

The call in the thought of Lévinas, Marion and Chrétien: description of a phenomenon or deconstruction of a tradition?

Isabelle Thomas-Fogiel

Description, analysis, deconstruction – three terms that call to mind three distinct and potentially opposite traditions: phenomenology, analytical philosophy, and deconstruction; in other words, three names: Husserl, Wittgenstein, and Derrida. These three notions have been posited as the new modalities of a contemporary approach to philosophy and as a kind of substitute for a defunct metaphysics. All three acts are founded in an implicit common rejection, which states that to philosophize no longer consists in the ontological search for first causes (Aristotle), nor in the establishment of the objective world based on a sovereign subject (Descartes), nor in the narrative of the progressive development of knowledge (Hegel). However shared this negation may be, it cannot conceal the profound differences that nevertheless exist among differing approaches to understanding the philosophical task. For some, philosophy is essentially the analysis of the statements of language, for others it is the exposition of phenomena, while for others yet it is the scrutiny of ancient metaphysical texts for traces of what they conceal. These differences can at times appear to move towards radical opposition, as in the case, to name but one, of the now emblematic opposition that has set Austin's endeavor to replace the ancient query «*Ti esti?*» with the question: «what are we doing when we say X?», against Husserl's reduction in the quest to attain the *Eidos*. The divergences are widely known and have been amply underscored by both sides; it is around those differences that the paradigmatic dispute has been constructed and it is among them that it has stagnated.

Stagnated, because the insistence on differences prevents an exposition of the identities that transcend the unanimous rejection of a universally shunned metaphysics. In

this regard, it would prove fruitful to demonstrate that, in the philosophy of language, analysis can frequently become description. Wittgenstein, for example, redefined the function of philosophy by saying: «we need not erect a new edifice or throw a new bridge, we need simply describe the geography as it is» (Wittgenstein [1937-1944]: 302). The use of metaphors drawn from geography, a descriptive science *par excellence*, in itself is an abundantly clear signal of the *rapprochement* between analysis and description. In the same vein, does Austin not talk of a «linguistic phenomenology» defining his work in scrutinizing the uses of ordinary language? And what is Cavell engaged in, if not the description of American society's defining characteristics through the language of cinematography?

Conversely, is it not possible to show that in the realm of phenomenology the Husserl of *Logical Investigations* is not alone in his concern for linguistic expression? Indeed, although it may long have seemed that, to borrow the words of Benoist, «language is the neglected, the unremembered [*le grand oublié*] of a branch of phenomenology» (Benoist [2003]: 83), it is nonetheless clear that attempts to reconcile phenomenon and language are today far from rare. In *Méditations phénoménologiques*, for example, Marc Richir (1992) tackles «the phenomenon of language» head on and explores the theory of «operative speech» [*parole opérante*], first introduced by Merleau-Ponty (see Tengelyi [2006]: 97-109). Furthermore, can we not state that in *Autrement qu'être* Lévinas put forward a genuine phenomenology of saying [*du dire*], rigorously defined as the description of the relationship between the act of saying and what is said (see Thomas-Fogiel [2005] and [2010])? In a word, the indications are many that the border separating analysis and description, phenomenology and philosophy of language is a porous one. The third term cited at the outset – deconstruction – is also a frequent companion to description. That, in any case, is the approach that François-David Sebbah adopts in *L'épreuve de la limite, Derrida, Henry, Lévinas et la phénoménologie*, discussing at length deconstruction's implication and need of description, arguing that «the Derridean gesture, often perceived as a dismantling of texts through an opposing perspective, is innately descriptive» (Sebbah [2001]: 15). Indeed, can we not say that, at times, description depends on an anterior deconstruction of a metaphysical thesis? In this regard, has not E. de St Aubert suggested that Merleau-Ponty's use of topological concepts was motivated by the reversal, the overturning, the inversion of the «Cartesian framework» [*scénario cartésien*]¹? If the concepts of «encroachment», «fold» and «neighborhood»,

¹ As per the title of one of St. Aubert's three works [2004] concerned with Merleau-Ponty. On topology in the thought of Merleau-Ponty, see also St Aubert [2001] and Petitot [1993].

as well as others directly or indirectly issued from mathematical topology² seem better attuned to the life of the flesh than was the case of classic representations of a space that unifies a diversity of perspectives in a geometric plane, is it this not solely because they oppose an objectivizing representation of the world and seek to deconstruct it? In fact, it is not only between analysis and description, but also between description and deconstruction that the demarcation line grows vague, blurred, and evanescent to a point where paradigms overlap and, indeed, at times, include one another. This neighboring of paradigms may go as far as the reversal of their assumptions; so far, in fact, that we may no longer be able to distinguish between what it is to describe, analyze, or deconstruct. It is precisely this strange neighboring that I aim to explore through examples beyond Wittgenstein's geographical model, Derrida's description, Richir's analysis of language, and Merleau-Ponty's deconstruction. Setting out from an analysis of the notion of the call in the works of Lévinas and his adherents, my task will be to show how that which is presented as description of a phenomenon is in fact the deconstruction of the text of tradition. In order to accomplish this, it will be apposite first to carry out an overview of the uses of the notion of the call in order to flesh out its recurring constants; subsequently, it will become possible to demonstrate the ways in which description is entirely dependent on a prerequisite act of deconstruction. To clarify the demonstration's overall thrust with stark precision, let us state the following: if we can demonstrate that description is deconstruction and that deconstruction is, in turn, the statement of a hermeneutical hypothesis (that can at any time be disputed) of the history of metaphysics, then both the status of description and its capacity to be a fecund figure of the philosophical revival can and must be questioned.

1. *The characteristics of the notion of the call in the Lévinasian universe*

The notion of the call has been subject to highly convergent descriptions³. Starting with Lévinas, especially in *Autrement qu'être*, through Marion in *Réduction et donation* and *Etant donné*, to J.L. Chrétien in *L'appel et la réponse*, the descriptions all discern the

² On this transfer of originally mathematical topological notions, see Thomas-Fogiel [2011a], [2011b], [2008a].

³ This has not necessarily been the case for other notions, such as that of the «event» – however quasi-inevitable it may be in a phenomenological context – or that of «birth», notion that has gained in importance during the past two decades (in the thought of Chrétien, Marion and Romano, for example), often through polemic intent towards the theme of Heidegger's being-for-death.

same features in the call, and they are the same characteristics that Heidegger had already largely outlined in *Being and Time* and particularly in his postface to *What is metaphysics?* The uniformity among these descriptions could well pass for an indication of their validity. Indeed, one phenomenon's identical descriptions by multiple authors would seem to testify to the descriptions' accuracy. It is relevant, therefore, to proceed with an overview of the designated corpus of works (Heidegger, Lévinas, Marion, Chrétien), noting the occurrences of the notion of the call in order to highlight its specific characteristics more clearly. Three distinctive features are readily discernable. The first is *the call as the subject's «becoming object»*.

Within the delineated corpus, the call is always defined as a call of which I am the object, rather than the subject. In his work *L'appel et la réponse*, J.L. Chrétien defines «the event of an intimate call» as «the sensation of being called or interpellated, of being touched by an address of which I am the object» (Chrétien [1992]: 60) This same definition resurfaces in the work of Marion, who specifies in § 26 of *Etant donné* that «the call appears at the reversal of intentionality» (Marion [1997]: 363). For Marion, the call brings us into a relationship that is different from the traditional face-to-face in which the object is under the gaze of the subject, who addresses, dominates and controls. The subject becomes the object of the relationship. This inversion of the relationship is also perceptible in how Lévinas' took particular care to cast the subject in the accusative (the subject becomes the one who receives, who is addressed, called), in the place of the metaphysical subject that was initially nominative (the Cartesian subject, who is always the one who addresses and constructs the object, endowing it with properties: see Lévinas [1974]: 6-67). It is this inversion that was also present in the Heideggerian notion of «the call of being»: notwithstanding its genitive, rather than accusative enunciation, the statement is no less a stigmatization of the destitution of the subject who receives the call and answers the injunction to consider what lies beyond the common object or the object scientifically reduced. Thus, in each case the subject has become the addressed object. More precisely, in this context, the call becomes visible and gives place to a phenomenon only *when and because* it is received. As Marion stated in *Etant donné*: «the call is given phenomenologically only through its discernibility within an answer». Thus, nothing is nor can be said of the one who calls. It may just as well be Being (as for Heidegger), or God (as for Lévinas, who in *Autrement qu'être* defined the call as «a provocation from God»), or infinity, or a work of art, or something undefinable, which it very much seems to be for both Chrétien and Marion. Paradoxically, the accusation of a «theologization» (Janicaud [1992]) of phenomenology, although it may well be applied

to Lévinas, does not hold for either Chrétien or Marion, since they invariably analyze the call from the point of view of its recipient – by the same process transforming it into a verifiable phenomenon that is intersubjectively shareable and thus susceptible to description. That is why the first determination of the call, conceived as the subject's «becoming object», does not seem to elicit objections.

The second characteristic of the call, however, appears to be more problematic: *The call as aggression*.

Within the selected corpus, the call is always given as an imperious exhortation that addresses by aggression. Not only does the subject become object in the subject-object relationship; the object is determined as the effect, the pawn, the hostage. The call is clearly defined as aggression, injury, and, more precisely still, a trauma, to borrow a concept dear to Lévinas. Thus, J.L. Chrétien writes: «the call of the beautiful is a call that reminds us of itself by reminding us of ourselves [*qui se rappelle lui-même à nous en nous rappelant à nous-mêmes*]. Its word lives because of the hurt in our hearts. It impels us to leave our present position and forsake our immobility. It calls, only to disquiet» (Chrétien [1992]: 20). To be called is, for Chrétien, to be «required», «wounded», and «altered». Wherefore is the necessity that transforms shock (the Fichtean concept of *Anstoss*, taken up by Lévinas and Marion) into injury? Fichte defined the shock neutrally as the affecting [*l'affection*] by the other (Chrétien's statement illustrates the affecting in relation to the beauty of a work of art), without any connotation of aggression or trauma. To be sure – as Chrétien points out – the call modifies our primal state and bends the initial trajectory of our lives. In this process, the subject is distinctly second to the affecting that precedes and conditions it. In the words of Chrétien: «the call implies the affecting: the course of my thinking is modified all of a sudden by the feeling of being called» (Chrétien [1992]: 25). The affecting is never sought, we do not cause it – not even in Rousseau or Kant's phenomena of the internal voice. As already noted by Heidegger in § 56 of *Being and Time*, «It calls, against our expectations and even against our will». Yet, why think of the affecting as a wounding? Far from being a hapax, the same negative determination is repeated throughout the selected corpus, as if the chain of substitution that leads from the call to the affecting, from affecting to aggression by the other and then to the wound, were inherent, necessary, and intrinsic to the phenomenon. We may take as example Marion's description of the call exerted by the countenance of the other: «I must also and above all sustain the counter-gaze that the other addresses to me in silence, yet more explicitly than if he were to scream» (Marion [1997]: 368). In the same vein, Chrétien commented on Lévinas by saying that «the call

that recalls us is also an oath that binds us and gives us voice only when it grips us by the throat» (Chrétien [1992]: 44); Marion echoed this idea in many passages that frequently set being «called, altered, and attacked» (Marion [1997]: § 26) in apposition, reiterating the idea of «being harassed by the other» that Lévinas developed in *Autrement qu'être* (Lévinas [1974]: 86). Why must the call scream, wound, and grip me by the throat? Is it imperative? What is the basis for this shift that justifies the passage from call to wound, from wound to trauma? After all, to be affected is not innately synonymous with being attacked, wounded, traumatized; there are pleasurable affectings, too. Without dwelling on such readily available examples as, to name one, the sudden and salutary effect of rain water on sun-drenched skin (an affecting that neither attacks nor wounds, but soothes), we can juxtapose the example cited by Chrétien – of beauty that wounds, of the work of art that grips by the throat – with other occurrences of the «the call of beauty». For example, Alberti, in *De Pictura*, also defines beauty in general and painting in particular as a call. More precisely, in his directions for setting the *istoria* of a painting, Alberti relies on a pivotal character, whom art historians have called the admonitor, and whom Alberti defined explicitly as he who makes the painting's voice heard within its mute space and who calls the viewer.

«I like», he wrote, «to see someone in the story who draws our attention to what is happening, who calls our gaze by a gesture (*manu ad visendum advocet*) or [...] or indicates either a danger or something marvelous, or yet invites you by a gesture (*te gestibus invitet*) to laugh or weep along with them» (Alberti [1435]: § 42, 149)⁴.

Thus, for Alberti, the admonitor calls, and this reference to the voice (expressed in the term *advocet*) remains preserved in the Italian translation of the text⁵. This voice, which I receive and which guides me through the painting, is an invitation (*invitet*), an appeal, and an incitement, but neither aggression nor traumatism. This positive association of the call with the invitation takes place, significantly, in a text that purports to illustrate the ostensibly metaphysical relationship of a subject who addresses an object; significantly, because the posture adopted by the viewer ever since the *quattrocento*

⁴ «Tum placet in historia adesse quempiam qui earum quae gerantur rerum spectatores admoneat, aut *manu ad visendum advocet*, aut quasi id negotium secretum esse velit, vultum ne eo proficiscare truci et torvis oculus minitetur, aut periculum remve aliquam illic admirandam demonstret, aut ut una adrideas aut ut simul deploras suis *te gestibus invitet*».

⁵ In Italian: «Et piacemi sia nella storia chi admonisca et insegna ad noi quello che ivi si facci: o *chiami con la mano a vedere* o, con viso cruccioso e con li occhi turbati, minacci che nuino verso loro vada; o dimostri qualche pericoloso o cosa ivi maravigliosa o *te inviti* ad piagnere con loro insieme o a ridere».

towards a figurative painting is frequently compared to the attitude of the Galilean observer. For Alberti, however, the viewer not only considers the painting by gazing at it, but receives a call from within it and this call is defined as an invitation: an invitation as much to fear as to admire, to weep, but also to laugh. However, in the thought of Lévinas, Marion, and Chrétien, the negative connotation carried by the German *Anspruch* is automatically transferred onto the call [*appel*] without the phenomenological necessity (at the very least descriptive) of this transfer being explicitly stated. Tellingly, to the notion of *Anruf* used in paragraph 56 of *Being and Time*, Heidegger later preferred the term *Anspruch*, which conveys an immediate demand, an injunction, frequently even an ultimatum in the sense of a claim [*revendication*], a term used frequently in French translations of Heidegger, along with *adresse* and *appel*⁶. Yet the negative and even tragic charge of the *Anspruch*⁷ is not normally carried by either the French *appel* or the Latin *vocat* that gave us our “vocation”. Nevertheless, French texts accentuate the dramatic intensity of the convocation that must be obeyed. I am «required», says Chrétien (Chrétien [1992]: 25); «summoned», «convoked», writes Marion ([1997]: § 26). Yet this dimension of aggression and obligation, far from being self-evident, demands rather to be justified, because it seems far more to stem from the transfer of a connotation from one language to another than from the necessity of the thing itself.

What is more, it appears that Heidegger had already dramatized the notion of the call in his native language. Indeed, earlier German philosophers had discussed the affecting of the subject in terms of «the call of the other», without imposing on it the connotation of ultimatum. Thus Fichte, in his *Science of Knowledge* (1794), showed that we cannot explain representation – defined as thought, but also as feeling and imagination – without inducing a shock (*Anstoss* – the German term taken up by Marion in *Etant donné*). For Fichte, the shock is the affecting that originates from something external and modifies the nature and direction of existing states (which is precisely the meaning of Chrétien’s statement, cited above)⁸. Fichte determined this shock to be not the effect

⁶ For example, in a French translation of the postface to *What is Metaphysics?*, we find two different renditions *Anspruch* within the space of two successive sentences, first as claim [*revendication*], then as call [*appel*]: «thus a claim proceeds therefrom (*Anspruch*) [...] we can remain deaf to the call (*Anspruch*)»; later we come across a passage that speaks of the «call of the primal», to ultimately return to the notion of the claim.

⁷ Its meaning often resembles that of *Geheiss*: injunction, order, imperative.

⁸ Before Fichte, this affecting was conceived as the effect on a thing, the empiricists’ tangible object of sensation, as God in certain 17th-century systems, or as something innately unattributable for Kant.

of some thing, but the call of another human being. At the hand of another, I sustain the *Aufforderung*, which has been translated variously and at various times as call, address, appeal, and invitation. This *Aufforderung* is not convocation, ultimatum, or injunction, but an incitement to act, encouragement towards self-determination, invitation to liberty. Someone addresses me to invite me to be free, not to convoke, attack, or wound.

Although I do not argue that the Fichtean definition of the call as invitation is inherently better or more accurate than the determination of the call as an injunction, the fact remains that Fichte's example, like Alberti's beforehand, reveals the non-necessity of the description set forth in the Lévinasian universe. Indeed, if we can subtract the notion of wounding from that of the affecting without altering the essence of the latter, it follows that the wounding is not an essential feature of the phenomenon under study. It appears that there has been a dramatization that is unsupported either by linguistic usage, at least in the French language, or by strictly phenomenological description – since we can omit the wound without forfeiting the affecting. In short, it is possible to consider otherness without distortion, the affecting without the summons, the shock without the wound, the call without the trauma. There is, on the part of the Lévinasian phenomenologists, a conspicuous emphasis on the tragic, a kind of ascension towards extremes and hyperbole that is problematic. This tragical emphasis is present in the discourse on passivity, which is curiously defined as a shock that brings about the dispossession of the self.

This is the third and last feature of the call exposed by an analysis of the term's occurrences within the Lévinasian corpus: *Passivity and dispossession*.

To demonstrate this slippage into hyperbole, we need not look further than Marion's *Etant donné*, in which the author cites «convocation, surprise and interlocution» as three inherent aspects of the notion of the call. The call is a convocation, that is, precisely, a vocation that is sustained. The examples cited in support of this interpretation are nearly always religious in nature and, significantly, prophetic (Isaac for Lévinas, Samuel for Marion, Jeremiah for Chrétien). Yet, as A. Neher [1950] has shown in *Amos, contribution à l'étude du prophétisme*, (a work that influenced both Ricoeur, in his article *Philosophie et prophétisme* (1955), and Derrida), the prophet is called upon without having wanted to be called and, once called, does not desire to have been. Neher wrote: «the prophet is torn from himself by a God who invades him and reveals himself as a destructive force» (Neher [1950]: 157), thus indicating the traumatic character of the injunction (the threat of destruction). The choosing, as Amos himself tells us, «is a day not of joy, but of sorrow». The call is indeed a convocation, in the sense of an unwanted vocation: Amos does not give himself to God, but is torn from himself and from the

cation: Amos does not give himself to God, but is torn from himself and from the world. The gift in this instance strangely resembles a sacrifice, which Lévinas unhesitatingly asserts when conceiving of the choosing as a curse and thematizing a hostage subject, forever responsible for all the others (see Lellouche [2006]). The notion of the invasion of the self as a threat of destruction connotes with the previously discussed notion of the wound and announces the surprise that Marion defines by saying: «the one who is unsettled [*l'interloqué*] by a convocation no longer recognizes himself and is overwhelmed [*sur-pris*] by a stranglehold [...]». The call surprises by grasping the devoted, yet teaches him nothing; it only reduces him to trepidation, stops him in his tracks, places me in a state of immobile availability for what may never conclude its advent, indeed may never even begin» (Marion [1997]: 370). Marion goes as far as to talk of a «loss of self». The surprise is a stranglehold in the sense that I am dominated, («trapped, overwhelmed» specifies Marion) and provokes the «loss of self» which must be understood «in the dual sense of a loss of an original conscience of the self and of the impotence to view the claim's pole of origin as an object» (Marion [1997]: 370). The definition of interlocution, the third trait of the call, follows. Interlocution can involve anything except interaction, except a dialogic situation in the sense adopted by Habermas, that is, as a moment in which two interlocutors exchange in a relation of relative equality. Yet the call, as described by Marion, is a situation of absolute inequality, in which I find myself called, invaded and attacked by that which exceeds and surpasses me, which is so vastly superior to me that I cannot tell what it might be, if not God. Marion very rigorously does not say this; that is why in reference to his work the reproach of a «theological turn» is less apt than that of a «tragic turn», induced by a dramatic emphasis that asks questions from the point of view of the phenomenon. In fact, not only am I wounded (as discussed in the previous point, above), but now also invaded and threatened, because trapped in an utterly asymmetrical and incommensurately unequal relationship. There exists such a disproportion between the call and the one who is called that «to receive» inescapably signifies «to sustain» in an apposition that flows frequently from the pens of both Marion and Lévinas. Yet, once more, it is difficult to discern the implicitly intrinsic link between passivity and the stranglehold or hold [*l'emprise ou la prise*] to borrow Marion's expressions, although he also talks of submission (Marion [1997]: 370). Just as it is legitimate to conceive of the affecting without the wounding, it is just as sound to think of passivity without inequality, stranglehold, or submission. In this vein, we may again cite Fichte, who proposed a wholly different chain of substitution when he associated passivity with the reception of an appeal, the reception with the welcoming of an incitement,

the incitement with the joyous activity that is an invitation to liberty. This counter-example shows, once again, that the passage from «receiving» to «sustaining» and from «sustaining» to «being held» or «subjected to a stranglehold» (*sous-emprise*) is not at all self-evident, since it appears that the term can subsist without either the second or the third. There is nothing that impels the shift from being chosen to being cursed, from vocation to sustained exhortation, and from the latter to submission. Our overview of the uses of the term «the call» thus calls into question the necessity of description, which will become more readily apparent momentarily.

2. The question of the necessity of description and a proposition of a counter-description: Caravaggio's "The Calling of St Matthew"

Our analysis has revealed a problematic emphasis, in the sense of a dramatic exaggeration, that is problematic. The call has become synonymous with trauma, although we cannot distinguish any phenomenological or conceptual necessity for this shift. True, Lévinas insists on hyperbole as a «philosophical method [...] that consists in passing from an idea to its superlative, until its emphasis» (Lévinas [1992]: 141). Nevertheless, hyperbole does not provide an answer to the question: why describe one way rather than another? What accounts for the necessity of the proposed determinations? Moreover, the descriptions fail to encompass all the possible variations of the phenomenon. In opposition to Chrétien's example of beauty that wounds, it is just as valid to recast our relation to art within the dimension of pleasure and incitement to freedom⁹. In the call of the work of art, as conceptualized by Alberti, we find pleasure as opposed to wounding, welcoming rather than submission, joy instead of drama, invitation in place of trauma. Why have these potential variations not been incorporated into the phenomenon of the call?

⁹ The work of art, far being solely that which unsettles my usual course of experience by wounding and gripping me by the throat, can just as well be defined as the consent that I give to the incitement to be free and, what is more, by means of a feeling of pleasure – a dimension in which it is difficult to remain economical when it comes to art.

In addition, if we pursue the artistic phenomenon somewhat further, it becomes apparent that the description set forth not only fails to encompass the totality of possible definitions but, what is more, becomes an obstacle to the accurate perception of what lays before our eyes. Thus, Marion describes Caravaggio's masterpiece *The Calling of St Matthew* (1599-1600, Oil on canvas, Contarelli Chapel, S. Luigi dei Francesi, Rome) using a vocabulary that cannot fail to

surprise a viewer facing the artwork described. All the terms employed by Marion connote the call with imperious injunction, imposed summons, and forced convocation. Thus, on the one hand, the opening words of Marion's analysis, which state: «the call determines the choices of a mind, a soul, a life», are ambiguous, since they would seem to suggest that the call determines the choice as



clearly as a cause determines its effect. On the other hand, in Marion's comment that «Matthew does not so much perceive Christ, but Christ's gaze, turned towards him; not Christ as another sight to behold, but as a burden that weighs on and grips him», the negatively charged terms of «burden» and «weighing» convey more than the work of art offers up to the eye. Marion unhesitatingly interprets the surprise evident in Matthew's expression as «capture» and «stranglehold» (term that alludes to the overwhelming discussed earlier), yet again exceeding that which is plainly discernable to the gaze of the viewer. If we were to paint what Marion describes, we would be hard pressed to obtain any part of the facial expressions, composition, iconographic detail, historical allusions or stylistic choices of Caravaggio's canvas. To begin, it is rather difficult to say whether Christ's eyes rest on Matthew, since Christ's eyes are largely hidden from view¹⁰. Furthermore, even if we accord Marion the benefit of our doubt and agree that Christ's gaze is fixed squarely on Matthew, there is nothing in the painting to sug-

¹⁰ Marion mentions this in passing, without acknowledging that this element hobbles his description.

gest that that gaze «weighs on and grips him». Indeed, the image hints rather at something different, and this is corroborated by the gesture of the hand (which, in classical painting is the mirror of the gaze, and specifies, even defines, its intended meaning). In the painting, Christ's gesture is vague, indecisive, almost weary; the index is not outstretched, but curved, indicating a meaning quite different than that of the authoritarian directive. The painted hand is meant to arouse interest and implies a questioning; it is painted as an enigma to be deciphered. In fact, if Christ's calling of St Matthew cannot be defined as a convocation emanating from a being infinitely superior to humanity – as is God in relation with Old Testament prophets – it is because the hand that Caravaggio so curiously designed is an exact reproduction of the hand of Adam painted by Michelangelo on the vault of the Sistine Chapel. This detail, in the sense that Arasse (1990)



uses the term, is testament to Caravaggio's concern to emphasize the earthly nature of the gesture. To be sure, Christ's call incarnate is accompanied by a flood of in-

tangible luminosity that, emanating from the upper right-hand corner of the canvas, from behind and above Christ, manifestly symbolizes the divine will. But this light does not shine on Matthew alone. That which Marion describes as the «phenomenon made visible by Caravaggio» is in fact a conversion *in the strictly literal sense of the term*, that is, the action of turning towards the light. This movement of rotation, which the artist depicted unequivocally, turns Matthew away from his accounting work and, simultaneously, away from a position that would have placed him face to face with the viewer, thus in one movement subtracting him from the material world. The terms employed by Alberti and Fichte, both of whom conceive the call as an invitation (*invitet*), rather than as a burden or capture, seem more apt to render what transpires in the painting. Indeed, there is nothing tragic, traumatic, or burdensome in the described situation. Caravaggio's aim was to show the voice, which cannot be seen, and depict the instant, which cannot be grasped. He needed to represent the instantaneity of conversion, which the Gospels described by saying: «As Jesus *went on from there*, he saw a man named Matthew sitting at the tax collector's booth. *"Follow me"*, he told him, and Matthew got up and followed him» (Mt. 9.9; emphasis added). A simple «and» juxtaposes

the call and the answer, and it is this juxtaposition, this quasi-simultaneity that Caravaggio had to paint. Within the canvas space, he unfolded the time of the narrative, revealing the instant of the sudden vocation, the incredible and stark suddenness (*fulgurance*) of «and Matthew got up and followed». Ultimately, nothing here suggests trauma, indeed nothing prohibits us from imagining Matthew happy and certainly not this painting by Caravaggio. Our analysis shows the degree to which the conceptual determinism of *Etant donné* inhibits a description of what is so plainly visible. Far from enabling description, the emphasis seems to forbid it.

This counter-description is akin to a *mise en abyme* of, or recursive perspective on, the difficulties encountered at different stages during our analysis of the chosen texts, all of which can in essence be summed up as the absence of a necessity of description. The first problem was the apparent necessity of a link between affecting and wounding, because there patently are agreeable affectings, such as the pleasure generated by a work of art, to name but one; problematic also was the passage from «receiving» to «sustaining», since other thinkers have been able to conceive of the reception as a welcoming; a final problem was posed by the shift from passivity to stranglehold or submission, since passivity can be experienced as an incitement and, by a process of dialectical reversal, as an incitement to be free, as the repository of an autonomy that is yet to be. Furthermore, assuming that we could nevertheless agree with Chrétien, Marion and Lévinas on the inequality of the relationship, admit that that which calls me exceeds me in every way, admit that I can neither know, nor objectivize, nor overcome the source of the call, the fact remains that there is nothing to compel in us a conceptualization of this exceeding as a wounding, alteration, or trauma. A work of art exceeds any concept that I can formulate thereof, as Kant had argued; nevertheless, it does not wound or attack me, but gives me pleasure. By the same token, the Cartesian subject experiences its finitude not in suffering, but in joy, in the admiration of the third *Méditation*. Ultimately, the effective convergence of the descriptions of the call does nothing to prove their validity. Their veracity cannot be mandated by the agreement of a handful of authors: otherwise the description would be empirical, subjected to the uncertainty of induction and the pitfalls of contingency. We would then be faced with a global fact in the purview of regional science, not a reduced phenomenon dependent on philosophy. The shaping of phenomenological description, it seems, requires at the very least the ordeal of negation or of the annihilating fiction to conceive of that which cannot be subtracted. To excise a determination without eliminating the notion, is to show that the determination was not inherent to the notion. We have demonstrated that we can conceive of the effect

without the wound. Moreover, if the proposed definition excludes certain variations that are nevertheless possible, it must necessarily be recused as insufficiently universal. As we have seen, passivity as welcoming, reception as joy, and effect as incitement are not acknowledged in the proposed descriptions. Consequently, the agreement among the analyzed authors becomes a paradox rather than a guarantee of the description's validity. How, then, can we explain this agreement?

3. *The non-descriptive function of hyperbole*

It would be fallacious to interpret the convergence as a simple reiteration of the words of the master by his disciples, by arguing, for example, that the German connotations of the term passed surreptitiously into the writing of Lévinas or asserting that Marion and Chrétien unconsciously replicate attributes of the prophetism specific to Lévinas' Judaism. The convergence is not the effect of an unacknowledged influence. Its cause is rather to be sought in the shared source of description; or, more precisely, the technique of inversion that is directly attributable to the method of emphasis. To illustrate this point more clearly, let us note that within Lévinas' body of work there operate two very distinct uses of hyperbole. In his writing from the period 1935-1945, hyperbole appears as the controlled radicalization of the Husserlian reduction. For example, in the articles collected in *De l'existence à l'existant*, Lévinas attempted phenomenologically to approach «a boundary moment» (*moment limite*) and to think in terms of a «negation that strives to be absolute» (*négation qui se voudrait absolue*). This extreme negation has a limit that consists of that which cannot be denied – the «there is» (*il y a*). As Lévinas wrote in *Le temps et l'autre*, an imaginary destruction of any thing, what remains is not some thing, but «the there is» (Lévinas [1947]: 25). The method he employed, thus, is that of a movement from variations towards extremes, until a point where we reach that which cannot be suppressed and which, henceforth, must be posited as necessary. In *Autrement qu'être*, however, the hyperbolic negation is no longer given as an act of destruction or imaginary subtraction, but as a technique of inversion or of the reversal of a thesis labeled metaphysical. Thus, to conceive of otherness is, writes Lévinas, to «operate within the self the deliverance of a me delivered from its imperialist dream, from its transcendent imperialism, awakened to itself, patience as the subjection of the everything [*patience en tant que sujétion du tout*]» (Lévinas [1974]: 209). Or, elsewhere: «to conceive of the same animated by the other, the trauma of awakening, hyperbole»

(Lévinas [1995]: 17)¹¹ is to «reverse the metaphysical subjectivity»¹². The method consists in the removal of determinations from a given notion in order to reveal the subsisting traits, but instead to invert, reverse, and overturn a metaphysical thesis, previously identified as such. In short, hyperbole has an initial descriptive function and a subsequent critical and reflexive function. The aim is no longer to proceed with a radicalized form of the Husserlian reduction, but to deconstruct the text of tradition, such as Kant's transcendental subject, whose imperialism we uncover and which we invert to its exact opposite. It is this second method that Marion and Chrétien systematically apply. The true driving forces of the descriptions are the notions of «inversion», «reversal», and «overturning» of metaphysics¹³. Within this frame of reference, it proves fruitful to apply a sort of verification test, which shows that at each instance of a description of the call and, as a general rule, of the relationship with the other, we come across a reference to a metaphysical agreement of an omniscient subject – this reference is the very thing that justifies the way in which the call will allow itself ultimately to be defined¹⁴. That is how the subject becomes the object of the relationship; to address, to be addressed; activity, passivity. In short, the image we hold of a subject that is self-assured and dominating is overturned into a hostage figure, thrown into a world that transcends it, the «being-there» [*être-là*] in every part dominated by what exceeds and wounds it, until it reaches the threat of destruction (which appears as a dimension of trauma). As it was for Derrida, the text of tradition is interpreted, analyzed, and dismantled until it re-

¹¹ See also Levinas ([1953]: 67): «le moi est solidaire du non-moi comme si tout le sort de l'autre était entre ses mains [the me is solidary with the non-me, as if the fate of the other rested completely in its hands]».

¹² «Ce retournement doit s'effectuer jusqu'à ce qu'on parvienne à penser la "passivité hyperbolique" ou encore "l'ouverture hyperbolique à l'autre qui se situe au delà du dialogue puisqu'elle accorde à l'autre une priorité absolue" [this reversal must continue until we are able to think in terms of "hyperbolic passivity" or of a "hyperbolic opening onto the other that is situated beyond dialogue, since it accords to the other an absolute priority"]».

¹³ The three terms are given simultaneously by both Chrétien and Marion; see Marion ([1997]: 367) «l'appel ressortit au renversement de l'intentionnalité [the call appears at the reversal of intentionality]». Consider the recurrent expressions, including in the thought of Marion, such as: «contrairement à Descartes et toute la métaphysique avec lui [contrary to Descartes and all of metaphysics with him]» (363). Strikingly, Marion tends to excise Descartes from the ontotheological structure of metaphysics in his studies of the history of philosophy, yet in his writings on general phenomenology he makes the same thinker the very exemplar of metaphysics.

¹⁴ Let us cite several examples: the accession to the comprehension of another originates «from the opposite of intentionality» (Lévinas [1974]: 69); he searches for «a conscience going against the current, a conscience that is the reversal of conscience» (Lévinas [1991]: 75); the endeavor is to go «into the reverse of intentionality» (Lévinas [1961]: 180).

veals a trace of that which conceals, which it negates, which it «denies» [*de ce qu'il «dénie»*], as Marion would have it, when he writes that «metaphysical subjectivity can be defined as the entrenched denial [*dénégation butée*]» of a certain number of phenomena (such as the call or birth, among others). Tracking the denial upheld by the tradition and turning definitions on their head – such is this method, undeniably deconstructive and no longer descriptive. Furthermore, not only is there no longer a question of description *stricto sensu* but, what is more, this method of hyperbole appears to be wholly dependent on what it negates. It is precisely this aspect that we must now examine more closely.

4. *The problems emanating from the dependency of description upon deconstruction*

Two burdensome presuppositions encumber this method. First, it is evidently imperative that theses on the essence and history of metaphysics be accepted as true. Totalizing statements, such as Marion's «Descartes and all metaphysics» (Marion [1997]: 363)¹⁵ in *Etant donné*, must be legitimized, since it seems apposite to cast this history of metaphysics into doubt. We can do so, on the hand, as a heuristic hypothesis within the type of challenge that asks «and what if it is false?», a risk accepted by any rigorous method. On the other hand, we can do so by patiently demonstrating how each author of the tradition: Descartes, Leibniz, Fichte, Hegel, and others, escapes this supposed metaphysical determination of subjectivity and the supposed ontotheological structure of metaphysics. This is a hermeneutical task whose aim is to call into question the Heideggerian version of the history of philosophy. I will, of course, not take up this task at present, but examples are readily available in a variety of current commentary on the history of philosophy¹⁶. Contemporary phenomenology relies so strictly on one thesis of philosophy and its history that calling it into question would in fact bring about the hobbling of many of its analyses. Indeed, the notion of the call rests at the very foundation of the philosophical edifice of the authors considered here, since its description precipitates the determination of the relationship with otherness and the definition of a new subjectivity – a subjectivity that comes «after the subject» to borrow the closing words

¹⁵ As well as other recurring statements, such as: «that which metaphysics disqualifies unsparingly» (363).

¹⁶ Not least including in Marion's own endeavors in the history of philosophy, such as, for example, when he demonstrates the limits of the integration of Descartes into the ontotheological structure of metaphysics in *La théologie blanche*.

of *Etant donné*. Yet this description, far from being radical, autonomous, and devoid of preconceptions, is in fact dependent on a hermeneutical thesis of the history of metaphysics. If this thesis were to be recused, the philosophical framework would have to be rethought in its entirety.

In addition, even if we were to hold, as do Heidegger, Lévinas, Marion and Chrétien, as a definite given that in metaphysics the subject is indeed a proud being, sure of itself and dominating, nothing suggests that the opposite is necessarily true. To pretend that it does is to make undue use of the principle of the excluded middle within a formula that states: if not a totally active subjectivity, then an entirely passive subjectivity. In fact, however, we are not operating within the realm of logic (if not A, then non-A) in the sense that many other determinations of the subject are possible. Thus, the subject may be conceived as composed of distinct strata, variously actualized according to its particular and ever-changing situation. I may, like the Cartesian subject, fix my gaze, objectivize, and behold when I am operating within Euclidian geometry; but I can, in another instance, as Merleau-Ponty wishes, attempt to retreat to a pre-geometric space and seek to return to the living space of the flesh, to the «confused terrain of existence» (Merleau-Ponty [1948]: 360-361)¹⁷. To engage in physics is certainly not to describe the world as Cézanne would have done it, but why should the two perspectives be trapped in a binary logic and be mutually exclusive? To use a mathematical analogy, the topology excludes neither order structures nor group structures¹⁸, but rather adds itself to them without contradiction. Although Poincaré saw topology as an instrument concerned with the concrete forms that are effectively perceived by the human conscience and although he believed that mathematics could thereby better reflect the everyday objects of our lives, he nevertheless did not reject the Euclidian mathematics of quantities, measurements and figures. Euclidian space, as a simple idealization that follows an initially fluc-

¹⁷ So, further: «à cet ordre des phénomènes où nous sommes mêlés au monde et aux autres dans une confusion inextricable [to that order of phenomena where we are commingled with the world and with others in an inextricable confusion]».

¹⁸ According to the Bourbaki group, the totality of mathematical problems can be conceived in terms of the notion of structure; this notion is divisible into three groups: order structures, group structures, and topological structures. Mathematical topology is, accounting for significant changes, an extension of Leibniz's *analysis situs* (literally: situation analysis), which was a form of situational geometry. Today the study of topology necessitates no more mathematical baggage than the mastery of elementary set theory, a situation that has contributed – without, however, explaining – its widespread use outside its native discipline; for example, in the social sciences (Lacan) and in philosophy (Deleuze, Foucault, Merleau... even Marion takes on the topological concept of the fold in *Etant donné*).

tuating perception of living space, is not to be proscribed as false, but to be considered as one possible stratum of the mathematical universe. Why would we not, *mutatis mutandis*, assume the layering [*feuilletage*], the stratification of the subject, why not assume a history of metaphysics without rejection or reversal? Whatever the answers to these questions may be, having carried out our analysis, it is clear that the dependence of description on deconstruction is problematic and enjoins us to rethink the status of description in the phenomenological context. That is the issue that I will discuss in the conclusion to my analysis, by thematizing, beyond the bounds of the Lévinasian universe, what I shall call the equivocality of certain phenomenological descriptions.

5. *The equivocality of certain phenomenological descriptions*

Is it possible to formulate a truly phenomenological definition of description? We can illustrate the doubt by applying a notion other than the call, namely that of the «fold», which is frequently used by phenomenologists, from Marion who borrows it from Heidegger, to Merleau-Ponty, and at the outer limits of phenomenology by Deleuze and Foucault. The notion of the fold can have four distinct statuses – each one of them being problematic.

First, for a number of authors, the concept of the fold serves first and foremost a polemical and deconstructive function. Indeed, to say that I am like a fold in the world is to say that my body is not just a spectator outside of the world, but that it is enfolded within the world¹⁹. The fold allows us to conceive the differentiation (I am a fold in the world, I am not the world), without the severance of the *gegenstand*. This difference between the face-to-face that induces the figure of confrontation, and the fold that evokes the figure of envelopment, can easily be illustrated by the distinction between the classical perspective that exemplifies the face-to-face as recapitulated by Panofsky²⁰, and

¹⁹ The concept of the fold expresses the carnal relationship that Merleau-Ponty seeks to grasp.

²⁰ Since the Renaissance, three elements have been necessary to represent the three-dimensionality of bodies existing in space within a two-dimensional plane: a center of projection (the eye point), a body or figure to project (the represented object) and a plane of projection (the pictorial surface). The center of projection is the point from which the lines of projection emanate. If the plane of projection is situated at a finite distance, we obtain a central projection, that is, the classical perspective in which the eye of the viewer forms the center from which are projected onto the vertical plane (the painting observed by the viewer). This plane is raised on a certain horizontal plane («the geometral»). The painting and the geometral intersect along the line termed «the fundamental line» or «the ground line». The positioning of the geometral, parallel with the ground, is given by the indication of the height of the viewer's eye in relation to it. If we

the «baroque fold» as elucidated by Deleuze (1998) in his simultaneous commentary on Leibniz and the curvatures of Klee. The function of the notion of the fold is precisely to overcome the «face-to-face»²¹. In the first case, the concept of the fold has no significance other than the deconstructive, which returns us to the problems encountered earlier. That being said, the fold is also a precise topological concept to which both Merleau-Ponty and Deleuze refer so frequently²².

But this use of mathematical concepts is no less equivocal. We need not dwell here on the many reasons that render impossible the direct and literal transference²³ of

suppress the geometral, we obtain a dilution of perspectives and, ultimately, chaos; a visual void. In this face-to-face between a subject who sees and an object that is seen, the center is the eye from which emanate the objects projected onto the vertical plane (be it the painting that I observe, or the object of scientific inquiry that I examine). The subject faces the object, but is not in dialogue with it. This face-to-face is in clear opposition to the «vis-à-vis» that links two pairs of eyes that join their gaze, as described, for example, by Rougé [2006].

²¹ Yet if I am in the world and not face to face with it, neither am I entirely the world; there is a distance that is not that of the objectivizing gaze, but that of the fold in relation to the stretch of canvas of which it is a modification, bending, and inflection. The fold introduces a gap, an indentation in the continuum, but not a fracture, severance, or break. The fold is a bending, to borrow a notion from Riemannian geometry, yet belonging just as much, as Deleuze noted, to baroque architecture and music (and its nearly inversed relationship of melody and harmony). There or in perspective, things do not envelop or include one another, but are confronted, face each other; in baroque art, the fold is enveloped within a surface, itself enveloped in yet another, *ad infinitum*. For Merleau-Ponty, as for Deleuze, the fold is the notion that allows me to conceive of my insertion into the flesh of the world, my immersion in the visible world; but insertion without dissolution, since through the fold «le tissu de possibilités qui referme le visible extérieur sur le corps voyant maintient en eux un certain écart [the fabric of possibilities that closes the visible exterior upon the seeing body maintains a certain gap between them]». As with the Möbius strip, there is no rupture or discontinuity, but rather a curling in on itself, which Merleau-Ponty described at length: «mon corps est entouré par le visible [my body is *surrounded* by the visible]»; or: «mon corps est dans le visible. Cela ne veut pas dire simplement : il est un morceau du visible, là il y a le visible et ici il y a mon corps. Non. Il est entouré par le visible [my body is in the visible. This does not mean simply: it is a part of the visible, there is the visible and here is my body. No. It is *surrounded* by the visible]». (Merleau-Ponty [1964]: 172). The image is straightforward: the fold in the fabric introduces a gap (the fold is no longer the extended surface), but it is not a rift in the fabric, or a rupture into two pieces that could then face each other. The fold is an inflection that, in opposition to the plane of the painting has no top or bottom; it is a simple quivering, a curvature, a non-dimensional point.

²² Let us recall that Leibniz, whom Deleuze comments on, was the inventor of *analysis situs*, which now forms the very matrix of topology.

²³ On this point, see my analyses of topology in the thought of Merleau-Ponty: see Thomas-Fogiel [2008b]. Indeed how could we adopt these notions in all their mathematical implications? Indeed, although it is possible to mimic a Möbius configuration in the reversibility of the beholder

mathematical meaning; let us rather address the crux of the matter: if Merleau-Ponty and Deleuze wished to apply mathematical concepts without metaphorization, their entire body of work would be placed within the shadow of an invalidating performative contradiction. Indeed, through his willingness to extend mathematical notions to the most remote corners of experience [*du «vécu»*], Merleau-Ponty would be the most positivistic among positivist philosophers. While recusing the Cartesian mathematization of the world of lengths and breadths [*du monde de l'étendue*], he would aspire to nothing else than to apply the mathematical instrument to all spheres of experience! The phenomenologist would thus realize the dream of a mathematization of the world without exception, without a shadow zone, without recalcitrant opacity! Phenomenology would be the pinnacle of scientism. If phenomenology were dissolve into this contradiction from the outset, it would then obviously be misguided to wish to turn it into a symbol of the philosophical revival. Will the response to this objection be to say that we are simply in the realm of metaphors? That is what authorized commentators such as St Aubert²⁴ and Matos-Diaz (in his chapter on «the topology of reflection» in *Une poïétique du sensible*) have stated. It is from this appraisal that «the equivocality» of Merleau-Ponty follows for St Aubert and, for Matos-Dias, the idea that «art is philosophy and philosophy art» (Matos-Diaz [2001]: 162). In a word, there would no longer exist a clear frontier between literary description and phenomenological analysis. By wanting to avoid founder-

and the visible (or of the sensed and the tangible), although the importance of the notion of neighborhood seems to echo its Bourbakian centrality in the definition of topology, although it has come to light that Merleau-Ponty's notes make explicit reference to Riemannian topology in its opposition to Euclidian topology, Merleau-Ponty did not, however, define the notions of continuity, neighborhood, and limitation strictly within the framework of set theory – the sole guarantor of the coherence of these notions. Moreover, his aim was not to consider the situation of a body in space, apart from his use of the notion of distance and gap, nor was it to study its invariable properties in repeated transformations, and even less so to produce quantitative formulas to account for initially intuitive notions, such as distance or neighborhood – all tasks that define mathematical topology *stricto sensu*, in the absence of which it no longer exists.

²⁴ See St. Aubert [2004]: 20: «le philosophe fréquente parfois les marges de l'équivocité. Le danger est redoublé par la signification même de l'empiètement qui tend à mêler des champs séparés pour en brouiller les frontières. Et lorsque cette figure, *comme c'est le cas* chez Merleau-Ponty, se généralise à outrance, elle frôle un nouvel abîme: celui de détruire elle-même, faute de combattant, faute de frontières à transgresser jusqu'à se confondre avec son contraire [the philosopher at times frequents the margins of equivocality. The danger is increased by the very significance of the encroachment that tends to blend separate fields and blur their boundaries. And when this figure, *as is the case* with Merleau-Ponty, is excessively generalized, it verges on another abyss: that of its self-destruction, for lack of an opponent, lack of boundaries to transgress, so that it might eventually confuse itself with its opposite]».

ing in the mathematical science, phenomenological topology would become a metaphor aiming to elicit the affecting and no longer a concept aiming to attain the *Eidos*. As demonstrated by St Aubert, will we say, to overcome this third equivocality, that by his debt to topology Merleau-Ponty appeals more to Piaget than he does to Bourbaki? Would this not entail the turning of the empirical science that is psychology into a purveyor of philosophical truths? Psychology, based on statistical study and always adopting the third person perspective, would become the paradigm of phenomenological description, which claims to be at once universal and to speak in the first person?

In sum: either the notion of the «fold», employed by all phenomenologists, commits itself to deconstruction and subsequently becomes addled by the two problems discussed above, or it relinquishes its philosophical status by becoming either mathematical and self-contradictory, or literary and consigned to the realm of affect, or yet a regional science dependent on empirical description. This is the quadruple equivocality that we would have to overcome if we wished, as do J.L. Marion and others, to cast phenomenology as the descendant of the first philosophy and the wellspring of its revival.

6. Conclusion

Having travelled this far, what should we retain?

1) The first conclusion is that we must agree with Marion in ceasing to speak of a theological turn in phenomenology²⁵. If St Aubert was able to term Merleau-Ponty's turn as a «topological turn», it would seem that the turn emanating from Lévinas is in fact a «hyperbolic turn» and not, as we too often repeat in Janicaud's footsteps, a theological turn.

2) Nevertheless, this hyperbolic turn is problematic in terms of its descriptive status, since it is a deconstruction of the history of metaphysics. What would happen in our philosophical (phenomenological, analytical, and deconstructive) world if we succeeded in showing that metaphysical subjectivity and the ontotheological structure of philosophy are illusions on a par with Don Quixote's windmills?

²⁵ Marion aptly observed that «l'appel et la revendication déploient donc une figure phénoménologique propre singulière et irréductible qui exige qu'on la décrive pour elle-même, c'est à dire sans faire acception des autorités successives (l'être, père, autrui) [the call and the claim thus establish an individual, singular, an irreducible phenomenological figure that demands to be described unto itself, that is, without admitting successive authorities (being, father, other)]».

3) Our analysis of the relationship between description and deconstruction has, among other things, allowed us to present a synthesis of the problem of description: are descriptive concepts metaphors, topological concepts and thus mathematical, empirical concepts within the purview of psychology and sociology, or yet, and once more, polemical concepts strictly dependent on that which they negate? In a word, what is the thing we call description?

4) Finally, we can take away from this analysis three conclusions that are positive, in the sense that they indicate three possible tasks of reflection: the first is a hermeneutical task that requires an inquiry into the history of metaphysics. The second task is a reflection on argumentation in philosophy. We have seen the notion of necessity emerge repeatedly – it not only seemed to distinguish empirical from phenomenological description, but also seemed the surest means of characterizing the former's specificity. To discuss, describe, deconstruct, analyze, and interpret – are they not all practices unified in one and the same activity, that is, the pretension to validity that is characteristic of the philosophical activity, pretension that implies an adherence to a number of *necessary* conditions, which argumentation, whether or not transcendental, is charged with elucidating? That is the second question, the second avenue opened by our analysis. The third, and last task, is one of integration. Rather than oppose one subject to another, can we not integrate them within one «layered subject» [*sujet feuilleté*], if we dare here to risk a notion at once topological and gastronomical (the connotation of *feuilleté* being that of the thinly layered pastry)? Is not the subject, in turn, a physicist facing the object, a painter immersed in worldly flesh, and a perpetually distracted child who, come snack time, always confuses his doughnut and his cup of tea²⁶? Why should these attitudes be exclusive? To conclude with a painting analogy: many are the painters who, since the 1960s, have criticized the face to face relationship with paintings imposed by museums and who called, through performances and happenings, for an art that was integrated into the environment, an art that can become its own world, and a spectator who becomes actor, participant and artist. In this optic, Rauschenberg's *Solstices* (1968,



²⁶ I allude here to the venerable joke about the topologist who cannot tell the difference between a teacup and a doughnut. For Merleau, as for Piaget, the topological space is that of the child before the age of eight.

Mixed media, National Museum of Art, Osaka) can be seen as a condensation of the theses of contemporary phenomenology, the crystallization of the relationship with the world idealized by Merleau-Ponty. The subject is here no longer in a position of primacy, but is inserted into the world, enclosed by it, forever «in situation»²⁷. In Rauschenberg's *Solstices* installation we have a sort of casting into image of one of Merleau-Ponty's key concepts, that is, the topological notion of «reversibility»; reversibility of positions, in as much as we are all at once, at the same time, and within the same relation: spectator and actor, content of the work and author of its form, subject and object. Yet, must this position be conceived as *ipso facto* excluding the other position, that of figurative painting? Did this painting not already contain the insertion, the participation, the setting in



situation? It was, after all, in reference to a painting by Piero Della Francesca, a mathematician painter if ever there was one, that Baxandall (could write these words about the character who from within the canvas of *The Baptism of Christ* (1440-1460, Oil on canvas, National Gallery, London) «calls» and «invites»: «On his own, the angel establishes a relationship between himself and us [...] In this way we are invited to participate in the group of figures assisting at the event. We alternate *between our own frontal view as spectator of the action and the actor's personal relationship with the angel group, so that [...] we become active accessories to the event*» (Baxandall [1980]: 120).

Bibliography

Alberti, L.B., 1435: *De Pictura*. Trad. fr. di Th. Golsenne e B. Prévost, rev. da Y. Hersant, Seuil, Paris 2004.

Arasse, D., 1990: *Le détail, pour une autre histoire de la peinture*, Flammarion, Paris.

Baxandall, M., 1985: *L'œil du quattrocento*, Paris, Gallimard.

²⁷ Rauschenberg wrote of *Solstice*: «It was composed of transparent panels through which we could pass: when you were on the inside, you modified their colors. You were at once viewer, actor, and pigment».

- Benoist, J., 2003: *L'écart plutôt que l'excédent*, "Philosophie", 78, pp. 77-93.
- Chrétien, J.L., 1992: *L'appel et la réponse*, Minuit, Paris.
- Deleuze, G., 1998: *Le pli, Leibniz et le baroque*, Minuit, Paris.
- Janicaud, D., 1992: *Le tournant théologique de la phénoménologie*, éd. de l'Eclat, Paris.
- Heidegger, M., 1927: *Sein und Zeit*, in *Gesamtausgabe*, a cura di F-W. von Herrmann, 1, 2, Vittorio Klostermann, Frankfurt a.M., 1977.
- Heidegger, M., 1929: *Was ist metaphysik?*, in *Gesamtausgabe*, a cura di F-W. von Herrmann, 1, 9, Vittorio Klostermann, Frankfurt a.M., 1978.
- Lellouche, R., 2006: *Difficile Lévinas*, éd. de l'Eclat, Paris.
- Lévinas, E., 1947: *De l'Existence à l'existant*, éd. de la Revue Fontaine, Paris.
- Lévinas, E., 1961: *Totalité et infini. Essai sur l'extériorité*, M. Nijhoff, La Haye.
- Lévinas, E. 1980: *Le Temps et l'Autre*, Fata Morgana, Montpellier.
- Lévinas, E., 1990: *Autrement qu'être ou au-delà de l'essence*, LGF, Paris.
- Lévinas, E. 1991: *Entre Nous. Essais sur le penser-à-l'autre*, Grasset, Paris.
- Lévinas, E., 1992: *De Dieu qui vient à l'idée*, Vrin, Paris.
- Lévinas, E., 1994: *Liberté et commandement*, Fata Morgana, Montpellier.
- Lévinas, E., 1995: *Altérité et transcendance*, Fata Morgana, Montpellier.
- Neher, A., 1950: *Contributions à l'étude du prophétisme*, Paris, Vrin.
- Merleau-Ponty, M., 1948: *Sens et non sens*, Nagel, Paris.
- Merleau-Ponty, M., 1964: *Le visible et l'invisible*, a cura di C. Lefort, Gallimard, Paris.
- Marion, J.L., 1989: *Réduction et donation*, PUF, Paris.
- Marion, J.L., 1997: *Etant donné*, PUF, Paris.
- Matos-Diaz, I., 2001: *Merleau-Ponty, Une poïétique du sensible*, Presses Universitaires du Mirail, Toulouse.
- Petitot, J., 1993: *Topologie phénoménale: sur l'actualité scientifique de la phusis phénoménologique de Merleau-Ponty*, in *Merleau-Ponty, le philosophe et son langage*, "Cahiers du groupe de recherche sur la philosophie et le langage", a cura di F. Heidsieck, 15, pp. 291-312.
- Richir, M., 1992: *Méditations phénoménologiques*, Million, Bruxelles.
- Ricoeur, P., 1955: *Aux frontières de la philosophie II. Philosophie et prophétisme*, in "Esprit", 23, pp. 1928-1939.
- Rougé, B., 2006: *Pontormo, Lévinas et le vis à vis de peinture*, "Revue de Métaphysique et de morale", 4, pp. 523-543.
- St. Aubert, E., 2001: *Sources et sens de la topologie chez Merleau-Ponty*, "Alter", 9, pp. 331-364.

- St. Aubert, E., 2004: *Du lien des êtres aux éléments de l'être*, Vrin, Paris.
- Sebbah, F.D., 2001: *L'épreuve de la limite, Derrida, Henry, Lévinas et la phénoménologie*, PUF, Paris.
- Tengelyi, L., 2006: *Introduction à la phénoménologie contemporaine française*, «Richir», Ellipses, Paris, pp. 97-109.
- Thomas-Fogiel, I., 2005: *Référence et autoréférence: essai sur le thème de la mort de la philosophie dans la pensée contemporaine*, Vrin, Paris. Trad. amer. di R. Lynch, *The Death of Philosophy*, Columbia University Press, New York, 2011.
- Thomas-Fogiel, I., 2008a: *Spatialiser nos concepts, la tentative de Merleau-Ponty*, "Symposium. Revue bilingue de philosophie continentale", 12, 2, pp. 147-161.
- Thomas-Fogiel, I., 2008b: *Le concept et le lieu, études sur les figures de la relation entre art et philosophie*, Cerf, Paris.
- Thomas-Fogiel, I., 2010: *Fichte and Lévinas. The Theory of Meaning and the Advent of the Infinite*, in *Fichte and the Phenomenological Tradition*, a cura di D. Breazeale, De Gruyter, Berlin, pp. 327-340.
- Thomas-Fogiel, I., 2011a: *Merleau-Ponty: De la perspective au chiasme*, "Chiasmi International", 13, pp. 381-406.
- Thomas-Fogiel, I., 2011b, *L'espace chez Merleau-Ponty, problèmes et enjeux contemporains*, Atti del convegno *Reading Merleau Ponty* (Beijing, 5-6 September 2008), Beijing University Press, Beijing, pp. 43-62. Trad. fr.: http://www.cerium.ca/contenu30.html?id_mot=468
- Wittgenstein, L., 1937-1944: *Bemerkungen über die Grundlagen der Mathematik*, in *Werkausgabe*, vol. 6, a cura di G.E.M. Anscombe, R.Rhees e G.H. von Wright, Suhrkamp Verlag KG, Berlin 1984.