Review of: "Richir's Phenomenological and Symbolical as a Model for the Relationship between Phenomenology and Theology"

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In the classical tradition of metaphysics as it pertains to theology, two concepts are especially pertinent in designating the mysterious relationship of finite beings to the inexhaustibly infinite ground and source of all being. On the one hand, *theophany* names the manifestation of the infinite under the particular modalities that delimit things in their finite determinations. On the other hand, *theosis* designates the transformation of the sphere of finite beings through its divinizing ascent towards and integration into the limitless power of its ultimate beginning and end. In classical terms, neither theophany nor theosis erases the distinction between the uncreated, eternal, and infinite cause whose absolute simplicity entails the perfect identity of its essence with its existence and the entire cosmic sphere of created, contingent realities - also itself created and contingent - bound to the exigencies of mutability and change, if terrestrial, or, in the highest spheres of cosmic reality, subsisting as though corporeally in relation to the highest principle from which it derives its being.

To speak of the divine in this tradition - or family of traditions - is at once to invoke *both* the phenomenon of a cosmic reality somehow imbued with the presence of the ineffable fount or wellspring of its being *and* the thought of this mysterious transcendent source itself. From itself, the transcendent ground of all being sustains the kind of relation to all finite, dependent realities by which it subsists in and through them without reserve all the while remaining wholly distinct from them. So, for instance, in the famous image of Plotinus, the One is, like the sun, manifested in all that it brings into vision by its light, while, like the sun, it hides itself in what it illuminates.[1] Ontologically speaking, to "be" is always in some respect already to participate in the first cause as a kind of glorious manifestation of its plenitudinous self-sufficiency precisely by becoming its symbol, i.e. the representation of an eternal beginning and end under the modalities of finite being. Beings in their finitude and relationality forming a cosmic fabric are symbolic instantiations of an invisible because uncontainable source which is really present in them, granting their existence.

So it is that, in the classical metaphysical tradition, true theophany passes over into theosis, just as the true manifestation of any finite reality (e.g. a table) is also a passing symbolically into the contextual mediations that grant it meaning (i.e. the eventuality of the meal or another use). The reality of the table is inextricably bound up in the occasions for its being meaningful precisely *as* a table. Yet, the same essential reality unfathomably somehow also subsists beyond any particular iteration of its tableness or even the sum total of all such iterations. Still, the table is a finite form which in its finitude is contained in a higher causality by which the teleological structure of its being, i.e. its "tableness," and its relation

to minds that know it exists. And so it is with every limited form up to the ultimate source of every contingency, the vanishing point of infinite being beyond being, which constitutes the beginning and end of all finite beings. This ultimate source is uncontained, unconstrained by any cause or essence. For this reason in its very transcendence the source is present in all finite creatures and their webs of relations, the world. Absolute transcendence is also absolute immanence; the source that manifests its plenitudinous power in its giving and granting being to finite things is that towards which all things aspire as though in receiving themselves they simultaneously became the symbol of their origin.

Just so, the theosis is not truly itself, is not truly a passing of the finite being into the divine, unless the ultimate reality it symbolises remains wholly distinct, despite its being entirely hidden, an event wholly concealed at the origin in its "eventuality," that is, its being received, mediated. This I take to be the metaphysical heart of the famous theophanic image of the burning bush from the book of Exodus and, again, of the account of the transfiguration of Christ in the Synoptic Gospels. In the former figure, the divine fire engulfs the living tree without thereby destroying it, such that the life of this "cosmic" tree comes to symbolise another, higher source of being into which it passes. In the second, the living Christ brings the divine fire into the world, but is thereby already mediated by his human form, interwoven into relationships with his disciples. The real presence of the divine is already symbolic, already finitely mediated, while the ultimate content of the symbol cannot be otherwise than a reality beyond itself and all finite determinations towards which it points and which to some extent it really and truly embodies. Only the ground and source of all being, utterly transcendent of every being in its finitude and contingency, can sustain infinitely a relation of identity to all that is not itself in virtue of an essential relation of itself to itself.

The classical metaphysical intuition of theology's divine object has haunted generations of phenomenological analysis. Has phenomenology been able adequately to give conceptual shape to the ontological structure of conscious experience or of the manifestation of the world such that it accounts for the deepest longings of religion and gives place to the object of theology? Quite arguably, these questions were with phenomenology from the beginning. As Dominic Nnaemeka Ekweariri indicates in his analysis of Marc Richir's work, the so-called "theological turn" in phenomenology diagnosed by Dominique Janicaud at the turn of the 21st century concerned not so much a renewed interest by a generation of French phenomenologists (Emmanuel Levinas, Michel Henry, Jean-Luc Marion, Jean-Louis Chrétien, et al) in the question of God or of the possibility of an experience of the divine but rather a methodological distortion that quite ironically eclipses the very object it fears classical phenomenology has obscured.

To be sure, from its inception phenomenological analysis had always remained quite open to the possibility of something like an experience of the divine. Heidegger explored it in his earliest lecture courses, for instance.[2] And by the 1930s he was writing of the need for thinkers to prepare for the sudden emergence of a more profoundly original horizon of intelligibility than had hitherto been seen. This would be the arising of the last god (*der letzte Gott*) in a kind of world-shaping theophany that would bring humanity into the sort of self-responsible relation to its own being that the entire history of metaphysics had prepared for but was unable to achieve.[3] Whatever one makes of these pronouncements (I will return to Heidegger's understanding of classical metaphysics later) it is clear that something like a turn to theology or religious experience as objects of phenomenological analysis did not originate with the "second generation" French

phenomenologists.

Instead, the so-called theological turn concerns what Janicaud perceived to be a methodological shift in phenomenology, away from a strict philosophical return to the “things themselves” into a project guided by dogmatic aims. What began in earnest as a methodological attempt to initiate oneself into the ongoing task of the formulation of an adequately truthful response to philosophy’s absolute object through a conceptual unfolding of the logic of its manifestation ends in a turn to distortive concepts reducing this object to an infinite indeterminacy - the Other, givenness, the flesh.[4] In the first case, phenomenological analysis brings with it the conformity of one’s perception to the internal demands of its object, including a deepened appreciation of the absolute demand imposed on one by the absolute object of ethics and religion. In the latter case, phenomenology offers only the simulacrum of a genuine philosophical encounter with the absolute. Especially in the case of Levinas and Marion, as Janicaud would have it, phenomenology claims to provide a finished description, an ultimate projection that formally lays out once and for all the conceptual blueprint of any possible experience of objects, beings, the lifeworld, other persons, and God. From the outset, dogmatically, phenomenology is negatively defined by what it purportedly is not - an ethical experience, an encounter with God, special revelation - and is thereby relegated to the *merely* descriptive task of the signalling of possibilities for its crossing over into an experience entirely foreign to it.

Of course, the phenomenologists of the theological turn have not jettisoned their philosophical criterion for discerning the theological meaning of these supposedly neutral possibilities, and that is precisely Janicaud’s point: especially in the case of Jean-Luc Marion, the rule is hidden within an arbitrary break between phenomenological analysis of a purely descriptive kind, on the one hand, and the sort of speculative work found in theology, on the other. But this is, of course, to presuppose a pre-established harmony between the two disciplines, which are both supposed to be guided by the same object, yet without any conceptual grounds for their intermediation. Without recourse to any “overlap” (in Ekweariri’s terms) between phenomenology and theology, philosophy is left bereft of any reason to suppose that an authentic understanding of the purely immanent field of experience brought into proper description by phenomenology is also saturated with the divine. The converse problem, of course, is that philosophy also finds itself hijacked by a supposedly autonomous theological discourse that was secretly directing its investigations all along.

If Janicaud rightly calls out the French phenomenologists of the theological turn for their dogmatic reduction of the discipline, still he offers no helpful criterion for resolving the legitimate question of the place of something like an experience of the divine or an encounter with the infinite source and ground of all being within the strictures of phenomenological analysis. Part of the problem, argues Ekweariri, has to do with the lingering prejudice within the field of phenomenology towards its supposed integrity and self-sufficiency as the enactment of philosophical wisdom. Following Richir’s elaboration of Paul Ricoeur’s work on the relationship of phenomenology to psychoanalysis, Ekweariri contends that, the classical phenomenology of Husserl and Heidegger ignored the force of the unconscious and its “symbolic institution” in the symptomatic “gaps" in our linguistically mediated conceptualizations of the world - for instance in the apparent break between my own consciousness of time and the objective time of the world which is transversed symbolically with reference to the invisible origin of both. But where, as Ekweariri contends, classical phenomenology failed adequately to account for the irreducibility of symbolic mediation in our coming to understand the absolute object of experience, the co-called theological turn overcompensates through its identification of this object with a particular

symbolic content. If classical phenomenology offered a kind of theophany of absolute presence without thereby also being able to find a corresponding theosis or pathway of mediation into this object, then its theological interlocutors could see through the eyes of phenomenological analysis only traces of an actual or real presence which remained entirely out of view, theosis without a corresponding theophany.

Aside from these unsatisfactory alternatives, Ekweariri contends that Marc Richir's project provides the phenomenologist with a method which makes possible the analysis of what we might call the experience of God or of one's relation to the absolute object of religion. This method safeguards phenomenology against its colonisation by a particular theological discourse, on the one hand, through its identification and exclusion of the "tautology" of any "'symbolical system' where all distinctions and differences are included in [the] same universal." On the other hand, in light of its recognition the undeniably constitutive role played by symbolic-theological discourse in the achievement of a coherent experience of the world or "being," phenomenology remains open to theology's invitation for it to explore the human existential longing for meaning with an attentiveness to its themes. Phenomenology begins in sheer philosophical wonder with an exploration of the limits of conscious, lived experience, but for that very reason must find its end in a discourse that (following Hegel) speculatively imagines the transgression of those limits in the figure of a call or address from elsewhere. The phenomenological exploration of consciousness for the conditions of possibility of an experience of God, the theophanic, yields the transformation of the very terms by which the exploration is undertaken, from those of an active pursuit on the part of the subject to those characterised by the subject's responsiveness to the demand of ultimate reality, the absolute object of religion, in a corresponding theosis of sorts.

Ekweariri is quite right, in my view, to call for a revision of the phenomenological project which allows for a certain "overlap" with its theological interlocutor. However, as I argue in the remainder of this view, if such a point of contact exists, it must be one free of the faux metaphysical strictures of critical philosophy and open to the symbolic realism of classical metaphysics, albeit in the perhaps more romantic idiom of language as medium of appearance. In the final analysis, it is the linguistic medium of the symbolic in its double elusiveness that supplies the condition for phenomenology's *rapprochement* with theology. The medium is elusive in the sense that it pervades both disciplines, supplying them with the figures and images by which they are able to bring their content to expression, and for that reason cannot be mastered by them. It is elusive also in the sense that the object of the symbol is both present and absent, visible and invisible, and is indeed the relation of these modes of being, as Gadamer realised.[5] It is not a relation, however, that can be brought into the light of conceptual analysis as though it were subject to meaningful limits. There is no way to delimit the final structure of the symbolic, for this would entail a delimitation of the entirety of language itself, which is always already there at the origin of any conceptual analysis.

It is here that I would argue that Richir's project as Ekweariri has described it depends upon a still-too-Kantian restriction placed upon metaphysics which prevents it from making a complete escape from the problem of a *lack of mediation* correctly diagnosed in the French theological turn. Ekweariri takes for granted Kant's argument that the sublime cannot be represented but only indirectly acknowledged through the admission of the utter failure of our imaginative capacity to find a figure adequate to it. This is, however, a false philosophical humility which attempts to "police the sublime," to use John

Milbank's phrase. As Milbank argues, Kant's restriction on metaphysical claims about the ratio of infinite to finite being rests on two core assumptions. In the first place, it takes for granted a kind of pre-established harmony of concepts and appearances based on the dubious assumption that it is possible to isolate and so define the categorical limits of the understanding. In the second case, and equally dubiously, it supposes that our subjective freedom grants us the possibility of having an indirect glimpse of the absolute object standing beyond the series of appearances, enough to establish, supposedly with the utmost certainty, the regulative discourse of ethics, while excluding any positive metaphysical claims about the real relation of God to the cosmos that exists "in" God. This, as Milbank further contends, is to oppose Aquinas's allowance for attribution of qualities to God from the analogy of the resemblance between effects and their formal-final causes by regulating in no uncertain terms what can and cannot be said about this relation between infinite being and finite beings.[6] In this way, a new sort of metaphysics emerges, one "which lays claim to a totalizing and once-for-all representation of finitude."[7] Under this new metaphysical policing, theology is granted philosophical legitimacy as a discourse concerning the absolute but is rigorously kept from any meaningful participation in the exploration of experience. Theology is relegated to the sphere of the purely "symbolic," which, to be sure, pervades philosophical discourse about being, consciousness, lifeworld, etc., but also poses the danger of co-opting this discourse and reducing it to tautology.

In fact, it is Ekweariri's analysis that repeats the erroneous denial of mediation in French phenomenology by relegating "symbolic" theological discourses about the relation of God to the cosmos, or of infinite to finite being, into the sphere of the tautological or aporetic. The discourse which polices the relationship between the two registers of the "symbolic existential" and the "phenomenological existential" is performatively established as the voice resounding from beyond the limits of the symbolic, the originary "word" immediately present in every theological and phenomenological pronouncement. The limits to the symbolic are thereby set: they concern the transition of philosophy into worship through its "conversion" by way of images that lead it along through the flow of spatio-temporal instances. According to this regulative word at the origin, however, the beautiful image, the icon, the inspired work of art, etc., are never to be regarded philosophically as anything other than failed attempts to render real the ideal infinite. They are, supposedly, symptoms of our existential situation of having to speak of the transcendental relation without being able to say anything at all about it save that it cannot be rendered in images.

This emptying of the symbolic of its power is, of course, to deny the classical metaphysical idea, radicalised in the thought of Nicholas of Cusa, that our finite powers of creativity and conjecture by which we attempt to bring the world and ourselves into view are in fact a mode of participation in the divine activity of knowing all things.[8] We imitate this divine act by bearing witness to it through our own energies.[9] The Eucharist is exemplary. As a memorial of Christ's passion and suffering and a witness to his exodus from bondage to death the ritual becomes simultaneously a participation in this event.[10] The elements of bread and wine initially call to mind the originary event to which they point, which is Christ himself, but become fully symbolic of this event only in their embodiment of it. The communicants consume the symbol, which is the reality of God, and are thereby consumed by this reality and integrated into the divine life. It is here we glimpse the full elusiveness of the symbol in its becoming the divine power of mediation between the visible and invisible, the embodied and the bodiless, the finite and the infinite. It can be so only if it is *really and truly* somehow both at once,

the eternal Word at the origin incarnate in the visible medium of bread and wine. According to this theurgic logic of the symbol, no concept or intellectual intuition of its supposed limitation is supplied in advance of the ritual discernment of the infinite in the finite; instead, the divine act is symbolically imitated and thereby embodied in a performance that "repeats" it non-identically in the Kierkegaardian sense. The symbol is at once the occasion of theophany and theosis in an unbroken circle that is, nevertheless, not vicious or tautologous because it is not in the first place merely theoretical or conceptual. In the ritual, the "self" can bring itself to an awareness of the mystery of its unity as both the active subject of experience and the passive object of divine activity through one participatory act.

For reasons already articulated, then, it will not suffice to argue in Heideggerian terms that the "symbolic circularity" of theology leads to "dead ends for meaning." Heidegger's critical unfolding of the logic of onto-theo-logy reveals the pointlessness of the *conceptual* self-positing of identity. To wit, Anselm of Canterbury's so-called ontological proof for the existence of God is not truly ontological in that regard. Instead, as Jean-Luc Marion has brilliantly shown, Anselm's argument is the occasion for the flight of the intellect towards the universal good beyond being precisely through its very denial or crossing of the (limited) concept.[11] The activity does not make sense without the context of faith, i.e. in one's already participating in the divine act which, as we have seen, is in its perfection an act of knowing. To remain with Nicholas of Cusa's radicalisation of symbolic realism, we might say that Anselm's metaphysical reflection is precisely an attempt to bring this active participation in divine self-knowledge into a fuller view of the intellect and, so, to participate in it all the more fully. We see, then, that metaphysical claims about God need not be established on the basis of the self-identity of a concept (i.e. thought thinking itself) but may proceed by a perceived analogy between the divine and human powers of intellection which, through the power of the symbol, simultaneously posits and crosses out their identity. God thereby "exists" in Anselm's thinking, which is to say that he exists really and truly, while also superseding the limits imposed by finite intellect, drawing the latter ever further into the longing activity of thinking, a kind of flame that divinizes the living beings it touches.

Again, the critical stance by default remains suspicious of all analogical attributions of quality to God (omnipotence, goodness, etc.) as a false philosophical humility. But here one can be suspicious of the suspicion and call into question the denial of all metaphysical frameworks in which difference and possibility as ontological categories are thought under the auspices of the unity and simplicity of the one divine act. It is not the case that such a metaphysics proceeds by "eliminating the distance between *abstract thinking* and *practical thinking*" (author's italics), that is, by excluding the possibility of all subjective reflexivity in the spatio-temporal series (e.g. I am now here, but will soon be over there with you) without it being a mere modality of divine presence (e.g. all possibilities for our meaningful interaction are *really* determined in advance). In the first place, this would be the case only if one were to discount the participation of secondary causes in the primary cause allowing for their proximate autonomy and ontological indeterminacy. Under this classical schema, I can truly opt to "be" as this or that particular expression of myself, since neither has been decided from the outset, even though I cannot ultimately act in such a way as to supersede my own nature as a being who must in fact exist. There is here no hidden will to abstraction which dares to pronounce once and for all on the deepest extent of the logical possibilities of a given age or lifeworld. Instead, theology as metaphysical inquiry gestures towards the horizon of universal truth through its denial of the veracity of such pronouncements and its signalling of the possibility that there may

as yet arise new occasions for the discovery of shared meanings given the inexhaustible creativity of the infinite divine act.

Ironically, in the second place, it is precisely the discourse which begins from a suspicion of theology (i.e. as a veiled abstraction) which cancels new possibilities from emerging. Theology is (supposedly) characterised by a positionality and an intentionality that renders it blind to the first gleaming of experience whose possibilities are, therefore, best articulated under the disinterested gaze of a phenomenological science that has awakened much earlier and remains vigilant to the end. But what possibility is there to be discovered beyond the inexhaustible potential for a harmonisation of differences already glimpsed in the same inspiration that brings the intellect towards the thought of the absolute horizon of being and goodness? Would not this "possibility" that escapes theological intuition be that of the sheer irreconcilability of beings under this or any universal horizon? The universality of the wound, the rupture, the alienation of the symbol from its content and its corresponding need for endless proliferation is the horizon under which any and every theological expression must now labour.[12] On this logic, it must now descend into a phenomenological analysis chastened by the ontological strictures imposed by the reduction of the symbol to the mere symptom (after Freud and Lacan). To be sure, Ekweariri contends that theology promises to break free of this horizon (as Christ broke free of the conditions of corruption, death, and futility) by providing phenomenology with the "metaphysical" guarantee of the veracity of its final claim to unbroken truth. But it is unclear just how this "resurrected" theology which has traversed the path of phenomenological analysis can be restored to anything besides dissimulation and striving.

This striving is a far cry from Thomas Aquinas's masterful navigation of revealed doctrine and human experience through a singular application of the powers of the intellect. In Aquinas, as in the much older tradition of contemplation there is no essential distinction to be drawn between philosophical and theological analysis. Instead, there are the distinctive starting points of the revealed doctrines, on the one hand, and of our "given" law-governed experience of ourselves and nature, on the other. Both, however, are modes of grace insofar as they are ways of participating in the one beatific vision of the eternal law uttered by the Father in the Logos that is their proper aim.[13]

Philosophy has already begun analogously to enact this vision under the modality of limited, conscious being insofar as it is the search for the self-revelation or manifestation of the infinite in the finite. That is to say, philosophical reason is already to some extent a bringing to mind of the participation of the historical and ethical being of the self in its deeper nature which is already an "incarnation" of eternal law.[14] The self discovers its irreducible givenness in its *having to be* that agent who receives itself ritually and in the graces of virtue and contemplation. This "having to be" has an eschatological structure that looks forward to the future of a perfected nature which must be habitually enacted, however imperfectly, in the here and now.

The blending of theology and philosophy is not, however, the signal of a reversion to a*merely* pre-critical stance. Rather, as I indicated above, the suspicion levelled against metaphysics in both critical philosophy and certain iterations of the phenomenological project must in fact be deepened and radicalised in a suspicion directed against the metaphysical strictures of critique itself. The philosopher, like the poet, has discerned the theophanic fire and longs to bring it into the open in the medium of the symbolic which, it faintly glimpses, contains an infinite depth of being. Perhaps the true

divinization of philosophy and indeed of all human endeavour is to be achieved in its venturing forth unapologetically, speculatively, creatively in this medium without looking back for long forgotten shores.

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