purification determining *Eros* in the middle work, or whether erotic love might have always been determined by a movement of oscillation (which, admittedly, Levinas describes more explicitly in the later account).

Furthermore, even though the metaphysical, ethical, and religious approach in *TI* may not come together so easily, they are all needed for Levinas' conception of philosophy. Allen is right to point out that these relations are not easily resolved in the later work either, and cannot be, especially if one wants to avoid reducing one realm to the other. As she puts it: "Paradoxically, I think it is in emphasizing the ambiguity sur-

rounding transcendence in his later works, especially insofar as it enters meaningfully into philosophy, that Levinas offers us a somewhat clearer (but by no means crystal clear) account of the interplay between philosophy, ethics, and religion.” (301) Allen points out that in the later work, there is a religious sense of ethics that “precedes and exceeds philosophy.” (302)

In her conclusion, Allen returns to the difficulties of explaining the relation between religion and philosophy, especially where transcendence is concerned. There is an inherent “ambiguity of philosophy’s self-definition in philosophy in general; in looking for the philosophical sense of transcendence, the sense of philosophy is itself put into question.” (311) Putting philosophy into question is a necessity because philosophy relates to and depends on its others, such as religion. “Ethics comes from religion,” and yet they do not coincide. (312) As Allen points out well, it is troubling for the more philosophical as well as for the more religiously inclined person that they have to consider the other perspective to gain access to their lived-experience. The philosophically inclined person has to do so because the source of transcendence lies outside of philosophy, and the religiously inclined person must admit that access to the religious experiences requires philosophical concepts.

Allen’s study is written in an exceptionally clear and lucid style, and as a reader, I always know what question is being considered in a given paragraph and how it relates to the overall argument. It is quite rare, nowadays, to find studies which hold together in this fashion. Even rarer is it to find an author who can present the Platonic, phenomenological, and religious influences on Levinas in such a competent fashion. I am already looking forward to Sarah Allen’s next book.