

**BETWEEN SEPARATION AND ENCOUNTER:
LEVINASIAN METAPHYSICS AND THE QUESTION OF PHENOMENOLOGY**

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ABSTRACT

Contemporary French phenomenologists, including Emmanuel Levinas, explored the boundaries of the phenomenological method of Edmund Husserl. In *Totality and Infinity* Levinas offers a phenomenology of an encounter with an Other that challenges the very limits of the subject. In “The Theological Turn of French Phenomenology,” Dominique Janicaud claims that this Other breaks with the phenomenological method—by abandoning immanent phenomenality and by subversively importing theological content into phenomenological reflection. To the contrary, I argue that Levinas offers a genuinely phenomenological work and that phenomenology cannot preclude the theological implications that may result therefrom. I draw on Jean-Luc Marion’s analysis of Husserl’s principle of all principles to challenge Janicaud’s preclusion of absolute Otherness from intentional experience and subsequently defend Levinas on the following grounds: (i) that phenomenology must accept the possibility of an encounter with the divine and (ii) that Levinas never leaves the scope of phenomenological reflection insofar as his talk of God is always also talk of the human Other. The defence argues that Levinas does not offer a methodologically untenable phenomenology of God but rather a methodologically sound phenomenology of an experience with the infinite—an infinite which definitively confirms only the subject’s finite limits but which opens theological possibilities.

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If there is such a thing as a typical route through graduate school, I have not taken it. Nonetheless, what has remained constant through these years in academic philosophy and into my current work in children's mental health, is my interest in the human struggle to process one's place in a world of selves and of others. What has always spoken to me in Levinas is that our most unique *self* is also profoundly *other*, and that *otherness* provokes a deeply personal event in the *self*.

Showing surprising insight, my supervisor Dr. Sean McGrath once said, "Trina, I'm not sure if you'll write this thesis. But if you do, I think it will be good." I would like to give sincere thanks to him, for understanding my earliest intuitions about Levinas—even before I did—and for his encouragement to pursue them over these (many) years. Much gratitude is offered to other faculty members for their ideas, guidance, and support. And though we've all moved on in one way or another I have the fondest memories of my fellow students Sarah, Emily, Vahid, and Daniel. Finally, the deepest gratitude is extended to my first mentor, Dr. Karen Houle.

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INTRODUCTION

The aim of this thesis is to defend the encounter with the Other¹ as Levinas describes it in *Totality and Infinity* against the claims of Dominique Janicaud in “The Theological Turn of French Phenomenology.”² The thesis does so by developing the notion that Janicaud too narrowly defines phenomenology—both in terms of phenomenality and in the scope of possibility he permits to emerge from genuine experience.

A student of Husserl and of Heidegger, Levinas played a significant role in introducing German phenomenology to France and influenced the existential projects of both Sartre and Merleau-Ponty.³ Over his career, Levinas articulated his own phenomenology, which has become known for narrating the encounter with the face of the human Other. This human Other always transcends the subject’s comprehension, which in turn provokes debate on the definition of phenomenology—a branch of philosophy that deals with conscious experience. In addition, the face of the Other raises the question of divine experience because, Levinas writes, it is “the manifestation of the height in which God is revealed.”⁴ Janicaud claims Levinas’s work demonstrates a shift away from the method of phenomenology and toward theology. Specifically, Levinas is said to have broken with Husserlian phenomenality and to have brought the divine into phenomenological experience in contradiction to Husserl’s exclusion of God.

¹ The following two technical conventions are noted here: (i) This version of Janicaud’s critique (“The Theological Turn”) comes from a collection in a book and therefore takes quotation marks rather than italics for in-text citations. (ii) When referring to the *Levinasian Other* in passages of my own wording, *Other* will always be capitalized. However, the upper/lower case distinctions in direct quotations (from Levinas and other authors) will be followed as they appear in the original texts.

² Dominique Janicaud, “The Theological Turn of French Phenomenology” in *Phenomenology and the Theological Turn: The French Debate*, Dominique Janicaud et al., trans. Jeffrey L. Kosky (New York: Fordham University Press, 2000), 48.

³ Colin Davis, *Levinas: An Introduction* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1996), 1.

⁴ Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969), 79.

To the extent that he holds fast to his identity as a phenomenologist and at the same time appears to challenge some of the field's key concepts, one could argue that Levinas maintains a constant relationship with phenomenology throughout his career. While I will argue there has been no break with phenomenology, Levinas is, indeed, rather ambiguous in his use of the method. He considers his work phenomenological even though the face of the Other seems to resist phenomenological reduction. On the one hand, he challenges aspects of Husserlian phenomenology and argues that the encounter with the Other is fundamentally different from the encounter with the phenomenon as typically defined. On the other hand, he claims his ideas “owe everything to the phenomenological method”⁵ and that “the Other is the principle of phenomena.”⁶

Furthermore, it is possible that the aforementioned ambiguity is not without purpose; when Levinas employs phenomenological concepts in ways that seem to transgress their conventional applications, he provokes a conversation about their boundaries—a conversation which leads us closer to and not further from the Husserlian method. This thesis argues that we ought not to exclude Levinas from having produced a genuine phenomenological work.

Levinas, moreover, is not alone in exploring the scope of phenomenology. Many philosophers have interrogated its boundaries, including Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, Ricœur, Derrida, Marion, and Henry.⁷ In fact, Levinas is just one among several phenomenologists whom Janicaud accuses of following a theological turn away from Husserlian phenomenology.

Janicaud is not wrong to question Levinas's methodology as even Levinas himself tends to deflect such details. He is quoted as saying that the focus on method has been to the detriment of the work that philosophy could have otherwise achieved—“so much the worse for the philosophy

⁵ Levinas, *Totality*, 28.

⁶ Levinas, *Totality*, 92.

⁷ Janicaud, “Theological Turn,” 16.

that would walk in sunlight without shadows.”⁸ It is open for debate as to whether Levinas’s attempt at “‘overflowing’ phenomenology” purports to transgress the method or to preserve it.⁹ Indeed, Janicaud is absolutely correct to highlight that Levinas both employs and challenges phenomenology.¹⁰ Janicaud himself notes that phenomenology “belongs to nobody,”¹¹ but he insists that Levinas’s work is methodologically “unsupportable.”¹² On the matter of method, “the question remains open,”¹³ although this is not to say that a Levinasian defense cannot be constructed.

Janicaud concludes that Levinas oversteps the boundaries of phenomenology, but if this is so, why the constant effort to wrestle with the phenomenological method across his career? If Levinas’s only aim were to demonstrate the limitations of phenomenological experience, why does he consistently identify as a phenomenologist? Levinas appears invested in the method of phenomenology and in the integrity of its interpretation. Given that methodological detail is not Levinas’s primary focus, he never definitively clarifies whether his work transgresses, remains within, or transforms phenomenology; this thesis, however, in keeping with his constant identification with the discipline, develops the claim that Levinas is a phenomenologist as such.

The defence of Levinas presented here is mounted on two grounds: first, that phenomenology cannot exclude the possibility of an experience of the divine and, second, that when Levinas talks about God, he is always also talking about the human and so never leaving the pale of the phenomenological reduction.

⁸ Emmanuel Levinas, *Of God Who Comes to Mind*, trans. Bettina Bergo (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 89.

⁹ Janicaud, “Theological Turn,” 48.

¹⁰ Janicaud, “Theological Turn,” 43.

¹¹ Janicaud, “Theological Turn,” 30.

¹² Janicaud, “Theological Turn,” 36.

¹³ Janicaud, “Theological Turn,” 49.

Chapter 1 lays the groundwork for understanding Janicaud's critique and the subsequent defence of Levinas. It provides a review of selected literature on the question of Levinas as phenomenologist (section 1.1), an overview of the phenomenological method (section 1.2), an account of Levinasian experience (section 1.3), and finally a sketch of Janicaud's challenge to Levinas (section 1.4).

Chapter 2 argues that phenomenology can and must accommodate encounters with absolute Otherness. I begin with a summary of the metaphysical encounter with the Other in the context of phenomenological experience (section 2.1). I then demonstrate that Janicaud's challenge to Levinas reflects an overly narrow interpretation of phenomenological experience (section 2.2). I do so by drawing on Jean-Luc Marion's analysis of Husserl's "principle of all principles" in *Being Given: Toward a Phenomenology of Givenness*, in which he argues that phenomenology must recognize the possibility of inverse intentions. Phenomenology must respect this possibility so as not to violate the principle of all principles, which stipulates that phenomena must be accepted in the terms in which they present themselves. Lastly, I conclude that Levinas's work is genuinely phenomenological (section 2.3).

In Chapter 3, I will claim that the way in which the theological emerges from Levinasian philosophy is not contradictory with phenomenology and that phenomenology cannot exclude the possibility of an encounter with the divine. This line of reasoning will be developed through the following three arguments: that, in contradiction to Janicaud's interpretation that the Levinasian Other *is* God, the experience of absolute otherness is uncharacterizable, and therefore it does not lead definitively to God but rather to the *possibility of* God (section 3.1); that from a Husserlian perspective phenomenology and God are not wholly mutually exclusive (section 3.2); and that the possibility of God is always concurrent with the concrete human Other, and so Levinas's talk of

God never departs from phenomenological experience (section 3.3). Finally, I conclude that theology is grounded in human experience (section 3.4).

CHAPTER 1: GROUNDWORK

In “The Theological Turn,” Janicaud argues that Levinas breaks with the intentional structure of Husserlian experience. This is because the face of the Other as described in *Totality and Infinity* exceeds all conceptual powers of the subject, and, so it would seem, cannot be considered a phenomenological appearance. Levinas offers no methodological justification in defence of this experience. Furthermore, this face does not only fall outside the scope of Husserlian phenomenality but the infinity of face of the Other is the infinity of the biblical God—bringing theological content into what should be neutral phenomenological reflection. What follows is a selection of the philosophical discourse in response to the question of Levinas’s alleged departure from phenomenology.

1.1 Review of Literature

Janicaud’s critique can be separated into two major areas of concern: a methodological question as to whether or not absolute Otherness counts as a phenomenon (literature on this question will be reviewed in section 1.1.1), and whether or not Levinas is engaged in a theological project that draws God into phenomenology (literature on this question will be reviewed in section 1.1.2).

1.1.1 Levinas and Methodology

Literature on Levinas’s use of the phenomenological method is varied; Levinas is variously considered to have broken with, remained within, or transformed the phenomenological method. In *Levinas’ ‘Totality and Infinity*, William Large considers Levinas to have departed from the

phenomenological method of Husserl. The Levinasian Other, he claims, is not constituted by the intentionality of the subject because the Other is never given in the subject's intuition.¹⁴ Rather, the Other is given in speech.¹⁵ This way in which the Other is given differs from all other phenomena, making it an "extra-ordinary phenomenon," and therefore Large concludes that Levinas has broken with the intuition of Husserl's principle of all principles¹⁶ (which will be explained shortly). The next interpretation will suggest that finite intuitions reflect only one sort of phenomenality accommodated by Husserl's principle of all principles and so the Other is indeed commensurable with the method.

In contrast to Large's interpretation, Jean-Luc Marion explains that absolute Otherness, conceived of in the Levinasian sense, remains faithful to the phenomenological method of Husserl. Specifically, the Other does not transgress intentional experience but rather proposes the possibility of an inverse intentionality or what Marion also calls a "counterconsciousness."¹⁷

Husserl's principle of all principles explains how phenomenology must simply explain that which is encountered in the way it is encountered.¹⁸ Or, that all phenomena give the terms in which they are to be understood and that phenomenologists must admit the phenomena in the terms in which they give themselves. Marion argues that the definition of the phenomenon found in this principle has been consistently defined too narrowly in the phenomenological tradition, and in a way that restricts its fullest possibility by absolutizing intuition within finite limits. He thus

¹⁴ William Large, *Levinas' 'Totality and Infinity'* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015), 5.

¹⁵ Large, *'Totality and Infinity'*, 8.

¹⁶ Large, *'Totality and Infinity'*, 5.

¹⁷ Jean-Luc Marion, *Being Given: Toward a Phenomenology of Givenness* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 266.

¹⁸ Edmund Husserl, *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy: First Book; General Introduction to a Pure Phenomenology* ("Ideas I"), trans. F. Kersten (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 1983), 44.

provides a methodological exposition as to how infinite, transcendent, and absolute manifestations fall within the scope of the phenomenological method.

Neither broken with nor remained within, Adriaan Peperzak claims Levinas has created a method of “transformed phenomenology.”¹⁹ Levinas moves away from intentionality, he argues, toward the “‘pre-original’ and transcendent.”²⁰ The essential experience of the face to face encounter cannot be captured by a phenomenology which views phenomena in too homogeneous a manner. He does note that Levinas “still wavers”²¹ on this point in *Totality and Infinity*, but claims that Levinas ultimately moves beyond conventional phenomenology.²²

1.1.2 Levinas and the Divine

Regarding the question of the content of Levinas’s phenomenology, that is, whether Levinas is attempting a phenomenology of God (which would contradict the scope of phenomenology), opinions again vary: some consider God to be completely absent from Levinas’s philosophical work; some consider God to be present but only metaphorically so; others challenge the scope of Husserl’s exclusion of God from phenomenology.

William Large writes that the matter is dependent on what one means by the term God. He argues that since God is not an ontological being for Levinas, he does not contravene the method of phenomenology by “smuggling” God into experience.²³ It is not a matter of believing or not believing in the existence of God because “existence is not a category applicable to the meaning of God.”²⁴ He suggests that Levinas instead is committed more to religion than he is to the idea of

¹⁹ Adriaan Peperzak, “Levinas’ Method,” *Research in Phenomenology* 28 (January 1998): 111.

²⁰ Peperzak, “Levinas’ Method,” 113.

²¹ Peperzak, “Levinas’ Method,” 114.

²² Peperzak, “Levinas’ Method,” 115.

²³ Large, ‘*Totality and Infinity*,’ 126–27.

²⁴ Large, ‘*Totality and Infinity*,’ 127.

God, and that one could argue that Levinas does not believe in God at all.²⁵ In similar fashion, Colin Davis argues that the God of which Levinas speaks is not something to be believed in or not. Instead, when the subject encounters that which exceeds itself in Levinas's face to face encounter, this encounter with the infinitely inconceivable does not prove God's existence but justifies using the word *God*, insofar as the word stands in for the "area of sense not commanded by consciousness."²⁶

Some readers have considered that when Levinas speaks of God he does so purely metaphorically and so remains phenomenological. In "Phenomenology and the Possibility of Religious Experience," Ronald Mercer argues that Levinas "gets tied up in religious language," but his aim is to describe the development of the subject.²⁷ He argues that the way that the subject is formed in Levinas depends on certain metaphors or models that utilize religious language, but which are not necessarily religious. These models include the infinite God of Descartes and the Good Beyond Being of Plato.²⁸ God, the Infinite, and the Good are different terms which function as congruent structures of transcendence, and accordingly Levinas's work is not theological given that Levinas's use of religious language is metaphorical. Similarly, Adriaan Peperzak claims that the idea of infinity Levinas borrowed from Descartes ought not to be viewed as representing God.²⁹ Peperzak explains that the idea of infinity is largely a structural analogy, and the infinite referred to by Levinas represents a transcending of what can be contained within the space of the mind, rather than representing God.

²⁵ Large, *Totality and Infinity*, 128.

²⁶ Davis, *Levinas*, 97–98.

²⁷ Ronald L. Mercer, Jr., "Phenomenology and the Possibility of Religious Experience." *Open Theology* 3, no. 1 (October 2017): 517, doi.org/10.1515/opth-2017-0039.

²⁸ Mercer, "Religious Experience," 521.

²⁹ Peperzak, "Levinas' Method," 121–22.

Other authors have emphasized nuance in Husserl's exclusion of God from philosophy. For example, Christopher Yates posits that Janicaud interprets Husserl's exclusion of God too pervasively. He suggests that Husserl does not exclude God completely from phenomenology, but only to the extent that religious consciousness might potentially interfere with the return to pure conscious experience or might bias the constituting Ego.³⁰ In Yates's interpretation, Janicaud interprets the exclusion too widely by excluding the possibility of religious manifestation.³¹ To make this claim, he draws on Erazim Kohák's explications in *Idea and Experience: Husserl's Project of Phenomenology in Ideas I*, in which he argues that, having suspended beliefs about the world, one might be tempted to use God to explain experience.³² Kohák claims that phenomenology can deal with all kinds of experiences, even those which may in fact be caused by God, insofar as these projects describe experiences rather than attempt to explain their causes. His analysis of Husserl supports a defense of Levinas to the extent that *Totality and Infinity* keeps its discussion of theological possibility grounded in subjective experience.

With the above context in mind, I argue that what Levinas offers is a genuine phenomenology of an unknowable experience—an experience which may be divine.

In line with Marion, the possibility of inverse or non-finite intentionalities follows directly from Husserl's principle of all principles. Therefore, and in contrast to Large's interpretation, I argue that to exclude the Levinasian Other insofar as its manifestation exceeds all subjective constitution is a contravention of the principle of all principles and of the Husserlian method. In divergence from Peperzak, this line of reasoning defends Levinas as a phenomenologist as such;

³⁰ Christopher Yates, "Checking Janicaud's Arithmetic: How Phenomenology and Theology 'Make Two,'" *Analectica Hermeneutica*, no. 1 (May 2009): 88, <https://journals.library.mun.ca/ojs/index.php/analecta/article/view/7/7>.

³¹ Yates, "Janicaud's Arithmetic," 88.

³² Erazim V. Kohák, *Idea and Experience: Edmund Husserl's Project of Phenomenology in Ideas I* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), 41.

it does not require that we view phenomenology as in need of transformation in the first place (although the interpretation thereof may require it). Thus, the way is cleared methodologically for absolute Otherness.

Having defended the phenomenality of the Other, I clarify how the divine plays into Levinas's work. The infinite is neither *God*, nor (as Mercer, Davis, and Peperzak propose) *not God* but, instead, the *possibility of God*. That is to say, insofar as the encounter remains outside of subjective constitution and so always incomprehensible, the possibility of God cannot be excluded. In addition, when the text of Levinas does refer to God, it remains within the sphere of phenomenological reduction in that to speak of God is always to speak of a human Other and a human experience.

1.2 Phenomenology

Phenomenology aims “to get at the truth of matters, to describe *phenomena*, in the broadest sense as whatever appears in the manner in which it appears, that is, as it manifests itself to consciousness, to the experiencer.”³³ If phenomenology is to study what appears, it must inspect what appears in an unobscured manner; this means suspending beliefs and theories to prevent their imposition “before the phenomena have been understood from within.”³⁴

Phenomenology is a philosophy that returns to subjective experience. It has been described as “radical,”³⁵ but it is hard to imagine in modern days what is so radical about the idea that subjective experience could be a source of truth. However, according to the “egocentric predicament” consciousness was understood as being self-contained. Subjective experiences were

³³ Dermot Moran, *Introduction to Phenomenology* (London: Routledge, 2000), 4.

³⁴ Moran, *Introduction to Phenomenology*, 4.

³⁵ Moran, *Introduction to Phenomenology*, 4.

then presumed to be copies of what lay outside in the “real” world, accessed across the subject-object divide by mental processes such as inference.³⁶ The radicality of phenomenology is that it overcomes this divide by proposing that the subject engages directly with the world—not indirectly across some non-traversable void of uncertainty (which would leave our perceptions always somehow in need of external validation) but instead with our perceptions validated from within subjectivity. In phenomenology, the subject is always in relation with the world insofar as its conscious experiences are structured by intentionality.³⁷

1.2.1 Phenomenological Experience

Phenomenology proposes, through its theory of intentionality, that there is no independent consciousness to find itself divided from its object. Subjective experience is always directed toward something, says Husserl; “we understand the own peculiarity of mental processes ‘to be conscious of something.’”³⁸ Husserl writes that “acting bears upon action. Doing bears upon the deed. Loving bears upon the loved one, being glad bears upon the gladsome, and so forth. In every actional cogito a radiating ‘regard’ is directed from the pure Ego to the ‘object’ of the consciousness-correlate in question.”³⁹ These examples of experience—acting, doing, loving, gladness—demonstrate that subjectivity is directed toward objects of experience. There is no experience of acting without what is acted upon. Moreover, the action always proceeds in an outward direction that originates from the subject.

³⁶ Robert Sokolowski, *Introduction to Phenomenology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 9.

³⁷ Sokolowski, *Introduction to Phenomenology*, 9.

³⁸ Husserl, *Ideas I*, 200.

³⁹ Husserl, *Ideas I*, 200.

Intentional experience can be broken down further into its noetic-noematic structure.⁴⁰ The noesis is the act of consciousness that projects from the subject toward the state of affairs (seeing, remembering, etc.), and the noema is “any object of intentionality, but . . . considered just as it is experienced.”⁴¹ In Husserl’s excerpt, referred to in the previous paragraph, the noema would be the “loved one” but the loved one *as experienced* by the subject. To take one of Husserl’s examples above, the act of “bearing upon” demonstrates the intentional relation between “loving” and the “loved one.” Accordingly, the act’s noetic structure means that it is the lover, whose act of loving “bears upon the loved one,” or in other words, that the act or experience radiates from the subject *toward* the object noetically.

Even though the noema is the object of an experience, it should not be conflated with the object insofar as the object would exist independently in the *world*. Instead, Husserl tells us we are restricted to describing our internal conscious experience of the object as it becomes meaningful to us in our experience. As he explains, “we have to abide by what is given in the pure mental process and to take it within the frame of clarity precisely as it is given. The ‘actual’ Object is then to be ‘parenthesized.’”⁴²

Structured intentionally, phenomenological experience overcomes the divide between subject and object. Subjectivity is “inextricably involved in the process of constituting objectivity,” so phenomenology indeed deals with objectivity in that it “deals with it as ‘objectivity-for-subjectivity.’”⁴³ Husserl explains that intentional acts confer a meaning or sense onto the objects perceived. He writes that “every attentive mental process is precisely noetic,” that each conscious act “include[s] in itself something such as a ‘sense’ and possibly a manifold sense on the basis of

⁴⁰ Husserl, *Ideas I*, 211.

⁴¹ Sokolowski, *Introduction to Phenomenology*, 60–61.

⁴² Husserl, *Ideas I*, 211.

⁴³ Moran, *Introduction to Phenomenology*, 15.

this sense-bestowal and, in unity with that, to effect further productions [*Leistungen*] which become ‘senseful’ precisely by <this sense-bestowal>.”⁴⁴ Sokolowski clarifies that we should not take the term *constitution* too colloquially; it “should not be taken to mean anything like a creation or an imposition of subjective forms on reality. In phenomenology, to ‘constitute’ means to bring it forth, to actualize its truth.”⁴⁵ In fact, Husserl also employs other terms for the process of constitution that seem less open to interpretation.⁴⁶ For example, he also refers to the process of constituting as “‘manifesting’ and ‘exhibiting.’”⁴⁷ As Sokolowski emphasizes, “we cannot manifest a thing any way we please; we cannot make an object mean anything we wish. We can bring a thing to light only if the thing offers itself in a certain light.”⁴⁸

1.2.2 Phenomenological Reduction

However, these structures of experience are not clear to us in our regular daily life, in which we have a sort of “default perspective.”⁴⁹ The phenomenological term for this perspective is the “natural attitude,” wherein beliefs and theories (which come to us through culture, religion, and science) direct our understanding of the world.⁵⁰ We can, however, suspend all of these beliefs and reflect more authentically on our experiences insofar as they are intentional. Shifting from the natural attitude into this new attitude is called the “phenomenological reduction.”⁵¹ Shifting into a

⁴⁴ Husserl, *Ideas I*, 213.

⁴⁵ Sokolowski, *Introduction to Phenomenology*, 17.

⁴⁶ The interpretation of Husserl’s noetic-noematic structure of experience and of intentional constitution is rich with debate and, accordingly, nuance on this particular matter is warranted. For example, Moran is in agreement with Sokolowski that it would be anti-Husserlian to interpret constitution as though it were promoting a subjective idealism; even so, Moran highlights that “Husserl does actually speak of transcendental consciousness as giving both meaning and *being* to the world, but ‘being’ here means the manner in which beings appear to consciousness, being-for-us as opposed to being-in-itself (terms Husserl himself employs).” (Moran, *Introduction to Phenomenology*, 165.)

⁴⁷ Moran, *Introduction to Phenomenology*, 165.

⁴⁸ Sokolowski, *Introduction to Phenomenology*, 17.

⁴⁹ Sokolowski, *Introduction to Phenomenology*, 42.

⁵⁰ Moran, *Introduction to Phenomenology*, 4.

⁵¹ Sokolowski, *Introduction to Phenomenology*, 49.

phenomenological reflection upon the natural attitude is not to be equated with doubting what appears to us in the natural attitude; “we do not change our intentionalities, we keep them as they are, but we contemplate them.”⁵² Phenomenology respects the engagement between consciousness and the world, so when we understand what it means to enter into phenomenological reduction, we are interested in what we perceive and how we perceive it; “in other words, the way problems, things and events are approached must involve *taking their manner of appearance to consciousness into consideration.*”⁵³

1.2.3 The Principle of All Principles

Husserl’s works are dense and complex, but he notes the absolute clarity imparted by his principle of all principles, writing that “no conceivable theory can make us err with respect to [it].”⁵⁴ It illustrates many of the essential features of phenomenology covered so far: that one has a direct relationship with the reality of the world in the form of intentionality, that one must reflect on these intentionalities as they appear and uninfluenced by preconceived beliefs, and that what appears as it appears has truth to it. These features are reflected in §24 of *Ideas I*, an excerpt from which states the following:

Every originary presentive intuition is a legitimizing source of cognition, that *everything originarily* (so to speak, in its “personal” actuality) *offered* to us in “intuition” is to be accepted simply as what it is presented as being, but also *only within the limits in which it is presented there.*⁵⁵

When Husserl explains that a phenomenon is “to be accepted simply as what it is presented as being,” we are to understand that the phenomenologist must openly and honestly remove from her

⁵² Sokolowski, *Introduction to Phenomenology*, 48.

⁵³ Moran, *Introduction to Phenomenology*, 6.

⁵⁴ Husserl, *Ideas I*, 44.

⁵⁵ Husserl, *Ideas I*, 44.

mind all preconceptions and acknowledge the presentation of the phenomenon in whatever manner it genuinely presents itself. The point of the principle of all principles is to let *the thing* determine the categories with which it is understood.

In terms of phenomenology more broadly, the development of the phenomenological movement begins with Edmund Husserl.⁵⁶ It might be tempting to think of phenomenology as a homogeneous discipline, but Moran offers the following caution: “it is important not to exaggerate, as some interpreters have done, the extent to which phenomenology coheres into an agreed method.”⁵⁷ The phenomenological tradition is fleshed out by many phenomenologists who took up the turn to subjective experience in different ways. In fact, one of the most fascinating features of phenomenology’s focus on subjective experience is the multitude and diversity of experiences opened up for philosophical understanding. As stated, this rich inheritance that develops within the phenomenological tradition begins with Husserl, and one challenge its followers will face is to maintain its origins in him while also eschewing the dogmatism and presupposition in opposition to which the movement modelled itself.

1.3 The Philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas

Emmanuel Levinas holds an interesting place in continental philosophy, and his works raise particularly interesting questions in the context of the phenomenological tradition. This section contextualizes the question at hand—Levinas as phenomenologist—by providing a brief background on Levinas’s explorations of phenomenological experience (section 1.3.1) before

⁵⁶ Sokolowski, *Introduction to Phenomenology*, 211.

⁵⁷ Moran, *Introduction to Phenomenology*, 3.

sketching an account of Levinasian ethics (sections 1.3.2 to 1.3.4), and then finally returning to the specifics of Janicaud's critique upon which I will focus for the remainder of this work.

1.3.1 Levinas and the Structure of Phenomenological Experience

Early in his career, Levinas wrote that “what is interesting about the Husserlian conception [of intentionality] is its having put contact with the world at the very heart of the being of consciousness.”⁵⁸ Over time, however, Levinas waivers on the issue of intentionality with regard to the subject's ability to encounter something truly outside of itself—provoking an exploration of the structure and scope of phenomenological experience. At this juncture, and before developing Levinas's perspectives on intentional experience, it is important to note that while it sounds like Levinas is critiquing the Husserlian science of perception as such, it is possible that he is only critiquing intentionality to the extent that it is conceived of too restrictively. As we will see, such a move is actually quite Husserlian—despite the fact that Levinas never offers the elucidation that would demonstrate its methodological coherence.

Levinas begins to interpret the constituting act of intentionality as one in which the subject never truly encounters something outside of itself because, insofar as the subject constitutes objective meanings, those meanings always refer back to the subject and do not let the Other stand *qua* Other. When Levinas says “it is always the same that determines the other,” he has the noetic direction of intentionality in mind.⁵⁹ The direction of the subject's gaze is always responsible for bringing the object to its manifestation; in Husserlian terms, the “radiating ‘regard,’” is always “directed from the pure Ego to the ‘object’ of the consciousness-correlate in question.”⁶⁰ It is this

⁵⁸ Emmanuel Levinas, *The Theory of Intuition in Husserl's Phenomenology*, 2nd ed. (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1973), 43.

⁵⁹ Levinas, *Totality*, 124.

⁶⁰ Husserl, *Ideas I*, 200.

“radiating regard,” which always radiates from the subject, to which Levinas accords a certain privilege; moreover this structure seems out of step with what it is to encounter the Other person.⁶¹

Intentional experience always remains within what Levinas calls “the same,” because it is not the Otherness of the Other that is highlighted, but the subject’s identity.⁶² The object loses its otherness as it becomes completely available to the subject, who confers a meaning onto it, as if the object were created by the subject and was simply “the work of the thought that receives it.”⁶³ Again, Levinas has Husserl’s noetic direction of meaning-production in mind, wherein sense is *bestowed* upon objects in the “direction[s] of the regard of the pure Ego to the objects ‘meant’ by it, owing to sense-bestowal.”⁶⁴ It seems to Levinas that in conferring meaning to the encounter with things, those things become determined by the being who encounters them, and “the object

⁶¹ If we are familiar with Husserl’s works, it might seem that Levinas has oversimplified the phenomenological account of what it is to relate to another person. After all, in the fifth of his *Cartesian Meditations*, Husserl explicitly addresses the potential objection that phenomenology leads to solipsism and acknowledges clearly that other egos are indeed Other and not simply part of the subject. (Husserl, *Cartesian Meditations*, Fifth Meditation, 90) He writes that “neither the other Ego himself, nor his subjective processes or his appearances themselves, nor anything belonging to his own essence, becomes given in our experience originally. If it were, if what belongs to the other’s own essence were directly accessible, it would be merely a moment of my own essence, and ultimately he himself and I myself would be the same.” (109) At first glance this sounds fairly Levinasian since the Other always retains her Otherness and is not “a mere intending” within the subject. (90) However, Husserl’s explanation of how I come to be aware of such an other ego, even though I have no contact with her private reality, will involve viewing the Other as similar to myself.

In order to explain the encounter with another person in a manner that preserves her alterity but that can still be accounted for from within immanent subjective experience, Husserl proposes a “reduction to my transcendental sphere of peculiar ownness.” (95) Through this reduction, the subject discovers itself to be a somatic being, with hands and eyes to perceive, an identity, a being with a sensory experience of the world. (97) When the subject encounters another body, this other is not comprehended; it is, however, “apprehended” by analogy. (112) Even though the subject remains in a mode of “here” and the alter ego in the mode of “there,” the alter ego is “conceivable only as an analogue of something included in my peculiar ownness.” (115–16) In this way, the hypothetical other is encountered by means of “empathy” in the Husserlian sense (104), which effectively “is a ‘mirroring’ of my own self.” (94)

From a Levinasian perspective, it has been argued that this formulation still fails to account for the alterity of the Other because the alter ego is apprehended by comparison and through its similarity to the subject. Husserl does manage to keep the alter ego private and unknowable from the subject, but at the same time, even without direct comprehension, “all Egos are presumed to be fundamentally similar” insofar as their behaviours and actions as a body are only recognizable to me because they parallel with my own. (Davis, *Levinas*, 27) The problem is that “the ‘other’ is not another me, nor is it something defined by its relationship with me, but rather something completely other and unique. The other is incommensurate with me. Moreover, the other, as that which calls to me, calls for a response from me, is the very source of all language and culture, and hence is a source of instruction.” (Moran, *Introduction to Phenomenology*, 337)

⁶² Levinas, *Totality*, 126.

⁶³ Levinas, *Totality*, 123.

⁶⁴ Husserl, *Ideas I*, 214.

which is first exterior *is given*, that is, is delivered over to him who encounters it as though it had been entirely determined by him.”⁶⁵ Diane Perpich notes that when Levinas interprets intentionality as “a kind of creative mastering of the world,”⁶⁶ he does not interpret objective constitution in a superficial manner—as if the subject could “project anything whatsoever onto the object. But even as representation comes up against various limitations in its activity, it constitutes these very limits as an object for consciousness, thereby reestablishing its primacy and recovering its position at the origin of intelligibility.”⁶⁷

Levinas is skeptical that intentionality so described accounts sufficiently for the encounter with the human Other, however this does not mean that his philosophy is anti-phenomenological or anti-Husserlian. As will be developed in this thesis, Levinas will ultimately propose an intentional experience that transcends the subject and that is in fact true to Husserl insofar as the possibility of such experiences is guaranteed by his principle of all principles.

1.3.2 Totality

Levinas’s account of the interiority of the subject is considered to be the more “classically phenomenological” part of his philosophy insofar as it describes how the subject interacts with the world around itself and gives meaning to that world.⁶⁸ The account of experience is rich and

⁶⁵ Levinas, *Totality*, 123. We often have an incomplete view of what we experience. When we perceive an object, for example, we see only one aspect of it at a time. We can move around the object and take it in from different perspectives, and in the process, absent sides are brought into presence and present sides become absent. There will be a play between absence and presence, the potentially perceived and the actually perceived, empty intentions and filled ones. (Sokolowski, *Introduction to Phenomenology*, 18) When we perceive an object, the parts, seen and unseen, are presented in a unified identity. “In and through them all, we have one and the same object given to us, and the identity of the object is intended and is given . . . Identity belongs to what is given in experience, and the recognition of identity belongs to the intentional structure of experience.” (Sokolowski, *Introduction to Phenomenology*, 20–21) Analyzed from a Levinasian perspective, it is the subject whose activity brings out the identity of the object—even when objects remain always partially unseen or unexperienced insofar as they are finite.

⁶⁶ Diane Perpich, *The Ethics of Emmanuel Levinas* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008), 56.

⁶⁷ Perpich, *The Ethics*, 57.

⁶⁸ Davis, *Levinas*, 42.

descriptive, highlighting the joy that comes from living life. Levinas explains how the subject feels a sense of comfort in the world and a mastery over its experiences. When the self eats, for example, it incorporates the other into itself as a “transmutation”⁶⁹ which reflects a “mode of encounter” with the world.⁷⁰ We “live from ‘good soup,’ air, light, spectacles, work, ideas, sleep,”⁷¹ and more than simply meeting her needs, the subject *enjoys* the experience of satisfying her needs and converting the surrounding otherness into her own self. Life, according to Levinas is “*love of life*, a relation with contents that are not my being but more dear than my being: thinking, eating, sleeping, reading, working, warming oneself in the sun.”⁷² My encounters “[confirm] the identity and sovereignty of the self,” because my relation to what surrounds me is one in which everything I relate to becomes in some way mine, that is, combined into my body, supportive of my needs, or falling under the umbrella of my comprehension.⁷³

The life of the subject is not entirely free from challenge—as if it were completely static and unchanging—but even amidst change the subject still recuperates its identity. Even when the self encounters the “foreign and hostile,” she is still provided the opportunity to identify herself.⁷⁴ Even amidst the threat of the elemental—an indeterminate, non-specific, and impersonal “content without form”—the subject can attain sovereignty by building a home.⁷⁵ The home, an “extraterritoriality,” mediates the unknown, providing for the subject a sense of control—“time in the midst of the facts, to be me through living in the other.”⁷⁶

⁶⁹ Levinas, *Totality*, 111.

⁷⁰ Davis, *Levinas*, 43.

⁷¹ Levinas, *Totality*, 110.

⁷² Levinas, *Totality*, 112.

⁷³ Davis, *Levinas*, 43.

⁷⁴ Levinas, *Totality*, 37.

⁷⁵ Levinas, *Totality*, 130–31.

⁷⁶ Levinas, *Totality*, 117.

All that seems other to the subject—what is eaten, what I possess, what I contemplate—is essentially “reabsorbed into my identity as a thinker or a possessor” and so falls under Levinas’s concept of a “totality.”⁷⁷ Despite what seems to be other, the subject’s environment serves always to confirm her identity and never confronts her with a true alterity; everything is totalizable into a system that is inescapable to the subject, who is never confronted by true difference.

This systematic unification of experience in which everything is comprehensible and which reduces otherness to sameness—to a totality, in other words—is referred to by Levinas as an *ontology*. Ontology in the way Levinas uses the term refers to a comprehension of things wherein the encounter with otherness is mediated through the self.⁷⁸ The self maintains a power over what it encounters and has a freedom from being impinged upon by the unknowable.⁷⁹ The privilege is accorded to the self’s understanding as opposed to the Other’s Otherness. The Levinasian meaning of ontology will be developed in greater clarity once it can be juxtaposed with the infinite, the metaphysical, and the ethical in upcoming sections. Having described the totality of interiority, we can now describe the “breach of totality” by exteriority.⁸⁰

1.3.3 Infinity

The account of exteriority is considered the more phenomenologically contentious part of Levinas’s body of work because the Other exceeds all possible subjective meanings that could be conferred intentionally; the Other is encountered, but not in the mode of a subject-object relation. Whereas Levinas characterizes the self’s interiority as a return to the same—as exemplified by

⁷⁷ Levinas, *Totality*, 33.

⁷⁸ Levinas, *Totality*, 42.

⁷⁹ Levinas, *Totality*, 43.

⁸⁰ Levinas, *Totality*, 35.

Ulysses' adventure, which returns to its starting place,⁸¹ exteriority is characterized by Abraham—who ventures boldly into a “land not of our birth.”⁸² If the interiority is the subject who feels at home with herself, who recuperates her own identity despite change, and who has the time to postpone future challenge, then the exteriority of the Other is a rupture with the known, whose identity is radically unfamiliar, and who commands immediately and inescapably. This in turn provokes the development of the subject's subjectivity.

The *face* of the Other is one of the most famous terms used by Levinas and one which is quite striking. I refer to it as a term because the face, in a Levinasian sense, is more complex than the word itself typically implies. The Levinasian usage refers to something beyond the face's visible characteristics. Its manner of expression breaks with categories of understanding, and “does not consist in figuring as a theme under my gaze, in spreading itself forth as a set of qualities forming an image.”⁸³ Instead of crystallizing into a static concept, the face always and “at each moment destroys and overflows the plastic image it leaves me, the idea existing to my own measure and to the measure of its *ideatum*—the adequate idea.”⁸⁴ The Other is said to be transcendent—always beyond comprehension, forever exceeding the gaze of the subject and originating not from within the subject but from outside of it. “The distance of transcendence,” Levinas explains, “is not equivalent to that which separates the mental act from its object in all our representations”⁸⁵ because this distance is traversed by the transcendental ego, whose act of perception constitutes the meaning of the object; the transcendence that separates the subject from the Other can never be crossed, and never forms “a totality with the ‘other shore.’”⁸⁶

⁸¹ Levinas, *Totality*, 27.

⁸² Levinas, *Totality*, 34.

⁸³ Levinas, *Totality*, 50.

⁸⁴ Levinas, *Totality*, 51.

⁸⁵ Levinas, *Totality*, 49.

⁸⁶ Levinas, *Totality*, 64.

Levinas is a philosopher of transcendence, but it is important to clarify what it means to transcend in a Levinasian sense. If the Other infinitely transcends the subject, it is unclear how the subject ever encounters the Other. This is of particular importance because Janicaud will critique Levinas on the matter of *how* the transcendent could “somehow [touch] us by its absence.”⁸⁷ After all, Levinas writes in no uncertain terms that “the Other remains infinitely transcendent, infinitely foreign; his face in which his epiphany is produced and which appeals to me breaks with the world that can be common to us.”⁸⁸ So, again, how can it be encountered? Answering this question requires us to specify what Levinas means by the word *transcendence*.

His use of the word refers to the “beyond” of the “Good Beyond Being” in Plato’s *Republic*, insofar as it refers to “that which is beyond my immediate reality.”⁸⁹ However, we need to be cautious not to interpret transcendence as “some other world or existence beyond this one” as this would misconstrue the remoteness of the Other—and to do so would be going incorrectly “in the direction of the mystical and not the ethical Plato.”⁹⁰ The transcendence of the Other is remote, but we must understand this remoteness in the correct way (as William Large notes, we must understand it ethically and not ontologically).⁹¹ Transcendence understood ontologically involves subjective constitution which brings the Other into clarity for the subject. Understood ethically, transcendence means the subject becomes aware of the Other by a meaning that exceeds the subject’s constitutive powers and exposes the limits of the subject (ethical transcendence will be further explained in subsequent pages). Accordingly, a distinction is necessary between what is incomprehensible as compared to what is non-encounterable (and Levinasian transcendence refers

⁸⁷ Janicaud, “Theological Turn,” 46.

⁸⁸ Levinas, *Totality*, 194.

⁸⁹ Large, ‘*Totality and Infinity*,’ 25.

⁹⁰ Large, ‘*Totality and Infinity*,’ 26.

⁹¹ Large, ‘*Totality and Infinity*,’ 26.

to the former and not the latter). In fact, when Levinas claims that the Other transcends me, he does not mean that I cannot encounter her; he means that when I do encounter her, the mode of encounter is one that will always surpass my comprehension.

1.3.4 Totality *and* Infinity

Having laid out Levinas's account of the Other as transcendent—particularly noting Levinas's assertion that transcendence does not theoretically preclude an encounter with the transcendent (although we cannot yet afford this assertion any phenomenological authority)—we can now explain how such an encounter functions in Levinas's work; neither comprehended nor seen, the Other expresses himself through language. Rather than a meaning pinned down, the Other expresses himself actively, and “comes to his own assistance. He at each instant undoes the form he presents.”⁹² Speech remains alive and active, never converting the Other into a concept. Instead of a mediated experience, I can have “direct exposure” to what always surpasses me and, as a result, the “very presence of the other” is preserved “in the words they speak.”⁹³ In language, what the Other communicates to the subject will always surpass the subject's understanding, but what is essential “is the interpellation, the vocative.”⁹⁴ The speech of the Other is always addressed *to* someone. Again, the communication between Other and subject does not solidify the two terms into a unity. The communication that comes from the Other can be interpreted as a “teaching” to the subject of that which it could never have been exposed to on its own.⁹⁵ To receive more than what can be created from within has a profound impact on the subject, who finds herself challenged

⁹² Levinas, *Totality*, 66.

⁹³ Large, ‘*Totality and Infinity*,’ 35.

⁹⁴ Levinas, *Totality*, 69.

⁹⁵ Levinas, *Totality*, 69.

by such an absolute alterity. This challenge is referred to by Levinas as ethics—for which Levinas is well known.

The Other's transcendence is the foundation of an ethical encounter. Levinas explains that language "comes to me from the Other and reverberates in my consciousness by putting it into question."⁹⁶ When I encounter something so foreign it breaks with all understanding, and it challenges my sense of self as I have understood it. Where I felt I had possession of my world, the Other "paralyzes possession,"⁹⁷ and where I was able to utilize and grasp the other, the Other challenges me by "total resistance to the grasp."⁹⁸ The freedom to interact with the world and to have power over it is challenged in this moment because power is impossible over what escapes me.⁹⁹ My entire sense of self is upended, and I realize that there is someone otherwise than myself. In this moment, the self meets with what is utterly beyond its comprehension—infinite relative to the finite container of my own understanding—and this challenges my grasp of the world.¹⁰⁰ "The other shakes the contemplative ego to its foundations, forcing the ego to concede that it is not sovereign in its own sphere."¹⁰¹ If I can have an idea of that which overflows my understanding, then I am not the cause of all that exists and "thus we have a 'check' on the 'native right' and 'glorious spontaneity' of our own powers."¹⁰²

If the Other reveals herself with such a profound withholding, how then do we even know we have encountered the Other? In what way are we aware of the Other if not through concepts, knowledge, or vision? Peperzak writes that "the only way to express the impact made by the other

⁹⁶ Levinas, *Totality*, 204.

⁹⁷ Levinas, *Totality*, 171.

⁹⁸ Levinas, *Totality*, 197.

⁹⁹ Levinas, *Totality*, 87.

¹⁰⁰ Levinas, *Totality*, 196.

¹⁰¹ William Paul Simmons, *An-Archy and Justice: An Introduction to Emmanuel Levinas's Political Thought* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2003), 20.

¹⁰² Peperzak, *The Ethics*, 59.

in positive terms is to use ethical language: the other reveals a command . . . the answer to the question ‘what *is* the other?’ can only be ‘the other obliges me.’ The other’s being reveals itself as an order.”¹⁰³ The transcendence of the Other makes itself known to the self by an interruption of perceived powers and by revealing to the subject her finite limits.

The fascinating feature of this face to face relationship between self and Other is that it must maintain both relation and absence of relation. The subject cannot have any comprehension of the Other’s unique identity. Alternatively, the subject must have some awareness of the Other’s punctuation of the world. It remains a “relation without relation,” wherein a “being separated from the Infinite nonetheless relates to it, with a relation that does not nullify the infinite interval of separation.”¹⁰⁴ Interestingly, the infinite separation between self and Other can only be maintained if the self is engaged within the relation with the infinite, because as soon as the interval is viewed from outside of the relation it becomes a totality. So the *metaphysical* relation, as Levinas also calls it, is always in relation to something which it will never absorb. “As soon as one stands outside of it, then one cannot experience this separation. I can experience the space between you and me, but not the one between you and another, because in so doing I am treating you as equals” and diminishing the impact of the alterity of one of the terms.¹⁰⁵

Such a realization of true alterity is a shock to my system and produces an ethical injunction from the Other.¹⁰⁶ Its powers contested, the subject comes to terms with the enclosed nature of its former state.¹⁰⁷ The subject finds herself to be limited by the infinite and, in being so, is put deeply and fundamentally into question. This putting into question changes the subject: “the ‘I’ who

¹⁰³ Peperzak, “Levinas’ Method,” 115.

¹⁰⁴ Levinas, *Totality*, 80.

¹⁰⁵ Large, *Totality and Infinity*, 26.

¹⁰⁶ Levinas, *Totality*, 84.

¹⁰⁷ Levinas, *Totality*, 171.

encounters a face loses its naïve being at home in the world and discovers itself bound by the other in ethical responsibility.”¹⁰⁸

Interestingly, although I find myself overpowered by the Other, he does not command me out of power as much as out of weakness and fragility—“soliciting us by his destitution in the face of the Stranger, the widow, and the orphan.”¹⁰⁹ Faced with the neediness and frailty of the Other, “my arbitrary freedom reads its shame in the eyes that look at me. It is apologetic”¹¹⁰ and imposes on me a responsibility of infinite measure, always asymmetrical and never fulfilled. The Other calls for response, and even though one may respond in different ways, the call itself is irrecusable. Before I can think of how to respond, comprehend my choices, or assess my resources, I am first and foremost faced with an encounter that precedes myself as I understand myself; this encounter is the ethical.

Furthermore, the possibility of a relation with God or with the divine is opened up through this human experience of being put into question and the sense of obligation to one’s fellow human.¹¹¹ Levinas suggests that the transcendence may be the transcendence of God, and he always characterizes transcendence as being grounded in interruption of subjective life by an earthly human Other. The necessity that we encounter the Other as a concrete being—as fellow and neighbour—is an essential grounding for any possible relation with the divine. Levinas explains that “to posit the transcendent as stranger and poor one is to prohibit the metaphysical relation with God from being accomplished in the ignorance of men and things.”¹¹² Any

¹⁰⁸ Perpich, *The Ethics*, 58.

¹⁰⁹ Levinas, *Totality*, 78.

¹¹⁰ Levinas, *Totality*, 252.

¹¹¹ Levinas, *Totality*, 78.

¹¹² Levinas, *Totality*, 78.

experience with the divine, then, is always intertwined with the ethical encounter between human subjects. In turn, the possibility of a relation with God is opened.

Returning now to Levinas's project more generally, the subject encounters the Other, but in a way that is not a simple perception, and while "ethics is an optics," perhaps a radical *kind* of seeing, "it is a 'vision' without image, bereft of the synoptic and totalizing objectifying virtues of vision."¹¹³ Levinas

attempts to investigate in what way alterity could be explored, experienced and described phenomenologically without immediately reducing and mastering it. Can phenomenology remain open to difference and otherness without succumbing immediately to the need for clarity and familiarity? Is there a way to describe phenomenologically the impact of the strange alterity of the other? That is Levinas' most fundamental concern¹¹⁴

As disturbance, interruption, rupture, limitation, or opening, the finite subject has an encounter with what is infinite. This encounter will be developed throughout the thesis. For now I will highlight Levinas's opening words in *Totality and Infinity*: "'the true life is absent.' But we are in the world. Metaphysics arises and is maintained in this alibi."¹¹⁵

1.4 Janicaud and "The Theological Turn"

This section will provide an overview of Janicaud's critique of Levinas's phenomenology as found in "The Theological Turn of French Phenomenology."¹¹⁶ In this report, Janicaud critiques the phenomenological legitimacy of Levinas and other French phenomenologists who, he argues, have broken with the phenomenological method. They have, in his view, followed a "theological turn" away from an atheist Husserlian phenomenology—letting their theological motivations

¹¹³ Levinas, *Totality*, 43.

¹¹⁴ Christina M. Gschwandtner, "Jean-Luc Marion: Phenomenology of Religion" in *Continental Philosophy and Philosophy of Religion*, edited by Morny Joy (New York: Springer 2010), 173.

¹¹⁵ Levinas, *Totality*, 33.

¹¹⁶ Janicaud, "Theological Turn," 17.

intrude upon the rigours of the phenomenological project. Levinas's use of the phenomenological method, Janicaud claims, is "not altogether innocent."¹¹⁷ As part of a "more artful strategy," Levinas utilizes phenomenology to justify his own radical ethics and to fulfil his own dogmatic religious aims.¹¹⁸ In the end, "phenomenology has been taken hostage by a theology that does not want to say its name."¹¹⁹

Janicaud admits that Levinas's phenomenological heritage is undeniable but that Levinas clings more to the spirit than to the letter of the method.¹²⁰ In assurance that his critique is done in good faith, so to speak, Janicaud qualifies his concern as a matter neither of a "nonrespect of orthodoxy" nor of "strict observance," but simply a question of "methodological presuppositions."¹²¹ Janicaud attempts to tease out these methodological presuppositions and offers a "critique, perhaps even [a] polemic, aiming at a sole goal: methodological clarification."¹²²

The account begins by identifying a trend in French phenomenology in which phenomenological projects seem phenomenological only in inspiration.¹²³ Janicaud argues that Heidegger's "phenomenology of the unapparent" served as a springboard to the methodological departures and theological turn later exemplified by Levinas et al.¹²⁴ Janicaud contrasts Heidegger's concept of truth with Husserl's, in that Husserl considered being in terms of givenness to a subject, Heidegger in terms of its unconcealment to Dasein.¹²⁵ Accordingly, it seems to Janicaud that Heidegger "abandons the phenomena" along with the Husserlian notion of

¹¹⁷ Janicaud, "Theological Turn," 42.

¹¹⁸ Janicaud, "Theological Turn," 43.

¹¹⁹ Janicaud, "Theological Turn," 43.

¹²⁰ Janicaud, "Theological Turn," 36.

¹²¹ Janicaud, "Theological Turn," 35.

¹²² Janicaud, "Theological Turn," 17.

¹²³ Janicaud, "Theological Turn," 36.

¹²⁴ Janicaud, "Theological Turn," 29.

¹²⁵ Janicaud, "Theological Turn," 29.

intentionality.¹²⁶ Heidegger's move paves the way for Levinas and others who part ways with phenomenality by attesting to more original modes of thinking.¹²⁷ This divergence "places us at the crux of the matter where everything is decided: at the point of rupture between a positive phenomenological project and the displacement of its 'possibility' toward the originary [*originnaire*]."¹²⁸ Janicaud concludes that "the rupture with immanent phenomenality" is the demarcating feature of the turn toward theology and away from phenomenology.¹²⁹ This brings us to Levinas, who according to Janicaud exemplifies this demarcating feature. Janicaud will argue that one cannot give a phenomenology of what does not appear and that in the absence of appearance there can be no phenomenology.

1.4.1 Phenomenology without Phenomena

As we know, the face of the Levinasian Other does not pass into any concept. Janicaud then asks plainly "what kind of appearing [*apparaître*] is to be welcomed, discovered, and described, if the face gives nothing to decipher without hesitation, but only a 'first phenomenon' whose significance is immediately guaranteed and indeed coincides with itself, before all givenness of sense?"¹³⁰ Phenomenology deals with that which appears, but here the phenomenon Levinas wishes to address is absent—invisible by its very nature. In Janicaud's interpretation, the method of phenomenology is transgressed insofar as "phenomenality is overburdened by a revelation exceeding the bounds of basic givenness and constitution."¹³¹ The intentional structure of experience seems to dissolve in the presence of a paradoxical manifestation that cannot fit within

¹²⁶ Janicaud, "Theological Turn," 29–30.

¹²⁷ Janicaud, "Theological Turn," 31.

¹²⁸ Janicaud, "Theological Turn," 31.

¹²⁹ Janicaud, "Theological Turn," 17.

¹³⁰ Janicaud, "Theological Turn," 47.

¹³¹ Yates, "Janicaud's Arithmetic," 81.

the structures of Husserlian experience. Janicaud sees no concrete experience at all and instead more of a misty and intangible spectre in which “‘phenomenology’ comes down to the edifying and airy evocation of a disembodied caress.”¹³² He judges Levinas’s “analyses as existentially naïve, phenomenologically impoverished and literally meaningless, since they propose to be a phenomenological account of an evanescence that does not, properly speaking, appear.”¹³³

If there is no phenomenon, there can be no phenomenology. How could one possibly give a phenomenology of something so absent, so non-present, so illusory? “What remains of it,” Janicaud asks, “deprived of everything empirical?”¹³⁴ Experience as Levinas describes it seems deficient in finitude—nothing more than “evanescence here, there, and everywhere.”¹³⁵ It is difficult, if not impossible, for Janicaud to imagine an encounter with an “Other [*Autre*], who is singularly wordless, as self-evident.”¹³⁶ “If only,” he writes, “it were demonstrated to us, to begin with, that the notion of pure or absolute experience makes sense and does not collapse into words, words, words.”¹³⁷ Janicaud emphasizes the paradox of the Other, who is both elusive and demanding, and concludes that such ambiguity is simply not compatible with the manifestations necessary to the science of phenomenology. Given the unspeakable, “what are we to say (phenomenologically) of an exteriority so pure that it glistens like ‘the nudity of the principle’?”¹³⁸ Lacking the finitude essential for phenomenality,¹³⁹ Janicaud concludes that Levinas’s “words signify nothing.”¹⁴⁰ If the face of the Other resists conceptualization and cannot be described, then

¹³² Janicaud, “Theological Turn,” 40.

¹³³ Perpich, *The Ethics*, 20.

¹³⁴ Janicaud, “Theological Turn,” 40.

¹³⁵ Janicaud, “Theological Turn,” 41.

¹³⁶ Janicaud, “Theological Turn,” 49.

¹³⁷ Janicaud, “Theological Turn,” 42.

¹³⁸ Janicaud, “Theological Turn,” 47.

¹³⁹ Yates, “Janicaud’s Arithmetic,” 78.

¹⁴⁰ Janicaud, “Theological Turn,” 41.

it is phenomenologically meaningless and, worse, phenomenologically transgressive in its assertion.

1.4.2 Phenomenology with Theology

Not only does Levinas stray from the method of phenomenology, but according to Janicaud he also contravenes the scope of its content. If it were not bad enough that Levinas applies the category of phenomenon to that which is arguably non-phenomenal, this non-phenomenon then turns out to be God himself—in contravention to the Husserlian method.¹⁴¹ Much of Janicaud’s concern can be summed up in a forcefully worded excerpt wherein he claims that Levinas:

supposes a metaphysico-theological montage, prior to philosophical writing. The dice are loaded and choices made; faith rises majestically in the background. The reader, confronted by the blade of the absolute, finds him- or herself in the position of a catechumen who has no other choice than to penetrate the holy words and lofty dogmas: ‘Desire is desire for the absolutely Other [*Autre*] . . . For Desire, this alterity, nonadequate to the idea, has a meaning [*sens*]. It is understood as the alterity of the Other [*Atrui*] and as that of the Most High.’ All is acquired and imposed from the outset, and this all is no little thing: nothing less than the God of the biblical tradition. Strict treason of the reduction that handed over the transcendental I its nudity, here theology is restored with parade of capital letters.¹⁴²

The encounter with the Other—phenomenal deficiency aside—brings the phenomenologist straight to God, to the “Most High.” The phenomenologist is positioned face to face, so to speak, with the divine, which Janicaud characterizes as “lofty” and “dogmatic.” Though the account proposes to begin phenomenologically, there is no doubt that it ends otherwise. Surely nothing can be said phenomenologically of God, and God cannot be a content for phenomenology.

Janicaud writes that in Levinas, “the relation to experience is subordinated to the restoration of the metaphysical (and theological) dimension,” and that “we must not fall victim to

¹⁴¹ Janicaud, “Theological Turn,” 27.

¹⁴² Janicaud, “Theological Turn,” 27.

the word and fail to recognize to what point Levinas's metaphysical/theological project leads him to schematize experience."¹⁴³

The absolutely Other is clearly not a phenomenon, but Levinas seems to insist on treating it as such. One of Levinas's motivations for doing so is said to be his desire to restore theology. Janicaud "concludes that Levinas's claims about the face are dogmatic importations from theology. As he sees it, the reader is confronted with the claim that she is infinitely responsible for the other, and when she asks for justification, she is told that she must simply believe by the light of revelation that it is so."¹⁴⁴ The phenomenologist then finds herself faced with the "blade of the absolute," an impenetrable invisibility which confirms the religious faith that conditioned the experience all along. Despite Levinas's "explicit denials that his aim is to construct a theology or reach ethical conclusions by means of a theological discourse, his work nonetheless exhibits a 'quest for divine transcendence' and must be read as an attempt to restore theology, and more specifically 'the God of the biblical tradition,' to a place of preeminence within a purportedly phenomenological philosophy."¹⁴⁵ Levinas's "nonphenomenological, metaphysical desire" which "comes from 'a land not of our birth,'" is not something determined through experience but is instead "supposed." In the end, Janicaud famously challenges Levinas, insisting that "phenomenology and theology make two."¹⁴⁶

1.4.3 The Boundaries of Janicaud's Phenomenology

Considering that Janicaud's argument hinges on the question of phenomenological method, we must clarify his definition. He writes that, generally speaking, "the essence of intentionality is

¹⁴³ Janicaud, "Theological Turn," 44.

¹⁴⁴ Perpich, *The Ethics*, 52.

¹⁴⁵ Perpich, *The Ethics*, 19–20.

¹⁴⁶ Janicaud, "Theological Turn," 103.

to be sought, by the phenomenological reduction, in phenomenal immanence. If there is an intentional transcendence, it is to be grasped as it is given itself in the world.”¹⁴⁷ As we know, phenomenology deals with experience.¹⁴⁸ Husserl writes that as phenomenologists we “keep our regard fixed on the sphere of consciousness and study what we find immanently within it.”¹⁴⁹ The field of phenomenological research is to be limited to what we experience, to what we find within consciousness and not outside of it. Again, the structure of conscious experience is intentional wherein an act of consciousness is directed noetically toward an object. That is, the subject constitutes the object and brings it to meaning for the subject. If phenomenology must remain bound to the internal, immanent contents of consciousness, and if the Levinasian Other resists appearing within the consciousness of the subject, it is clear how Janicaud comes to his conclusion that the Levinasian Other falls outside the phenomenological scope as defined thus far. After all, one cannot reduce what one cannot conceive of.

Based on his characterization of phenomenology up to this point, Janicaud has emphasized the following components of phenomenology: intentionality (the relationship between consciousness and its object),¹⁵⁰ the phenomenological reduction (the shifting from the natural attitude to the phenomenological one in which one suspends judgements and attempts to understand the object as it is intended),¹⁵¹ and phenomenal immanence (that the meaning of the object is derived by the constituting act of consciousness and therefore from within mental processes). This description of Husserlian phenomenology seems quite reasonable. To continue his demarcation, Janicaud explains that “the suspension of the natural attitude ought not to lead to

¹⁴⁷ Janicaud, “Theological Turn,” 35.

¹⁴⁸ Husserl, *Ideas I*, 5.

¹⁴⁹ Husserl, *Ideas I*, 65.

¹⁵⁰ Sokolowski, *Introduction to Phenomenology*, 8.

¹⁵¹ Sokolowski, *Introduction to Phenomenology*, 47–48

a flight to another world or to the restoration of absolute idealism, but to a deepening of the transcendental regard vis-à-vis experience and for it.”¹⁵² Again, there is nothing phenomenologically surprising here as we know phenomenology deals with human experience, so the directive to remain within its scope is completely reasonable.

However, Janicaud consolidates these features one step further into a single decisive definition—which he borrows from Merleau-Ponty, who, in Janicaud’s view, “remained incontestably phenomenological in laying down the following restriction (which will be the shibboleth of this investigation): ‘not an absolute invisible . . . but the invisible *of this world*.’”¹⁵³ This definition of phenomenology has two components: a *how* and a *what*. The *how* highlights a methodological question as to what counts as a phenomenon (Janicaud claims that absolute invisibles do not); the *what* refers to the content of phenomenology, which must always remain of this world (Janicaud claims that the Levinasian Other, insofar as it leads to God, does not). This thesis aims to challenge Janicaud on these two matters, in Chapters 2 and 3, respectively.

¹⁵² Janicaud, “Theological Turn,” 35.

¹⁵³ Janicaud, “Theological Turn,” 34.

CHAPTER 2: LEVINAS AND METHODOLOGY

Knowledge or theory designates first a relation with being such that the knowing being lets the known being manifest itself while respecting its alterity and without marking it in any way whatever by this cognitive relation.

Emmanuel Levinas

The phenomenologist is neutral, in the sense that he or she is open to the thing itself, without any other teleological prejudice than the ideal of rational and scientific truth.

Dominique Janicaud

This chapter takes the first of two steps in challenging Janicaud's claim that Levinas has broken with the phenomenological method and defends the ethical encounter with the Other as phenomenologically admissible. (The second of these two steps is covered in Chapter 3.) It does so by arguing that phenomenology can and must accommodate the experience of absolute Otherness and that Janicaud too narrowly defines phenomenality in a way that is phenomenologically unjustifiable. I will demonstrate this by summarizing the Levinasian experience, which allegedly departs from phenomenological territory—the experience of the finite human who is limited by that which is infinite (section 2.1). I will draw on Jean-Luc Marion's analysis of Husserl's principle of all principles in *Being Given: Toward a Phenomenology of Givenness* to demonstrate that Janicaud's challenge to Levinas reflects an overly narrow restriction of phenomenological experience (section 2.2) and furthermore argue that Levinas enriches phenomenology rather than breaking with its method (section 2.3). Before considering the methodological detail that would lend phenomenological authority to Levinas's claims, it will first be necessary to review the experience which is at the heart of Levinas's work and of Janicaud's contestation, and to frame the question in phenomenological terms.

2.1 An Encounter with the Infinite

The encounter with the Other, Levinas explains, “leads us to a relation totally different from experience in the sensible sense of the term.”¹⁵⁴ If Levinas were to end here it would perhaps signal, as Janicaud suggests, a break with phenomenology insofar as phenomenology must deal with first-person experience; after all, what could phenomenology study if there were no experience at all? However, Levinas’s philosophy does not consist purely in challenging the notion of experience—instead, he broadens the meaning of experience to include absolute Otherness, revising his previous statement by adding that “if experience precisely means a relation with the absolutely other, that is, with what always overflows thought, the relation with infinity accomplishes experience in the fullest sense of the word.”¹⁵⁵ It is this experience with the infinite that Levinas means to investigate phenomenologically.

As we know, Levinas writes of an Other who remains absolutely transcendent to the subject, and who is also encountered by that subject; transcendence as experienced immanently. As described in Chapter 1, the *face* is the way in which the Other presents to the subject, though the presentation is not a visible or conceptualizable one. He explains that “by the facade the thing which keeps its secret is exposed enclosed in its monumental essence and in its myth, in which it gleams like a splendor but does not deliver itself.”¹⁵⁶ Levinas refers to this event as “revelation,” “expression,” “epiphany,” and “interruption”—all words which invoke the reality¹⁵⁷ of an event, but which refrain from reducing this event to something simply seen and therefore absorbed by the self as if it never originated from outside of the self in the first place. During this event the self encounters an extraordinary strangeness that is powerfully beyond her own comprehension and in

¹⁵⁴ Levinas, *Totality*, 193.

¹⁵⁵ Levinas, *Totality*, 25.

¹⁵⁶ Levinas, *Totality*, 193.

¹⁵⁷ Of course, the *reality* of the encounter has not yet been justified phenomenologically.

which the manner of the Other's presentation "at each moment destroys and overflows the plastic image it leaves."¹⁵⁸

Language is the mode of experience wherein the Other manifests to the subject while exceeding the subject's conceptual powers. "Language," writes Levinas, "institutes a relation irreducible to the subject-object relation: the *revelation* of the other."¹⁵⁹ As a manner of presentation, language has a certain aliveness to it which is never restrained, which constantly evolves, and which produces its own meaning. Levinas explains that "contrary to all the conditions for visibility of objects, a being is not placed in the light of another but presents itself," and that insofar as a manifestation of speech depends on nothing other than its own self-presentation it is considered a "pure experience."¹⁶⁰

Levinas draws on Descartes's *Idea of Infinity* to "formally"¹⁶¹ elaborate the structure of a subject encountering that which infinitely transcends its own cognitive capacities and in which the Other "maintains its total exteriority."¹⁶² In Descartes's *Third Meditation*, "Levinas is struck by the suggestion that in the idea of infinity, the distance between the idea and what it thinks is altogether different from that which normally separates the mental act from its object."¹⁶³ According to Levinas, the subject experiences the "infinite in the finite, the more in the less;"¹⁶⁴ but what does this mean in phenomenological terms?

Phenomenologically speaking, the encounter with the infinite face of the Other reflects an inversion of intentional experience. According to Levinas, the infinity of the Other is expressed by an "intentionality of transcendence" in which the features of intentionality as typically understood

¹⁵⁸ Levinas, *Totality*, 51.

¹⁵⁹ Levinas, *Totality*, 73.

¹⁶⁰ Levinas, *Totality*, 65.

¹⁶¹ Perpich, *The Ethics*, 58.

¹⁶² Levinas, *Totality*, 50.

¹⁶³ Perpich, *The Ethics*, 58.

¹⁶⁴ Levinas, *Totality*, 50.

are reversed.¹⁶⁵ He writes that “*the difference between objectivity and transcendence will serve as a general guideline for all the analyses of this work.*”¹⁶⁶ The “objectivity” Levinas contrasts with “transcendence” refers to the way in which the meaning of objects is constituted in phenomenological experience. Perception is typically understood as originating in the subject and reaching its object by proceeding in the direction of the subject’s regard. In contrast, the intentionality of transcendence “does not proceed from the I”; rather “the movement proceeds from what is thought and not from the thinker. It is the unique knowledge that presents this inversion—a knowledge without a priori.”¹⁶⁷ In the face to face encounter, the subject encounters the Other by “a means of manifestation totally distinct from perceptual appearance or cognition.”¹⁶⁸ While such a manifestation is unphenomenological according to Janicaud, this chapter claims that it is in fact quite Husserlian.

Levinas remains in constant conversation with phenomenology, although in an unconventional way. When the Other exceeds the subject’s comprehension, Levinas does not simply do away with intentionality but reconsiders it. In the encounter with the Other’s infinity, there is still a “‘consciousness of something,’ but the ‘something’ at which the idea aims—namely God’s perfection or infinity—is that which breaks with or outstrips the structure by which the meaningfulness of things or objects is produced.”¹⁶⁹ It is not that the finite subject has no encounter with the infinite, but rather that the encounter is such that it exceeds the way we usually understand encounters.

¹⁶⁵ Levinas, *Totality*, 49.

¹⁶⁶ Levinas, *Totality*, 49.

¹⁶⁷ Levinas, *Totality*, 61–62.

¹⁶⁸ Perpich, *The Ethics*, 61.

¹⁶⁹ Perpich, *The Ethics*, 59.

What Levinas offers is an appeal to concrete experience which aims to be compelling and convincing in its account. William Large notes that “whether you agree with Levinas or not will be dependent only on whether your own experience corresponds with what he describes.”¹⁷⁰ This may convince like-minded readers, but it is insufficient to convince Janicaud. He considers Levinas’s challenges to intentionality to be imposed at “the price of considerable distortion to its methodological referents.”¹⁷¹ Levinas seems to want to revise the scope and structure of experience. In doing so, he appeals to the authority of phenomenology but without showing how these structures remain within the bounds of its method. While Levinas leaves himself open to critique on this matter, there is still a phenomenological defence of his work, and it will be provided by Jean-Luc Marion.

2.2 The Scope of Phenomenology

When Levinas seems to push against conventional boundaries of phenomenology, he engages in a project not of destruction but of expansion and enrichment. By drawing on Jean-Luc Marion’s analysis of Husserl’s principle of all principles, I will defend Levinas by demonstrating that Janicaud’s exclusion of the encounter with absolute Otherness results from too narrowly defining phenomenality in a way that is itself, arguably, unphenomenological.

The encounter with the Other resists the intelligibility of the subject. This does not reflect a break with phenomenality; rather, it raises the question of how phenomenality is to be defined. Indeed, it seems Levinas is at least ambivalent and at most blatantly transgressive toward the limits of phenomenology. However, one must wonder with what purpose Levinas utilizes phenomenology in this way. Both engaging with and challenging them, he produces a juxtaposition

¹⁷⁰ Large, *Totality and Infinity*, 20.

¹⁷¹ Janicaud, “Theological Turn,” 39.

(purposefully, I believe) that draws the phenomenologist into deep reflection upon the boundaries of the discipline's essential concepts. As described in Chapter 1, phenomenology studies the phenomenon—that which appears—and our subjective experience of it. However, this brings us to the question of what counts as an appearance.

As stated, Janicaud locates Levinas's methodological break at “the rupture with immanent phenomenality,” at “the opening [*ouverture*] to the invisible, to the Other [*Autre*],”¹⁷² and as characterized by “a pure experience, an experience that does not pass into any concept.”¹⁷³ By highlighting these features, Janicaud tells us what a phenomenon should *not* be, and we are led toward his definition of what it *should* be; he excludes that which is absolutely invisible and includes only that which shows itself as being this-worldly.¹⁷⁴ He defines phenomenality, asking “is it not a noble and vast enough task for phenomenology to seek the dimension of the invisibility that all describable idealities imply? Merleau-Ponty, who posed a question of this type, remained incontestably phenomenological in laying down the following restriction (which will be the shibboleth of this investigation): ‘not an absolute invisible . . . but the invisible *of* this world.’”¹⁷⁵ For Janicaud, phenomenological experience does not include encounters of Otherness that are infinitely Other and that are pure experiences bereft of concept. The experience Levinas accounts for, then, falls outside the scope of phenomenology as Janicaud understands it. However, we need not necessarily accept the delimitation of phenomenology that Janicaud prescribes.

Whereas Janicaud argues that absolute Otherness breaks with phenomenality, Jean-Luc Marion argues that phenomenology, insofar as it would limit phenomenality based on pre-set categories, would break with its own method. The method of phenomenology aims to abandon all

¹⁷² Janicaud, “Theological Turn,” 17.

¹⁷³ Janicaud, “Theological Turn,” 41.

¹⁷⁴ Janicaud, “Theological Turn,” 34.

¹⁷⁵ Janicaud, “Theological Turn,” 34.

presupposition—to study experience as accurately and as neutrally as possible by suspending all beliefs and preconceptions—and therefore Marion argues that the phenomenological method must do nothing more or less than follow the lead of the phenomenon.¹⁷⁶ In other words, phenomenologists do not determine phenomenality; phenomena do. This means “letting apparition show *itself* in its appearance according to its appearing,”¹⁷⁷ without predetermining which kinds of appearance are phenomenologically legitimate. The phenomenological method must follow the phenomenon and “not run ahead of the phenomenon, by *fore-seeing* it, *pre-dicting* it, and *pro-duc*ing it, in order to await it from the outset at the end of the path (*meta-hodos*) onto which it has just barely set forth.”¹⁷⁸ To follow the phenomenological method is not a matter of policing appearances to determine which ones meet prescribed conditions, but rather that the phenomena dictate the terms of phenomenality. If something presents itself as invisible, unspeakable, and infinite, then its nature is to be invisible, unspeakable, and infinite. The job of the phenomenologist is to describe what appears in the manner in which it presents itself—even if this means that what appears cannot be described except to say that it overflows any possible description.

Marion argues for a definition of phenomenality that runs counter to Janicaud’s.¹⁷⁹ Marion draws this conclusion by returning to the decisive guidepost of Husserlian phenomenology, i.e., the principle of all principles. Husserl himself assigns to this principle the foremost authority (emphasizing its incontrovertible clarity), writing that “no conceivable theory can make us err with respect to the *principle of all principles*.”¹⁸⁰ The principle states that “*every originally giving intuition is a source of right for cognition*—that *everything* that offers itself *originarily* to us in

¹⁷⁶ Marion, *Being Given*, 9.

¹⁷⁷ Marion, *Being Given*, 8.

¹⁷⁸ Marion, *Being Given*, 9.

¹⁷⁹ Marion, *Being Given*, 184.

¹⁸⁰ Husserl, *Ideas I*, 44.

intuition (in its fleshy actuality, so to speak) *must simply be received for what it gives itself*, but without *passing beyond the limits in which it gives itself*.”¹⁸¹ What is striking for Marion is how Husserl seems to “free” or “liberate” phenomenality, as nothing outside of intuition is required to justify it.¹⁸² No longer bound to prove their legitimacy, for example by dependence on “sufficient reason that would assign it to certain ‘well grounded’ phenomena but refuse it to others,”¹⁸³ the phenomena are automatically self-justified. The appearance of the phenomenon does not depend on anything external to it and is sufficient to justify itself. Marion notes that this is to define the phenomenon (which he notes agrees with Heidegger’s later definition) as “show[ing] itself on the basis of itself without remainder, and not of an other than itself that does not appear (a reason).”¹⁸⁴ When defined this way, nothing outside of the phenomenon itself can impose limits or conditions on phenomenality.

Marion notes that while Husserl’s principle of all principles aims to free phenomenality, Husserl does not himself follow it entirely through because “the statements that phenomenology explicitly privileges do not furnish the principle proper to it.”¹⁸⁵ This is because while intuition is sufficient to justify itself, it becomes a limitation on phenomenality to the extent that intuition is pre-conceived as finite and purely immanent to consciousness. Intuition “always has as its function to fulfil an aim or an intentionality directed at an object.”¹⁸⁶ However, Marion asks, “does the constitution of an intentional object by an intuition fulfilling an objectifying ecstasy exhaust every form of appearing? And even more, we must ask if intuition should be restricted to the limits of intentionality and the object’s transcendence, or if it can be understood within the immense

¹⁸¹ Marion, *Being Given*, 12. The original Husserl is not referenced in this case in order to maintain consistency with Marion’s translation. However, the corresponding reference is Husserl, *Ideas I*, 44.

¹⁸² Marion, *Being Given*, 13.

¹⁸³ Marion, *Being Given*, 12.

¹⁸⁴ Marion, *Being Given*, 184.

¹⁸⁵ Marion, *Being Given*, 14.

¹⁸⁶ Marion, *Being Given*, 13.

possibilities of what shows *itself?*"¹⁸⁷ To more fully develop Husserl's principle, Marion challenges the notion that the noetic determination of objects is the only possible orientation of intentional experience.¹⁸⁸

The entire structure of intentional experience "compels" us to consider the possibility of an inversion in which the phenomenon exceeds subjective constitution instead of being determined by it.¹⁸⁹ Marion refers to the "excess of intuition in [the saturated phenomenon], which subverts and therefore precedes every intention that it exceeds and decenters."¹⁹⁰ This reversal or "counter-intentionality," which Marion argues to be an "essential characteristic of intentionality itself," is drawn from Levinas's encounter with the Other.¹⁹¹ Marion follows in the footsteps of Levinas, but he does what Levinas does not by offering the methodological elucidation that would phenomenologically justify the inversion of intentional experience. Rather than simply accepting assumptions about the structure of intentional experience, Marion moves to preserve the full range and potential of Husserl's "unconditioned possibility," in which the phenomena most truly give themselves.¹⁹² Marion arguably stays true to Husserl's principle of all principles and at the same time manages to expand phenomenology as it has been typically employed—by complementing intentionality with a counter-intentionality, finite intuition with an infinite intuition, and a phenomenology of pure immanence with a phenomenology of immanent experiences of the transcendent.

¹⁸⁷ Marion, *Being Given*, 13.

¹⁸⁸ Marion, *Being Given*, 13.

¹⁸⁹ Marion, *Being Given*, 14.

¹⁹⁰ Marion, *Being Given*, 267.

¹⁹¹ Marion, *Being Given*, 265.

¹⁹² Marion, *Being Given*, 218.

2.3 Phenomenology Expanded

Following from Marion's argument, it is for the phenomenon to show the phenomenologist how it should be experienced—even if the phenomenon appears in such a radical fashion as to challenge the phenomenologist's very notion of experience. By this definition it is Janicaud whose restriction of the method appears biased. Janicaud challenges the "methodological presuppositions permitting a phenomenologist (or by which a phenomenologist might believe him- or herself permitted) *to open* phenomenological investigations onto absolute Transcendence"¹⁹³ [emphasis mine]. Conversely, the real methodological presupposition would be *closing phenomenology off* from encounters with absolute transcendence. If phenomena themselves are the instructors of phenomenality, then Janicaud's prescription of phenomenality is unphenomenological insofar as phenomenologists are not permitted to impose pre-set categories onto what counts as an experience.

Janicaud clings to a notion of phenomenality as conditioned by the intentionality of a subjective gaze in which subject determines object. The Levinasian Other who interrupts conscious experience and who resists and overflows all subjective comprehension does not fit into Janicaud's expectation of what a phenomenon should be. As Marion notes, in order to comply with Husserl's principle of all principles, the phenomenologist must remain open to all manners of manifestation, including those that exceed expectation, and remain open to seeing "[the phenomena] as they come, and in the end, to bear their unpredictable landing."¹⁹⁴ The phenomenologist has to be ready

¹⁹³ Janicaud, "Theological Turn," 36.

¹⁹⁴ Marion, *Being Given*, 4.

at all times to abandon anticipations of what phenomena *should* be like in order to receive them as they *are*—or in Husserl’s words, “*as they present themselves to be.*”¹⁹⁵

Marion’s analysis of intentionality is essential to understanding how the Levinasian Other remains within the bounds of phenomenology and to understanding why Janicaud’s restriction is a limitation of the Husserlian method rather than a preservation of it. Janicaud takes his understanding of intentionality so much for granted that he considers it a separate issue from the phenomenological method. He writes that in Levinas’s work “phenomenology is doubly short-circuited” both “in its transcendental grasp of intentionality as in the neutrality of its descriptions,” but that his critique will focus on a “more modestly methodological level—where we find our second short-circuit.”¹⁹⁶ Here Janicaud seems to say that intentionality—and the subsequent question of *how* it is to be understood—is a matter separate from phenomenological method when, in fact, it is at the heart of the matter.

Janicaud presents two options: one can either follow from Husserl and “patiently describe [experience] in order to know it,” i.e., do phenomenology, or one can “manipulate experience,” i.e., break with phenomenology.¹⁹⁷ Levinas is implied to have done the latter because, as Janicaud sees it, Levinas has not done the former. However, Janicaud’s view of what it means to describe is limited by his notion of intentionality as unidirectional. Inverse intentionality offers no possibility of intelligible description, but this fact results from being attentive to the terms in which the Other manifests herself, not from a subversive attempt to “manipulate experience.”¹⁹⁸ Janicaud presumes that all manifestations are finite and therefore can be described in finite terms. Diane Perpich explains that Janicaud’s appeal to the strictness of method “fails—or more accurately,

¹⁹⁵ Marion, *Being Given*, 12.

¹⁹⁶ Janicaud, “Theological Turn,” 48.

¹⁹⁷ Janicaud, “Theological Turn,” 44.

¹⁹⁸ Janicaud, “Theological Turn,” 44.

definitionally refuses—to see the limitations imposed” and therefore he “has no choice but to label the demand to recognize or acknowledge the distinct status of social relationships as a theological importation and manipulation of ‘experience.’”¹⁹⁹

To be neutral, Janicaud argues, is to be “open to the thing itself” and to suspend presupposition;²⁰⁰ however his notion of what kinds of descriptions are neutral reflect his own bias toward the “objectifying regard.”²⁰¹ In contrast, Levinas explains that remaining true to the Other’s secrecy, even if it means nothing can positively be said about the Other aside from its overpowering demand upon the subject, is precisely what it means to be “open to the thing itself.” Levinas writes that “knowledge or theory designates first a relation with being such that the knowing being lets the known being manifest itself while respecting its alterity and without marking it in any way whatever by this cognitive relation. In this sense, metaphysical desire would be the essence of theory.”²⁰² Levinas is describing knowledge as being open to the presentation of things, even if those presentations exceed the subjective grasp. Metaphysics, in that it is a relation with what remains infinite (a relation of non-relation), means letting phenomena show themselves and not restricting their presentation to the finite capacity of the subject—in parallel with Marion’s definition of phenomenology.

Janicaud has too narrowly interpreted Husserl and subsequently deemed Levinas’s metaphysical relation non-phenomenological. Janicaud claims that “the most intimate movement of [Levinas’s] thought consists in transporting it from phenomenology to metaphysics.”²⁰³ However, phenomenology and metaphysics are not mutually exclusive—assuming that we have a

¹⁹⁹ Perpich, *The Ethics*, 48.

²⁰⁰ Janicaud, “Theological Turn,” 48.

²⁰¹ Janicaud, “Theological Turn,” 48.

²⁰² Levinas, *Totality*, 42.

²⁰³ Janicaud, “Theological Turn,” 47.

proper understanding of metaphysics as Levinas defines it, and a proper understanding of phenomenology as Marion has expanded it. Once the definitions are clarified (i.e., Levinasian metaphysics as the finite experience of the infinite, and phenomenology as a method that accommodates finite experiences of the infinite), then Janicaud's statement that Levinas transitions from phenomenology to metaphysics is not problematic, given that Levinasian metaphysics and Husserlian phenomenology have overlapping scopes of practice. Phenomenology accounts for all subjective experiences, even experiences of the transcendent, and insofar as Levinas describes not a pure transcendence but a transcendence which interrupts and limits the subject, Levinasian experience remains phenomenological.

Janicaud correctly notes that Levinas is ambiguous on his use of the method. Janicaud draws focus to the fact that Levinas invokes phenomenology even after challenging it, and claims that Levinas "does not himself theorize on this two-timing [*double jeu*], but prefers to treat it as a kind of *fait accompli* by which the absolute anteriority of the Other [*Autre*] is loftily affirmed, it falls to the perplexed reader, unwilling to submit or to quit, to reckon with the passages to the limit—or contradictions—this discourse allows itself."²⁰⁴ Later, Janicaud asks to what end Levinas might do this. He assumes that Levinas's reasons must be biased, but in a reflective moment he considers another possibility. He writes, "To be sure, Levinas acknowledges his transgression of phenomenology's 'play of lights,'" and then wonders whether it might be "(to pedagogic ends? To apologetic ends?)."²⁰⁵ I think that in this reflective moment Janicaud is spot on; Levinas is engaged in a process of elucidation which demonstrates the limits that follow from rigid interpretations of its method. Levinas speaks of discovering the breakup of totality, which reveals that the structure as often conceived is flawed. He writes,

²⁰⁴ Janicaud, "Theological Turn," 40.

²⁰⁵ Janicaud, "Theological Turn," 27–28.

we can proceed from the experience of totality back to a situation where totality breaks up, a situation that conditions the totality itself. Such a situation is the gleam of exteriority or of transcendence in the face of the Other. The rigorously developed concept of this transcendence is expressed by the term infinity. This revelation of infinity does not lead to the acceptance of any dogmatic content, whose philosophical rationality cannot be argued for in the name of the transcendental truth of the idea of infinity. For the way we are describing to work back and remain this side of objective certitude resembles what has come to be called the transcendental method (in which the technical procedures of transcendental idealism need not necessarily be comprised).²⁰⁶

By beginning with objective experience and describing its interruption by the Other, Levinas gives a phenomenology that juxtaposes two different kinds of phenomena (the finite and the infinite, the other and the Other), which draws us into a didactic reflection on experience. He offers a provocation to enter into conversation about the richness of phenomenological possibility and what it is to be a subject. Levinas opens a door by engaging with the limits of phenomenology—an open door through which Jean-Luc Marion chooses to walk. Marion and Levinas demonstrate the limitations of intentional experience understood most narrowly, which in turn, and to its great benefit, allows for a widening of its scope—a move that preserves and enriches rather than transgresses and destroys phenomenology, as Janicaud would have us believe.

As noted, Janicaud’s phenomenon is ““not an absolute invisible . . . but the invisible *of* this world.””²⁰⁷ Having challenged the former part of his definition which would exclude absolute Otherness from phenomenology, the next chapter will challenge the latter part of his definition by arguing that the encounter of which Levinas speaks remains this-worldly (even if its source may not). In other words, having shown in this chapter that Levinas does not transgress phenomenology in terms of its methodology, I will argue in the next chapter that nor does he transgress it in terms of its content.

²⁰⁶ Levinas, *Totality*, 24-25.

²⁰⁷ Janicaud, “Theological Turn,” 34.

CHAPTER 3: LEVINAS AND THE DIVINE

The face in which the other—the absolutely other—presents himself does not negate the same, does not do violence to it as do opinion or authority or the thematurgic supernatural. It remains commensurate with him who welcomes; it remains terrestrial.

Emmanuel Levinas

The suspension of the natural attitude ought not to lead to a flight to another world or to the restoration of absolute idealism, but to a deepening of the transcendental regard vis-à-vis experience and for it.

Dominique Janicaud

Having demonstrated in the previous chapter that Levinas does not break with phenomenality, I will demonstrate in this chapter that Levinas does not give a phenomenology of God. Rather, he gives a phenomenology of a human experience of an infinite and absolute Otherness that resists characterization, which leads to the possibility of God; in other words, Levinas has not smuggled theology into phenomenology, but rather, theology is a possibility that opens up following from human experience.

First, Janicaud's claim requires a correction: Levinas does not account for a religious experience but for the *possibility* of religious experience. The encounter with the Other reveals to the subject her own limits by means of an interruption of the subject's consciousness—the source of which originates and remains *outside* that consciousness. While this encounter does open onto the infinite—an infinity which may in fact be the infinity of God—the Levinasian account remains anchored within the subjective experience of being put into question and so remains properly phenomenological. Furthermore, even if God is what makes the infinite so infinite, the Other so Other, and the transcendent so transcendent, Levinas has still not contradicted Husserl's exclusion

of God insofar as it is an exclusion to be made prior to phenomenological investigation of experience and not after it, and because to speak of God is always to speak of the human Other.

This chapter defends Levinas first by arguing that he gives a phenomenology of an unknowable experience and so does not lead us to another “world,” be it God or otherwise (section 3.1); second by acknowledging that even if God were to be the cause of the unknowable experience, the experience of the infinite would remain phenomenologically permissible (section 3.2); and third by highlighting that when Levinas speaks of God it is always concurrent with the human Other and so never outside the scope of the phenomenological reduction (section 3.3); this leads lastly to the claim that Levinas does not bring a belief of God, or theology, into phenomenological reflection—rather he begins with phenomenological reflection which then leads to the possibility of a belief in God or to theological possibility (section 3.4).

As is clear from the title of Janicaud’s report, much of his critique regards the theistic content of Levinas’s work. Janicaud claims that Levinas has departed from phenomenology by importing God in a way that is phenomenologically unjustifiable and by “installing” theology into the heart of experience.²⁰⁸ Throughout “The Theological Turn,” Janicaud challenges the theological content of Levinas’s work, arguing that the face of the Other “supposes a metaphysico-theological montage” and that Levinas imposes a dogmatic theology upon the reader, who has no choice but to accept the “holy words” and “lofty dogmas.”²⁰⁹ Janicaud explains that the content of Levinas’s work is “nothing less than the God of the biblical tradition,” which runs counter to the requirements of phenomenology.²¹⁰ However, Janicaud may have too quickly assumed that God

²⁰⁸ Janicaud, “Theological Turn,” 27.

²⁰⁹ Janicaud, “Theological Turn,” 27.

²¹⁰ Janicaud, “Theological Turn,” 27.

is the content of Levinas's phenomenology, and furthermore his use of the word *theology* is left unclear. The former problem will be clarified in section 3.1 and the latter in 3.2.

Janicaud claims that God and phenomenology are mutually exclusive, but from where does he draw this claim? In "The Theological Turn," he states that the biblical God is in "strict treason of the reduction."²¹¹ He is not explicit about in what way God runs counter to phenomenology. In his subsequent work *Phenomenology Wide Open: After the French Debate* he refers specifically to Husserl's exclusion of God from phenomenological undertakings.²¹² Janicaud highlights §58 of *Ideas I* which has a seemingly unambiguous title, "The Transcendence, God, Excluded," in which Husserl writes that "naturally we extend the phenomenological reduction to include the 'absolute' and 'transcendent' being. It shall remain excluded from the new field of research which is to be provided, since this shall be a field of pure consciousness."²¹³ It would seem that in order to remain true to subjective experience, God must remain excluded from phenomenology.

Given Levinas's extensive discussion of God, it might appear at first glance that Janicaud is correct; Levinas speaks of God whereas Husserl explicitly excludes God. If we are familiar with Levinas's religious writings such as *Difficult Freedom: Essays on Judaism*, or his *Talmudic Lectures*, we will know that theological themes are hardly foreign to Levinas. More specifically, *Totality and Infinity* mentions God and religious experience throughout. For example the encounter with the Other "is necessary in order that the breach that leads to God be produced," and that "the dimension of the divine opens forth from the human face."²¹⁴ However, just because the word God arises in Levinas's text does not necessarily mean the experience about which he writes is

²¹¹ Janicaud, "Theological Turn," 27.

²¹² Dominique Janicaud, *Phenomenology "Wide Open": After the French Debate*, trans. Charles N. Cabral (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005), 17.

²¹³ Husserl, *Ideas I*, 134.

²¹⁴ Levinas, *Totality*, 78.

necessarily, definitively, or exclusively God; whether or not Levinas's phenomenology leads to God is a question that requires a nuanced answer. Moreover, the question deserves an answer which does not deny the religious significance of Levinas's work—as defences of Levinas often do.

3.1 The “Flight to Another World”

Janicaud may have too simplistically interpreted the relationship with God in Levinas's work; Levinas does not propose an encounter with God; he proposes an encounter with the unintelligible—an unintelligibility which may be God. Janicaud entertains the idea that there may be something transcendent to consciousness but demands to know whether this must necessarily be God. He asks, “after all, even if we agree to consider a ‘dimension of height,’ must it immediately yield the ‘Most High’?”²¹⁵ This is an important question, and the answer to it will be more subtle than Janicaud implies in his rhetorical query. The answer to Janicaud's question will involve realizing that in *Totality and Infinity*, the subject remains phenomenologically²¹⁶ anchored in the experience of being put into question by that which is infinite, resulting in an unknowable and uncharacterizable experience.

It is important to notice that when Levinas refers to a “breach that leads to God” or a “dimension of the divine,” the wording is always indirect. Pathways are indeed opened which may in fact *lead* to God. However, one is never *led all the way* there. We never *reach* the divine; rather, the *dimension* of the divine is opened up. The transcendence of the Other always escapes cognition and so the experience always remains open-ended. The infinity revealed to the subject may be the infinity of God, but if it is, God is never directly known in human experience.

²¹⁵ Janicaud, “Theological Turn,” 28.

²¹⁶ Phenomenology as defined in Chapter 2 of this thesis.

Totality and Infinity does not propose the direct knowledge of God that would be required to assert, as Janicaud does, that the infinite is *necessarily* God. In fact, it argues against this direct knowledge. “The direct comprehension of God,” Levinas explains, “is impossible” because God is “beyond object-cognition.”²¹⁷ Levinas maintains an “aspiration to radical exteriority,” which through the ethical relation “does not exhaust this aspiration; it remains this side of its ambitions.”²¹⁸ While the self encounters the transcendent Other, the self does not exit itself, nor does the self reach the transcendent. Levinasian metaphysics is always a relation of non-relation between the finite subject and the infinite. While the infinite is experienceable by the finite being, the finite being’s experience does not lose its finitude, or, as Levinas says, “transcendence is to be distinguished from a union with the transcendent by participation.”²¹⁹ The subject can never directly *know* the infinite because to know the infinite would be to collapse the infinite into a totality. Levinas is explicit that to know God is to deny God.²²⁰ It would also be to lose one’s finite roots in the world, which is why Levinas highlights the fact that “as classically conceived, the idea of transcendence is self-contradictory. The subject that transcends is swept away in its transcendence; it does not transcend itself.”²²¹ Transcendence will always be the *experience of* transcendence, but an experience that also never reaches the transcendent. In other words, if God does exist, God could only ever be encountered as a subject and never as an object.

The Levinasian phenomenology of the ethical encounter remains within the finite limits of subjective experience. Janicaud writes that “if there is an intentional transcendence, it is to be grasped as it is given itself in the world. The suspension of the natural attitude ought not to lead to

²¹⁷ Levinas, *Totality*, 78.

²¹⁸ Levinas, *Totality*, 29.

²¹⁹ Levinas, *Totality*, 77.

²²⁰ Levinas, *Totality*, 78.

²²¹ Levinas, *Totality*, 274.

a flight to another world or to the restoration of absolute idealism, but to a deepening of the transcendental regard vis-à-vis experience and for it.”²²² When Janicaud writes that there should not be a flight to another world, it is important to realize that Levinas is in agreement with such a restriction—such a flight would create a union between the subject and what transcends it, effecting a “submergence in the being toward which it goes, which holds the transcending being in its invisible meshes, as if to do it violence.”²²³ When Janicaud writes that phenomenology should proceed from, remain within, and return to experience,²²⁴ it is important, again, to realize that this is exactly what Levinasian phenomenology does—remains within subjective experience, but the subjective experience of that which exceeds the subject.

For Levinas, the ultimate definition of experience is to be put into question by that which is absolutely Other; he writes that “if experience precisely means a relation with the absolutely other, that is, with what always overflows thought, the relation with infinity accomplishes experience in the fullest sense of the word.”²²⁵ Therefore, contrary to Janicaud’s claim that in Levinas “the relation to experience is subordinated to the metaphysical (and theological) dimension,”²²⁶ the exposure of the limits of subjectivity, which alludes to the infinite, is something that occurs within phenomenological experience rather than something presupposed at its expense. In fact, the relation to experience cannot be subordinated to metaphysical dimensions because metaphysics overlaps with phenomenology insofar as they are both terms that describe an the finite being’s encounter with that which is infinite and which exposes the finite limits of the subject. (As

²²² Janicaud, “Theological Turn,” 35.

²²³ Levinas, *Totality*, 48.

²²⁴ Janicaud, “Theological Turn,” 35.

²²⁵ Levinas, *Totality*, 25.

²²⁶ Janicaud, “Theological Turn,” 44.

will be developed, experience cannot be subordinated to theology any more than it can be to metaphysics because theology is dependent on experience for its very possibility.)

What Levinas argues is that the fracture of my world reveals to me a possibility of another, but this fact is not to be interpreted as a departure from this world. If the Levinasian subject remains within the bounds of the experience of being put into question, then she has not left the world behind but discovered its solitude to be ruptured. To know that there is something that exceeds her own world is not to determine the identity of that world.

It might seem that I have taken Janicaud's words too literally. Clearly he does not genuinely contend that Levinas proposes a "flight to another world" but instead means simply that the experience of which Levinas speaks leads to God. However, these two scenarios are undeniably linked because God, as transcendent, must remain separate from direct subjective knowledge—otherworldly in an ethical though not physical sense. To say definitively that an experience leads to God is to have been led to God, but in Levinas's account of transcendence one never arrives at a knowledge of the transcendent. To do so would in fact comprise a departure from worldly experience. If God is like another world, it is one we never arrive at; if to know God is to have left the world behind, then the Levinasian account remains firmly embedded in earthly experience.

The fact is that we never come to comprehend the transcendent and, accordingly, it remains always infinitely beyond category; we never know exactly to where it leads, and consequently we never know if it leads definitely to God. Insofar as its destination remains beyond comprehension, the infinity of the Other may be the infinity of God, but it also may not. The encounter with absolute Otherness leads, then, to the *possibility* of God. On the one hand, when Janicaud asks whether the encounter with transcendence *must* "immediately yield the 'Most High,'" ²²⁷ the answer to his

²²⁷ Janicaud, "Theological Turn," 28.

question must be no. On the other hand, were one to ask whether the encounter with transcendence *may* lead to the “Most High,” the answer would be yes.

If Levinas’s phenomenology does not lead unequivocally to God, then where does it lead? It is a phenomenology of an Otherness which infinitely resists classification and leads us *toward* (though never all the way *to*) what may be God. Janicaud incorrectly assumes that God has been brought into phenomenological experience. Yet the only thing discovered unequivocally by the subject is her own finite limitations, which in turn reveal the infinite—an infinity that may be the infinity of God.

3.2 Husserl and God, Levinas and Experience

When he claims that absolute Otherness is “nothing less than the God of the biblical tradition” and “strict treason of the reduction that handed over the transcendental I its nudity,”²²⁸ Janicaud has not only interpreted Levinas too narrowly on his use of the word God, but made the same error with respect to Husserl’s exclusion of God from phenomenology. Even if the infinity of the Other were to be the infinity of God (though we would never come to know such a fact), phenomenology and God may not be wholly mutually exclusive as Janicaud would have us believe.

Interestingly, in Janicaud’s first work, “The Theological Turn,” he does not say explicitly *how* the biblical God is incompatible with phenomenology, just that “all is acquired and imposed from the outset . . . here theology is restored with its parade of capital letters.”²²⁹ His later work, *Phenomenology Wide Open: After the French Debate* refers specifically to Husserl’s exclusion of

²²⁸ Janicaud, “Theological Turn,” 27.

²²⁹ Janicaud, “Theological Turn,” 27.

God from phenomenology.²³⁰ Janicaud highlights §58 of *Ideas I* in which Husserl explains that “the transition to pure consciousness by the method of transcendental reduction leads necessarily to the question about the ground for the now-emerging factualness of the corresponding constitutive consciousness,” and that “we pass over whatever else, from the point of view of religious consciousness, is able, as a rationally grounding motive, to lead to the same principle.”²³¹ It seems that God and religious consciousness must remain excluded from phenomenological reflection if we are to remain true to subjective consciousness.

It is possible here that when Husserl excludes God, he means to convey an exclusion of God to the degree that God would suggest a pre-existing belief that explains the world. Phenomenologists should suspend whatever kinds of consciousness would interfere with the “constitutive consciousness,” and to the extent that as a belief in God, or a “religious consciousness,” would do so it should be suspended.²³² God “cannot serve as a ground for the factualness of constitutive consciousness,” especially insofar as such a grounding would effectively “compete with absolute consciousness”; to do so might draw the phenomenologist down the road of a natural theology.²³³ Arguably, Husserl is not so much excluding God as he is excluding that which might interfere with the suspension of beliefs required of the phenomenological reduction—and such intrusions might follow from a prior belief in God (and specifically from a belief in a God as the foundation for understanding the world around us). Rather than excluding all religious experience or infinite manifestations from the scope of phenomenology, Yates suggests we read Husserl’s exclusion as an attempt to “avoid a tug-of-war”

²³⁰ Janicaud, *Phenomenology “Wide Open,”* 17.

²³¹ Husserl, *Ideas I*, 134.

²³² Yates, “Janicaud’s Arithmetic,” 88.

²³³ Yates, “Janicaud’s Arithmetic,” 88.

between natural theology and genuine phenomenological investigation.²³⁴ Husserl's exclusion of God may be more nuanced and less uniform than Janicaud appreciates.

This conversation about whether and how God shows up in Levinas could easily lose focus and become a debate about denying or affirming whether the infinite is the infinity of God (or about whether or not Levinas *believes* it is so). This is the wrong question. When it comes to experiences, for example ones that may or may not be caused by God, speculating on their cause does not bring us to a greater phenomenological understanding of experience.²³⁵ However, if we focus on the experience, regardless of its cause, then we have not brought into phenomenology any illegitimate content. Kohák writes that,

Phenomenology can quite legitimately deal with religious experience, but it cannot look for help from theology, except as one of the data of our cultural experience. The putative “cause” of religious experience may be the encounter with the true living God; it may also be an overdose of mescaline sulphate or a projection of a father image. Personally I happen to hold the first theory, but that is irrelevant. The cause is suspended; the experience is what matters. Our task, finally, is not to “explain” religious experience but first to understand it.²³⁶

While Levinasians might find absurd the suggestion that psychedelic drugs or unfulfilled relationships could ever generate an alterity as profoundly non-manipulable as does transcendence of the Other or even the transcendence of God, Kohák's point is that all experience is fair game for phenomenology.

As Kohák notes, “the epoche is designed to rid us not of ‘prejudices’ but of the specific pre-judgement that the world explains experience rather than vice versa.”²³⁷ On this matter, Levinas seems clearly to say that it is not an idea of God that explains human experience, but

²³⁴ Yates, “Janicaud's Arithmetic,” 88.

²³⁵ Kohák, *Idea*, 41.

²³⁶ Kohák, *Idea*, 41.

²³⁷ Kohák, *Idea*, 201, note 16.

human experience which gives any possible meaning to the idea of God, as he writes that “it is our relations with men,” and the subject’s subsequent experience of being put into question, “that give to theological concepts the sole significance they admit of.”²³⁸ The fact that the subject put into question raises the possibility of God may not be phenomenologically illegitimate because the possibility only follows from, and does not precede, human experience. Yates explains that the phenomenologists of Janicaud’s so-called theological turn may “consent to Husserl’s exclusions at the outset of phenomenological investigation, but do not take this to be an operative limitation on phenomenological findings per se.”²³⁹ The possibilities that open up from human experience need not disqualify that experience as phenomenological. The encounter with the infinite, as I have argued above, may or may not be the infinity of God. But *if God does figure into the Levinasian experience*, this figuring occurs in terms that do not violate Husserl’s exclusion.

This brings us to an interesting difference in Janicaud’s and Levinas’s respective definitions of theology—a contrast that results from the way in which the possibility of God emerges. It seems that Janicaud’s working definition of theology implies a belief in God prior to examining subjective experience, whereas for Levinas belief in God is a possibility that follows from human experience (and experience is the *only* justification for theological beliefs). Essentially, Janicaud’s interpretation of God comes before experience, Levinas’s after: the order of operations is an essential difference. As Levinas makes abundantly clear, “theological concepts remain empty and informal frameworks” without “the signification they draw from ethics”²⁴⁰ or, in other words, following the experience of being put into question by the Other.

²³⁸ Levinas, *Totality*, 79.

²³⁹ Yates, “Janicaud’s Arithmetic,” 88.

²⁴⁰ Levinas, *Totality*, 79.

Some authors attempt to deny the theological implications of Levinas's work in order to preserve its phenomenological integrity, for example, by claiming that the word God functions only as a metaphor for the infinite.²⁴¹ While such an explanation may serve in a defense of his phenomenology, it seems a rather disingenuous approach considering Levinas's rich contributions to both philosophy and theology. The question at hand is not whether God is or is not the cause—not whether the flight to another world would lead to God (as if it could ever reach its destination at all); rather, the question at hand, phenomenologically speaking, is whether or not Levinas investigates experience.

3.3 The Divine and The Human

Janicaud has inaccurately assumed that Levinasian experience is an encounter with God definitively, when in reality it is an encounter with absolute Otherness—with that which exposes the limits of the subject. This Otherness may or may not derive its absoluteness from God, but the perspective of the finite human subject will always remain in a state of unknowingness as to the origins of the infinite. While Janicaud has presumed that the subject is led to God, he has moreover presumed that the subject is led away from earthly concrete human relations. We need to return to his question as to whether Levinasian transcendence must “immediately yield the ‘Most High.’”²⁴² In his haste to condemn Levinas as non-phenomenological, he has oversimplified the original text. Levinas does not say that alterity *is* the “Most High.” Instead, the full quotation reads “alterity is understood as the alterity of the Other *and* of the Most High”²⁴³ [emphasis mine]. That which

²⁴¹ Mercer, “Religious Experience,” 521.

²⁴² Janicaud, “Theological Turn,” 28.

²⁴³ Levinas, *Totality*, 34.

limits the subject, or absolute Otherness, might be the infinity of God, but it is always also the infinity of the human Other.

If the divine were not always concurrent with the human, we might expect to see the word God arise all throughout *Totality and Infinity*, but the highest concentration of examples of the word God appears in a short subsection (comprising only three out of *Totality and Infinity*'s roughly three hundred pages) called "The Metaphysical and the Human."²⁴⁴ We read numerous sentences that describe any experience of the divine as an experience of the divine and the human. The human Other "is the very locus of metaphysical truth, and is indispensable for my relation with God."²⁴⁵ Levinas's talk of God is never in isolation from the human Other and so is always in reference to human experience. The human Other, as Levinas describes her, is not a stepping stone toward the infinity of God (nor is she a "mediator," nor is she "the incarnation of God"). Therefore, to speak of God is to speak of something concurrent with the human Other experienced concretely in the world.²⁴⁶ It is not the alterity of God alone that puts the subject into question but also the alterity of the human Other. The "absolutely foreign alone can instruct us. And it is only man," Levinas states, "who could be absolutely foreign to me."²⁴⁷ It is "the face of the Other" that provides "the 'authority' that puts the subject into question."²⁴⁸ Clearly, the only possibility of God arises in the presence of the human—"in the face of the Stranger, the widow, and the orphan."²⁴⁹ To speak of the infinite in a Levinasian context is always also to speak of the human Other. There will always be an ambiguity to the finite encounter with the infinite—always the presence of the human Other and always also the possibility of God. When Levinas speaks of the "Most High" he

²⁴⁴ Levinas, *Totality*, 77–79.

²⁴⁵ Levinas, *Totality*, 78.

²⁴⁶ Levinas, *Totality*, 79.

²⁴⁷ Levinas, *Totality*, 73.

²⁴⁸ Levinas, *Totality*, 81.

²⁴⁹ Levinas, *Totality*, 78.

also speaks of the human. As the title of this subsection suggests, the finite encounter with that which is infinite (metaphysics) is only possible in the context of earthly human experience.

On the one hand the infinite is bound to the human Other, and on the Other hand it is bound to God. The meaning of the infinite is not automatically God and neither is it exclusively God as Janicaud claims. One cannot simply collapse God and the human Other as if the Other did not exist or as if she were only a stepping stone toward God. The essential ambiguity between God and the human Other is clear in the following anecdote about Levinas:

After a lecture Levinas was asked by a fellow professor why he places ethics before divinity: “Is morality possible without God?” Levinas responded: “Is divinity possible without relation to a human Other?” Levinas is not atheist, but is attempting to ground ethics in the beyond Being. Levinas continues, “I am able to define God through human relations and not the inverse. The notion of God—God knows, I am not opposed to it! But when I have to say something about God, it is always on the basis of human relations. . . . I do not start from the existence of a very great and all powerful being.”²⁵⁰

For the subject to encounter the infinite there must be an interhuman interaction, as “the transcendent is a social relation.”²⁵¹ As long as the subject remains solitary she can never truly encounter Otherness as truly Other—her experiences will remain within the realm of the same and always be subject to comprehension and homogenization. In order that this interiority be breached, the subject first and foremost must encounter the human Other. The interhuman encounter signals a beyond but remains within the experience of the subject put fundamentally into question by the transcendence of the Other. Levinas explains that “the strangeness of the Other, his irreducibility to the I, to my thoughts and my possessions, is precisely accomplished as a calling into question of my spontaneity, as ethics.”²⁵² The subject does not transcend her finite condition but realizes it,

²⁵⁰ Simmons, *An-Archy*, 43.

²⁵¹ Levinas, *Totality*, 78.

²⁵² Levinas, *Totality*, 43.

insofar as “the relationship with the Other is not produced outside of the world but puts into question the world possessed.”²⁵³

Moreover, Janicaud may be comfortable excluding the possibility of God from phenomenology, but excluding the possibility of a God whose very possibility emerges from concrete human experience should be troubling to Janicaud because to do so would exclude intersubjective experiences altogether. If the possibility of God emerges from intersubjective experience then the only way to completely exclude the possibility of God is to eliminate intersubjective experience from the field of phenomenological research. If we want to preserve phenomenology as a discipline that accounts for a richness of human experience and in which subjects genuinely encounter other subjects (something we know Husserl valued since he proposed the alter ego in the *Cartesian Meditations* to prevent just such a solipsistic subject), then Janicaud ought to be concerned about the full preclusion that comes with his interpretation of Husserlian phenomenology.

3.4 The Emergence of Theological Possibilities (and of Ethical Ones)

Levinas offers a phenomenology which ultimately is both theologically and ethically meaningful.

In terms of theology, the experience is meaningful because it signals the possibility of God’s existence. To clarify, the experience always remains open-ended because the phenomenon in question is infinite relative to the finite subject and, accordingly, God’s possibility cannot be excluded because the phenomenon in question outstrips the subject’s finite perceptive powers.

²⁵³ Levinas, *Totality*, 173.

Again, Levinas does not give a phenomenology of God, but he does give a phenomenology of an encounter with Otherness from which emerges the possibility of the divine.

In terms of ethics, the experience is meaningful because it provides a first-person account of an interhuman experience. To clarify, the experience in question acknowledges what it is to encounter the alterity of the Other human and find oneself responsible for her—to have the foundations of one's finite self profoundly challenged and simultaneously brought into creation in a way that is impossible outside of an interpersonal encounter. Again, Levinas does not manipulate phenomenology in order to justify his ethics, but he does give a phenomenology of the limitation of the subject, from which emerges an account of an ethics of Otherness.

From an ambiguous experience come two possibilities. Levinas offers two registers of meaning, and this fact is in accordance with the experience of which he speaks. In sum, it is important to realize that both the theological and the ethical meanings are derived first and foremost from a phenomenological account of experience.

Aside from emphasizing that any theological meaning is embedded properly within human experience, any theological possibility is always coordinated with a human Other. When the subject discovers an infinite beyond its finite powers, the experience is always grounded in concrete human experience. By anchoring his thought in the phenomenology of subjective experience (experience in the widened phenomenological sense), Levinas preserves the two possible meanings that result: the ethical and the theological. Janicaud is correct to notice a theological reading of Levinas; however, the theology does not come at the expense of the phenomenology but is in fact *made possible* by it. Similarly, Janicaud finds the “directly moral” content of the work distasteful. Again, the ethics is *made possible* by, and does not come *at the expense of*, phenomenology.

Janicaud claims that Levinas has constructed a “metaphysico-theological montage,”²⁵⁴ where “theology and phenomenology” ought to remain “two.”²⁵⁵ However, it seems to me—that a metaphysico-theological montage is not problematic in terms of phenomenological content insofar as metaphysics and the *emergence* of theological possibility (understood in their respective Levinasian senses) both remain grounded within subjective experience (even if the experience shakes the foundations of the subjectivity so as to reveal its finite limitations). Similarly, when Janicaud critiques Levinas’s “abrupt and directly moral formulation”²⁵⁶ of experience, the ethics is grounded, again, in the experience of a finite subject who finds herself limited by that which both is infinite and provokes in her an obligation to the Other. I find myself newly aware that there is an infinity beyond my category, and in turn this infinity may in fact be God. I find myself overpowered and compelled to respond to the human face, reframing my understanding of the self-Other relation in which the Other precedes me. If there is any meaning to theology or ethics, such meaning results from interpretation of human experience.

Levinas is well known for both his ethics and his theology, which do often overlap across his works. Levinas articulates that his goal has not been to merge them, the effect of which might produce the crypto-theology that Janicaud is wary of. In response to a question of harmonizing these two facets of his work, Levinas asks “were they supposed to harmonize? . . . I have never aimed explicitly to ‘harmonize’ or ‘conciliate’ both traditions,” writes Levinas, but “if they happen to be in harmony it is probably because every philosophical thought rests on pre-philosophical experiences.”²⁵⁷ It is possible that this underlying pre-philosophical experience is the subject’s

²⁵⁴ Janicaud, “Theological Turn,” 27.

²⁵⁵ Janicaud, “Theological Turn,” 103.

²⁵⁶ Janicaud, “Theological Turn,” 47.

²⁵⁷ Emmanuel Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity: Conversations with Philippe Nemo*, trans. Richard A. Cohen (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1985), 23.

experience of being put into question. Janicaud suggests phenomenology may not “support the type of ambiguity wanted by Levinas.”²⁵⁸ However, it may not be that Levinas *wants* the ambiguity but rather that the nature of the event in question simply is to be ambiguous. Rather than “striving to overwhelm,”²⁵⁹ Levinas does nothing more and nothing less than provide a phenomenology—a phenomenology which happens to raise layers of meaning.

Moreover, while Janicaud views ambiguity in a negative light, the Talmudic tradition from which Levinas emerges sees it differently. In Jewish tradition, the Talmud explicates the Torah by means of a series of interpretations from multiple rabbinic sources. Colin Davis emphasizes how the Talmudic tradition does not seek to stabilize a fixed meaning of the Torah of which it aims to interpret, but rather that “the essence of the text lies in its restless questioning.”²⁶⁰ “Contradictions, disagreements and ambiguities” he writes, “do not appear as unwanted disturbances to be overcome; they are precisely what give the Talmud its vitality, permitting it to escape the specific historical circumstances of its compilation.”²⁶¹

In the same way that multiple interpretations arise within the Talmud, multiple meanings (i.e., the ethical and the theological) emerge from human experience. Janicaud’s standards are decidedly atheist. He notes that the precursor to a theological turn could be seen in Ricœur’s work when he asks “is the most radical subject God?”²⁶² Janicaud commends Ricœur for resisting a full-on transition to theology. But does such restraint actually preserve the integrity of the experience, or does it serve to restrict it? We may ask whether “the mere designation of a ‘religious’ manifestation [testifies] to a theological intrusion” or whether certain appearances might be “for

²⁵⁸ Janicaud, “Theological Turn,” 36.

²⁵⁹ Janicaud, “Theological Turn,” 28.

²⁶⁰ Davis, *Levinas*, 108.

²⁶¹ Davis, *Levinas*, 108.

²⁶² Janicaud, “Theological Turn,” 23.

better or worse, overwhelmingly religious.”²⁶³ It will not do justice to Levinas’s personal beliefs, religious writings, or philosophical work to deny theological readings. However, we must also realize that these implications are made possible by the experience of an Otherness that resists classification. Ethics and theology arise only through the ordinary human experience of that which is extraordinary.

As mentioned, Levinas gives a phenomenology that produces multiple meanings—one of which is theological. This statement muddies the clear demarcation that Janicaud deems necessary in order that the purity and neutrality of Husserlian phenomenology be maintained. Yet, the demarcation may not be as true to Husserlian method as Janicaud believes. If the experience in question offers up a theological implication, who is Janicaud or Levinas to dismiss such a possibility?

One wonders with what phenomenological authority Janicaud rules out the theological possibilities that might emerge from genuine human experience. When Janicaud cautions against where phenomenology *should* lead us, he has perhaps overstepped his ground as a phenomenologist insofar as he precludes the possibilities that may be opened up by it. To defend Levinas is not a matter of denying the theological (or ethical) possibilities but of realizing that such possibilities spring forth only from human experience.

²⁶³ Yates, “Janicaud’s Arithmetic,” 83.

CONCLUSION

It has been the aim of this thesis to defend Levinas from Janicaud's critique in "The Theological Turn of French Phenomenology." This defence has been mounted on the grounds that phenomenology can and must include experiences of absolute Otherness and the possibility of the divine that comes therefrom, and that when Levinas speaks of God he remains within the bounds of phenomenology since to speak of God is always to speak also of the human Other.

Chapter 1 offered background to the question addressed in this thesis by providing a review of selected perspectives regarding the relationship between Levinas and phenomenology with respect to Janicaud's argument (section 1.1), a description of the phenomenological method (section 1.2), an account of Levinasian experience (section 1.3), and an elucidation of Janicaud's challenge to Levinas in "The Theological Turn" (section 1.4). This trajectory brought us to Janicaud's definition of phenomenology, namely that absolute Otherness is non-phenomenal and that Levinas's discussion of God and theology exits the realm of phenomenological experience. This two-part definition was then challenged in chapters 2 and 3, respectively.

Chapter 2 defended Levinas against Janicaud's accusation that Levinas breaks with the phenomenality of Husserl. The defence began by framing Levinasian experience in phenomenological terms, i.e., within the context of an inverse or transcendent intentionality (section 2.1). It then argued that when Janicaud makes this claim it is he himself who violates Husserl's principle of all principles by excluding non-finite manifestations, when in fact the scope of phenomenality is to be determined by the phenomenon and not the phenomenologist. This argument was developed by drawing on Jean-Luc Marion's analysis in *Being Given: Toward a Phenomenology of Givenness*, wherein he explains that to respect Husserl's principle of all

principles phenomenology must recognize the possibility of inverse intentionalities (section 2.2). The chapter concluded by arguing that phenomenology must accept the possibility of absolute Otherness and therefore of Levinasian metaphysics (section 2.3).

Chapter 3 defended Levinas's discussion of the divine as well as the theological readings that emerge in Levinas's work. This defence was developed by arguing that Levinas's discussion of God does not break with phenomenology because the possibility of God and of religious experience emerges from an infinite and indefinable phenomenological experience (section 3.1), because phenomenology and God are not wholly mutually exclusive (section 3.2), because when Levinas does account for an experience with (what may be) God such an experience is only possible in the presence of a human Other and so never exits the realm of phenomenological experience (section 3.3), and because—in contrast to Janicaud's claim—theology is a possibility that emerges from genuine phenomenological experience rather than being imported at its expense (section 3.4).

Levinas has remained in conversation with the possibilities of phenomenology—all the while respecting its Husserlian roots and, in the end, greatly enriching them. To accept Janicaud's view of phenomenology is to limit its range in a rather disappointing fashion. While Levinas's account of the *interiority* of the subject would indeed remain phenomenological by Janicaud's restrictive definition, the phenomenologist could at any moment find her work suddenly excluded from the realm of phenomenology when the interiority is interrupted by the face of the Other. Janicaud has suggested that under such circumstances the phenomenologist breaks with the method. It seems to me, however, that it would be the phenomenological method (as Janicaud describes it, at least) which would break with experience insofar as the experience would outstrip the capacity of the method. Janicaud says that “phenomenology is not all of philosophy. It has

nothing to win in either a parade of its merits, or by an overestimation of its possibilities.”²⁶⁴ Yet surely this ordinary human encounter deserves philosophical investigation—and is phenomenology not meant to deal with subjective human experience, even the most complex and unexpected?

It seems that Janicaud found himself surrounded by phenomenologists who saw phenomenology differently than he did and in response held fast to his views. Janicaud saw himself as a valiant defender of Husserl’s method, but his resistance to the methodological explorations in the French tradition reflects a very conservative approach—one which arguably limits rather than follows through on phenomenological possibility. Janicaud writes that Levinas is phenomenologically inspired, but that we should not confuse such inspiration with the rigours of the phenomenological method.²⁶⁵ Janicaud thinks that Levinas’s inspiration leads him to misconstrue the method. Perhaps, in the end, it is the rigidity with which Janicaud views the method that would rob phenomenology of its spirit.

By excluding encounters with absolute Otherness—experiences which have deep and reverberating effects on the subject in the world—phenomenology would seem to fall short of the very encounters it means to rigorously engage with. The interruption by the Other may be “felt and heard more than it is seen”²⁶⁶ but, despite its non-intelligibility, the Other still makes a profound impact on the consciousness of the subject who is dispossessed by it. “What Levinas delivers like no other is an account of the trauma of a direct encounter with the real,” with “a reality

²⁶⁴ Janicaud, “Theological Turn,” 34.

²⁶⁵ Janicaud, “Theological Turn,” 49.

²⁶⁶ Gschwandtner, “Jean-Luc Marion,” 173.

unformed by human concepts,” and with “a true beyond [that] touches us, sending shivers through our conceptual schemes.”²⁶⁷

As noted, it has been suggested that a reader’s acceptance of Levinas’s account depends greatly on whether it resonates with the reader’s experience. Beyond the anecdotal, this thesis lends methodological support to Levinasian ethics. The introduction to this thesis posed the following question: if Levinas intends to break with phenomenology, why the constant engagement with the field throughout his career? I suggest that Levinas is invested in *how* phenomenology is to be interpreted and that his ambiguous use of the method might be motivated by instructive aims. A science of experience that constrains the full breadth of encounter is a bleak one. But moreover, it aligns, as Levinas explains, with the type of thinking that can lead toward dehumanization and injustice. This thesis remains methodological in scope, but it is worth noting that Levinas links totalization—at the level of the mechanics of perception and at the level of the political—with the possibility of war and tyranny. The way in which we understand and investigate the world has meaning, and Levinas is devoted to ensuring we remain open to what always evades our grasp.

What is most striking in Levinas’s work is how accurately he captures the enigmatic experience with Otherness. He articulates with remarkable clarity what it is to come face to face with another—and to feel that weighty and formidable moment when I know in my gut that I have been challenged, demanded of, questioned. Levinas attests to our indebtedness to that which is beyond us and opens us up to a richness of human experience. Grounding self-identity in what is Other, he attests to the very possibility that some encounters construct us more than we construct them.

²⁶⁷ Tom Sparrow, *End of Phenomenology: Metaphysics and the New Realism* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014), 57.

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