

Escaping the Aristotelian Bond: The Critique of Metaphysics in Twentieth-Century French Philosophy¹

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In April 1938 the first *Congrès national des Sociétés françaises de philosophie*, which had as its general theme the “Legitimacy and Meaning of Metaphysics,” met in Marseilles.² This largely forgotten event should now be considered a significant moment in the history of twentieth-century French philosophy. Not only did some of the most famous philosophers of the French twenties and thirties participate, figures such as Maurice Blondel, Emile Bréhier and René Le Senne, but the debates were dominated by the idea that something had gone wrong in the history of metaphysics.

The old academic tradition of Cartesian and Kantian rationalism appeared to be challenged by those who believed that the practice of philosophy had to be transformed, and that we had to look for a new alternative. Highlighting this theme, Maurice Blondel said in his introductory address: “we need a philosophy of action, of faith, of human destiny, taking into account the problem of transcendence, in its double aspect, philosophical and religiously metaphysical—of a transcendence that would not only be that of the *a priori* necessities of the human mind.”³ Louis Lavelle, a very original figure, voiced the same opinion in his contributing letter to the conference, asserting that we have to “overcome the world of appearance or the concept in order to reach being itself, precisely because metaphysics is

1. A first version of this article was presented at the 1998 Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association (APSA) in Boston, at a round table on “Multiple Modernities” organized by the Eric Voegelin Society, and chaired by Mendo Castro Henriques. Its original idea rose in a conversation with Arpád Szakolczai, and I owe much to suggestions by Wayne J. Hankey and Olivier Boulnois for sharpening its arguments. Thanks also to Corey Brettschneider, Ariane B. Foote, David Janssens, Yves Kohn, and John S. Leibovitz for their remarks and suggestions.

2. An abstract of the conference has been published in a special issue of the journal *Les Etudes philosophiques* 1/2 (April 1938).

3. M. Blondel, text reproduced in *Les Etudes philosophiques* 1/2 (1938): 7.

the seizure of an act that is continuously accomplishing itself, and beyond which there is nothing, but which is the very beginning of all things."⁴

One may be tempted to draw a parallel between those French professors discussing the beauty of pure metaphysics one year before World War II and those medieval orthodox theologians of Constantinople who, while the Turks were besieging the city, were believed to have been laboriously discussing whether the light of Tabor had been created or uncreated. This comparison does not stand, however. As we can gather from both their polemical and their philosophical writings, most of the authors of the French thirties were highly conscious that they were living in a time of philosophical and political distress. To most of them, as I will attempt to show, modernity was seen not so much as an unfinished project, but as a largely failed one. The reasons for their dissatisfaction with contemporary metaphysics were closely linked with their dissatisfaction with modern politics. Most of them believed that more than politics, philosophy could provide us with an answer to what had gone wrong in modern life.

These intellectuals thought that modernity and some of its most visible excesses, such as the complete administration of life, the secularisation of thought as well as its various forms of political barbarism, should not be seen as the outcome of a contingent political or social evolution, but rather as the direct consequence of the domination of a specific mode of knowledge and way of relating to the world that took its roots in the very heart of Western philosophy. The problem of modernity appeared therefore to be not so much political or sociological in nature, but above all a perverted but still dominant form of metaphysics. By showing how the modern categories of thought were overly objectivistic or concerned with mere appearance, they could explain why modernity itself was so much concerned with the desire to calculate, dominate or to repress some of our most intimate feelings. Calling for a new form of metaphysics was therefore also a way of calling for another form of modernity, which would be less technical, less materialistic and more religious. Maurice Blondel and Louis Lavelle thereby expressed something which would reveal itself as a deep *basso continuo* of twentieth-century French philosophy.

This fundamental opposition between "true" metaphysics and what would be called "logomachia" (Blondel) or "metaphysical forgery" (Maritain) will ground the sketching of what may seem to be a rather surprising picture of the history of twentieth-century French philosophy. This sketch is opposed to some received images, especially those common on the American side of the Atlantic. French twentieth century thought does not, in fact, reduce

4. L. Lavelle, "Remarques sur le thème: légitimité et signification de la métaphysique" (1938), text of Lavelle's contribution (since he could not come to the congress), reproduced in idem, *De l'intimité spirituelle* (Paris: Aubier, 1955) 61.

itself to some rather dull remnants of academic Cartesian rationalism allied to positivism, and to the currently highly popular amalgam of structuralism, poststructuralism, and deconstructionism.⁵

My claim is that these traditions have today not only become marginal in France itself, but that they have been so for the major part of this century. On the contrary, French philosophy has never ceased to be what Lavelle, a couple of years after the Marseilles conference, called a "philosophy of consciousness *par excellence*."⁶ This claim can be confirmed by the striking similarities between the intellectual project of writers of the twenties and thirties and that of more contemporary authors. For those who today clamour for an overcoming of the "metaphysics of representation" or of "onto-theology" do nothing but reproduce the protests of their elders against "objectivism," "idealism," and "phenomenism." On a deeper level, it could be possible to make sense of this general opposition if we consider it as the revival of a much older opposition inherited from late antiquity, i.e., the debate concerning the different interpretations that can be given to the nature of metaphysics. Most of the authors who will be discussed in this essay are highly conscious of reproducing a gesture that, broadly speaking, can be described as "Neoplatonic," against the ontological and scientific type of metaphysics inherited from Aristotle and his medieval commentators. More specifically, the insistence upon spiritual conversion rather than on speculative knowledge, the will to pursue a non-ontological determination of the divine, and the implicit presence of authors such as Plotinus, Augustine, and Dionysius in the writings of the authors here at discussion, will reveal that Neoplatonism is still very much alive under the many faces of twentieth-century critiques of classical metaphysics.⁷

This paper will attempt to illustrate this opposition in two successive moments. The first section will be devoted to developments of French philosophy before the war, when the critique of modernity and the call for a renovation of metaphysics reached a sort of climax across a wide spectrum of authors. The second section will then try to identify the resurgence of similar motives in recent philosophy, mainly influenced by phenomenology.

5. See B. Smith (ed.), *French Philosophy and the American Academy* (LaSalle, IL: Open Court, The Monist Philosophical Library, 1994).

6. L. Lavelle, *La philosophie française entre les deux guerres* (Paris: Aubier, 1942) 7.

7. The role of neoplatonism in the overcoming of classical ontology has already been stressed by Pierre Aubenque in his seminal article, "Plotin et le dépassement de l'ontologie grecque classique," in *Le néoplatonisme. Royaumont 9–13 juin 1969*, éd. E. Zum Brunn, C.J. De Vogel, et H. Dörrie (Paris: CNRS, 1971): 101–08. This role has also been emphasized by W.J. Hankey in a concise survey of French twentieth-century neoplatonism. See his "Le rôle du néoplatonisme dans les tentatives postmodernes d'échapper à l'onto-théologie," in *Actes du XXVIIe Congrès de l'Association des Sociétés de Philosophie de Langue Française*, 2 vols. (Québec: Les Presses de l'Université Laval, forthcoming).

PRE-WAR SPIRITUALISM: AGAINST OBJECTIFICATION

The Parisian philosophical scene of the thirties, now largely forgotten, was extremely heterogeneous. Besides a very academic philosophy dominated by idealism and represented by great Sorbonne professors such as Xavier Léon, André Lalande, Léon Brunschvicg, and Emile Meyerson, who analysed and celebrated the power of assimilation or unification of spirit, "approaching the real with the deep conviction that thought would always find it conforming to its own proper structure,"⁸ Paris saw the development of an alternative *philosophie de l'esprit*, resolutely anti-idealist, which tried to focus on the experience of the spirit and of consciousness rather than on their conceptual abilities.

The father of this program can be identified as Henri Bergson, whose entire enterprise was from its very beginning directed against the reductive approaches of Cartesian or neo-Kantian epistemology, and whose truly revolutionary work, according to Lavelle, was giving a "new fervour" to a generation of thinkers dissatisfied with the "austere investigations" of an overly academic Sorbonne.⁹ Besides Bergson, this attempt to renovate metaphysical inquiry had become the common aim of most of the authors who published in a series under the title "Philosophy of Spirit," founded in 1934 by Louis Lavelle.¹⁰ This editorial enterprise was accompanied by a real philosophical manifesto, which aimed at the overcoming of positivism and offered a new insight into the phenomena of consciousness, knowledge, and religion.¹¹ Lavelle himself, and to a large extent his friend and colleague René Le Senne, were searching for a renewal of a metaphysical investigation encompassing religion, first philosophy and morality, beyond the typically modern tendency to treat them separately.

In a similar vein, we could mention the prolific work of Nikolai Berdyaev and other Russian *émigré* thinkers, highly integrated within the French philosophical scene. Finally, there was the active rebirth of philosophical criticism

8. E. Meyerson, *Le cheminement de la pensée* (Paris: Payot, 1931), as quoted by L. Lavelle, *La philosophie française entre les deux guerres* 221.

9. L. Lavelle, *La philosophie française* 90.

10. In these series, Louis Lavelle published, besides his own works and those of René Le Senne, numerous translations of Hegel and Kierkegaard, Whitehead, Max Scheler, Nicolai Hartmann. He was one of the first to introduce Husserl in France, and gave a voice to the Russian philosophical tradition with essays by Nikolai Berdyaev, Vladimir Soloviev, Semion Franck. The series became also a breeding ground for Christian existentialism with essays by Gabriel Marcel. He also published Paul Ricoeur's first works.

11. See L. Lavelle, "La philosophie de l'esprit," in *La philosophie française entre les deux guerres* 263–67. See also A. Forest, "La philosophie de l'esprit," *Giornale di Metafisica* 1 (1946): 285–99. For a recent reappraisal of this tradition, see the essays collected by Jean-Louis Vieillard-Baron (ed.), *Philosophie de l'esprit* (Hildesheim: Georg Olms, 1999).

within the Catholic tradition, the so-called *Renouveau catholique*, the work of Maurice Blondel, then widely discussed; the development of Christian existentialism with Gabriel Marcel, Aimé Forest,¹² and Henri de Lubac;¹³ the thought of Etienne Gilson and Jacques Maritain in close relation to the development of academic neo-Thomism; and more generally the intellectual climate around the journal *Le Roseau d'Or*.

What united all these authors was their dissatisfaction with a form of knowledge they believed to be specific to modernity, and which I shall define here with a term widely used by these authors as *objectivistic*—i.e., the reduction of the *being* of things to their objective being within a *concept*. As a matter of fact, the question of the nature of this objectivism was the subject of an intense debate in the French philosophical context of the thirties. The question itself brings to mind an old Hegelian theme, which was then rejuvenated by Alexandre Kojève in his legendary course at the *Ecole des Hautes Etudes*, lectures in which a large share of the post-war French intelligentsia participated,¹⁴ and which also played an important role in the proto-existentialist reading of Hegel's philosophy popularised by Jean Wahl.¹⁵

For the authors we choose to consider, however, the experience of consciousness could not simply take the form of the Hegelian "sad consciousness," lost in its objectification. Objectification could not only be conceived as a mere stage to be overcome, since it is from the beginning conceived as a mistake about the nature and the genesis of consciousness itself. Therefore, it is not only the Hegelian concept of objectification that had to be criticised, but the very origin of a purely conceptual way of thinking, that took its roots in a perverted form of Aristotelianism and medieval theories of knowledge. Through objectification, consciousness only acquires a shadowy

12. Besides an important thesis on Thomistic metaphysics, *La structure métaphysique du concret selon saint Thomas d'Aquin* (Paris: Vrin, 1931), he was the author of *Du consentement à l'être* (Paris: Aubier, 1936) and *Consentement et création* (Paris: Aubier, 1943).

13. Besides his studies on the history of theology, he was also the author of the influential (at least in Catholic circles) essay, *The Drama of Atheist Humanism* (Cleveland: World Publishing, 1965).

14. From 1933 to 1939, Alexandre Kojève taught his course on Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* at the Ecole des Hautes Etudes (later published as *Introduction à la lecture de Hegel*, by Raymond Queneau [Paris: Gallimard, 1947]). These lectures were followed, amongst others, by Raymond Aron, Georges Bataille, Alexandre Koyré, Pierre Klossowski, Jacques Lacan, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Eric Weil, Fr. Fessard, and even André Breton. On the influence of this course in post-war French philosophy, see V. Descombes, *Modern French Philosophy*, trans. L. Scott-Fox (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980) ch. 1. It is interesting, however, that Descombes does not mention any of the authors here in discussion in his book. He assumes thereby that they had no influence on the post-war developments, which is true in one sense, but also lacks historical fairness and is an easy way of avoiding the explanation of the resurgence of similar motives in recent philosophy.

15. J. Wahl, *Le malheur de la conscience dans la philosophie de Hegel* (Paris: Rieder, 1929).

knowledge of itself, oblivious to the fundamental experience that awakened it and seeking an immediate refuge in the ordering of those contents it apprehends. The intrinsic reality of being is thereby immediately replaced by the purely extrinsic form of its being known.

From that point of view, the authors discussed here considered objectivism to be the dominating form of modern consciousness, culminating in Kantian idealism. Clearly describing the nature of the issues at stake, Maurice Blondel led the general onslaught: "Cartesian dualism, idealism and immanentism were some of its various consequences, and all resulted from a wrong initial problem. By separating from the beginning, by opposing subject and object, intelligibility and reality, knowledge and being, thought and action, philosophical inquiry condemned itself to artificial, insoluble and sterilising difficulties."¹⁶ And Louis Lavelle was right once again in writing that his time orchestrated a generalized attack on a certain kind of Kantianism.¹⁷ From Bergsonian intuitionism to Berdyaev's critiques, and from neo-Thomist attacks on modern epistemology in general to Louis Lavelle's own attempt to return to the experience of "intimate consciousness," the overall idea was that modern philosophy had proved itself unable to handle the question of the reality of consciousness.

We turn first to Bergson's radical skepticism about the categories of modern thought. He explained the problems of modernity as resting on a fundamental error within the evolution of Western metaphysics, dating back to what he called a few "Eleatic illusions"¹⁸ (just as Maurice Blondel had, in the same years, spoken of the "idealist illusion"¹⁹). These problems were consequences of the will to overcome the inherent contradictions of movement and of change in the way that our intelligence represents them to itself. These speculative efforts were common characteristics of both ancient and modern philosophers. It should therefore come as no surprise that Neoplatonism played an important role in the philosophical education of Bergson, as many commentators have emphasized.²⁰

16. M. Blondel, *L'Action* (Paris: Payot, 1936) I, 339.

17. L. Lavelle, "Destinée du kantisme" (Paris: Albin Michel, 1934), in *Panorama des doctrines philosophiques* (Paris: 1967) 97.

18. H. Bergson, *Time and Free Will: An Essay on the Immediate Data of Consciousness*, trans. F.L. Pogson (London: George Allen, 1910) 113.

19. M. Blondel, "L'illusion idéaliste," in *Les premiers Ecrits de Maurice Blondel* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1956) 116, republished from the *Revue de métaphysique et de morale* 6 (1898): 727–46.

20. See R.-M. Mossé-Bastide, *Bergson et Plotin* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1959); also P. Hadot, "Introduction" to *Le Néoplatonisme*: 2.

Contrary to the dynamism inherent to the Neoplatonic tradition, the metaphysics of most Ancients and Moderns alike

was led to look for the reality of things beyond time, beyond what moves and changes ... From then metaphysics could only be a more or less artificial arrangement of concepts, an hypothetical construction. It pretended overcoming experience, but in truth, it only substituted to the moving and full experience ... a system of general and abstract ideas, drawn from this same experience or rather from its most superficial layers.²¹

For such metaphysics, duration was then inevitably degraded to a lower form of being, while time was demoted to the status of a privation of eternity. Bergson attributes this whole historical movement to a fundamental temporation of consciousness which consists of objectivating whatever it perceives, an insight already clearly stated in his 1889 *Essay*: “consciousness, goaded by an insatiable desire to separate, substitutes the symbol for the reality, or perceives the reality only through the symbol.”²² Against this confusion of symbol and “second realities,” the effort of philosophical intuition would be to brush aside general ideas in order to restore “to movement its mobility, to change its fluidity and to time its duration.”²³ Opposing similar reductions, Bergson’s whole intellectual project aimed at uncovering the philosophical conditions of an “integral experience” capable of honouring being itself without merely degrading it into speculative forms.

The neo-Thomists immediately recognised Bergson as a great innovator, and engaged in a continuous debate with him. Of course, they could not share the central principles of his radically temporal metaphysics but lauded him for having found the right words to challenge the whole modern epistemological tradition. In his very first book, dedicated to Bergson, Jacques Maritain wrote that “in the feast of contemporary philosophy, in the middle of Kantians and neo-Kantians, idealists, positivists, adepts of scientism, subjectivists, relativists, solipsists, philosophers of the totem and the taboo [Bergson], truly appears as a sober man amidst drunken guests.”²⁴ Bergson was praised because his work, in spite of all kinds of discordances, outlined things that were clearly affirmed by Thomism. For example, there were the co-naturality between human intellection and material things, the authority of common sense, and the spontaneous consciousness. It also constituted an

21. H. Bergson, *The Creative Mind*, trans. M.L. Anderson (New York: Philosophical Library, 1946); in French: *La pensée et le mouvant. Essais et conférences* (1934), in *Oeuvres*, introduction by Henri Gouhier (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1970) 1259.

22. H. Bergson, *Time and Free Will* 128.

23. H. Bergson, *La pensée et le mouvant*, in *Oeuvres* 1259.

24. J. Maritain, *La philosophie bergsonienne*, in *Oeuvres complètes*, ed. Cercle d’Études Jacques et Raissa Maritain (Fribourg: Éditions Universitaires/Paris/Éditions Saint Paul, 1986ff) I, 236.

“effort to escape from the vain formulas of modern dogmatism.”²⁵ As a matter of fact, the neo-Thomist critique also pursued a double project: on the one hand, it severely criticized the post-Cartesian or post-Kantian epistemology; on the other hand, it tried to refound the knowledge of reality by means of a highly selective recourse to the medieval tradition, through the absolute privilege given to the thought of Thomas Aquinas and to his alleged existential realism.

What was typical of Gilson’s as well as of Maritain’s approach was a fundamental lack of differentiation between theology and philosophy. They put themselves not only in opposition to numerous contemporary “academic” neo-Thomists (especially the Louvain school), but also to the whole intellectual tradition which since the end of the Middle Ages had worked on a separation between the discourse on God and the discourse on Being, and of which the vast enterprise of systematization made by the Spanish Jesuit Francisco Suárez is often considered the best example. For Gilson, only Aquinas’s God proves that the claims of causality and sufficient reason, to which modern philosophy would confer such importance, do not relate as “first principles” to the necessity of being.²⁶ The Thomistic teaching on Being as *ab actu essendi* allowed Gilson to value the creative causality of Being as it communicates itself to every individual, against all the approaches he labeled as “essentialist,” i.e., as tending to progressively reduce the being of things to what could be known or conceived of them. This enabled the neo-Thomist tradition to discard the entire post-Thomistic tradition, precisely by showing that the dominant forms of twentieth-century epistemology were actually the continuation of perverted medieval forms. This history is read as the continuous loss of the Thomistic discovery of existential being in favor of a conception of being as simple quiddity, reduced to the knowable. Modern metaphysics, as it had become dominant since the age of Suárez and Descartes, was seen as cut off from its existential roots and as tempted to reduce reality to a *thingified* reality existent in knowledge.²⁷ From this point of view, there is a perfect continuity between medieval nominalism and modern idealism, since only “formal coherence” seems to regulate truth. This would be the reign of what Maritain called modern “metaphysical forgery,” which mistakes metaphysics for logic.²⁸

25. Ibid. 481.

26. See E. Gilson, “Les principes et les causes,” reprinted in idem., *Constantes philosophiques de l'être* (Paris: Vrin, 1983) ch. 11.

27. In English: see E. Gilson, *Being and Some Philosophers* (New York: Charles Scribner, 1937) 89. See also the statements in “Concerning Christian Philosophy. The Distinctiveness of the Philosophic Order,” in *Philosophy and History: The Ernst Cassirer Festschrift*, ed. R. Klibansky and H.J. Paton (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1936) 64.

28. J. Maritain, *Sept leçons sur l'être et les premiers principes de la raison spéculative* (1934), in *Oeuvres Complètes* V, 543 ff.

Interpreted in such a way, Thomism becomes a radical critique of modernity and of its philosophical infrastructure, since it calls for the overcoming of the purely ontological modern metaphysics as well as of the whole enterprise of "separation" characteristic of the modern sciences: theology reduced to "special metaphysics," autonomy of epistemology, and autonomy of morality as an independent discipline. Redemption could only come from the return to a form of realistic metaphysics, the specific forms of which—but not its basic intention—were the subject of a debate between Maritain and Gilson. This quest for a realism which would preserve the primary relation between being and thought allows us to compare the neo-Thomist enterprise with the very similar critiques addressed by Nikolai Berdyaev and Louis Lavelle²⁹ to the history of philosophy.

Their intellectual horizon was different: Berdyaev had a sound knowledge of the Russian Orthodox tradition and of modern German philosophy, Louis Lavelle was heir to an old French spiritualist tradition he traced back to a very personal interpretation of Descartes, by way of Félix Ravaisson and Maine de Biran. However, in spite of all these differences, they both lament the "existential loss" inherent in all modern philosophical constructions. For Berdyaev, history of philosophy has to be conceived as totally erroneous from the Greeks to Hegel. From the beginning, the question of being has been occluded by what he calls its "objectification." Sharing neo-Thomist intuitions, Berdyaev characterized *ontology* in particular as a mode of thought only capable of having access to Being *qua* product of thought and as the result of rational labor, searching for an *objective being*, that would actually undermine any attempt to seize Being *qua* Being.³⁰ "The entire world tends to negate the reality of spirit,"³¹ writes Berdyaev in *Spirit and Reality*, one of his most characteristic philosophical texts. This erratic experience of metaphysics implied a devalorization of the singular and of the authentic existential, by hypostazing products of thought and thereby transforming Being into something external which could simply be disposed of.

The attitude of all of these authors towards Kant, in some way the *princeps modernorum*, is quite revealing of what they consider to be thoroughly perverted in modern philosophy. From the beginning, Bergson saw in Kantianism a continuous sacrifice of the content to the framework and of spontaneity to the rule. For Jacques Maritain, the entire Kantian tradition

29. On the similarities between Louis Lavelle's approach and neo-Thomism, see J. Ecole, *La métaphysique de l'être dans la philosophie de Louis Lavelle* (Louvain: Nauwelaerts, 1957) 170–71.

30. N. Berdyaev, *Spirit and Reality* (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1937); in French: *Esprit et réalité* (Paris: Aubier, 1943) 7.

31. N. Berdyaev, *Esprit et réalité* 5.

was dismissed as a “historical catastrophe for Western civilization ... an abdication of intelligence,”³² since it was the culminating point of the depreciation of knowledge to a mere mode of fabrication. Other authors such as Berdyaev and Lavelle had a more qualified opinion.

Berdyaev makes a defense of Kant against neo-Kantian idealism: he praises Kant for having maintained a form of realism and for having established, better than anybody before him, the dualism of the order of liberty and order of nature, as well as for having recognized an order of reality more authentic than the one merely perceivable in the world of visible phenomena.³³ He also praised his critique of the “ontological argument” as an attack formulated against false ontologism in general, since the latter was based on a confusion of the logical predicate and reality, of the idea of being and being itself.³⁴ On the other side, Berdyaev was compelled to abandon Kant when the latter considers the *thing in itself* as the *cause* of phenomena, since causality was for him the transcendental condition for the knowledge solely of the world of phenomena. From that point of view, there lies a confusion between form and content—the content given by the thing-in-itself and the form given by reason, i.e. transcendental consciousness. Berdyaev saw here a typical danger of modern philosophy, i.e., to let the object escape from its simple condition of phenomenon in order to turn it into an intelligible content. As Bergson had already put it, Kant tended to “hand over root and branch the world of phenomena to our understanding.”³⁵ This difference between thing-in-itself and phenomenon should therefore not be conceived in the same way as a relation between subject and object, but had to be reintroduced within the very things-in-themselves, “in a qualitative condition of that which is called being.”³⁶

Finally, with Louis Lavelle, the critique of objectivism took a less historical turn. He did not follow the very linear historical evolution envisaged by his contemporaries, but rather directed his criticism against the objectivistic forms always susceptible of perverting the *philosophia perennis*. His reading of Descartes is a good illustration of this attitude, since he labored to recover the existential aspect of his own philosophical meditation. In general, he conceived the history of philosophy as an ongoing struggle between spiritualism and positivism, rejecting the latter as only capable of “imposing its truth to the most feeble-minded consciousness.”³⁷ However, he equally criti-

32. J. Maritain, *Réflexions sur l'intelligence* (1924), in *Oeuvres complètes* III, 45.

33. N. Berdyaev, *Esprit et réalité* 7.

34. N. Berdyaev, *The Beginning and the End* 10.

35. H. Bergson, *Time and Free Will* 235.

36. N. Berdyaev, *The Beginning and the End* 17.

37. L. Lavelle, “Le retour au spiritualisme” (1935), in *Morale et religion: Articles 1930–42* (Paris: Aubier, 1960) 140.

cized the “closed” or “constituted” forms of consciousness that have undoubtedly dominated the modern tradition. Following the Bergsonian intuition, he instigated a very similar trial of the Kantian transcendental consciousness.³⁸

In all these cases, one can see a very clear anticipation of certain intuitions of post-war French phenomenology, in particular its attempt to criticize the overly determinate character of Husserlian transcendental subjectivity, incapable of seeing the transcendent without simultaneously degrading it to a form of objectivity.

FROM METAPHYSICS TO POLITICS

Beyond the condemnation of the philosophical discourse which led to modernity as “objectivistic” or “essentialist,” I argued in the beginning of this paper that this objectivism had taken a social and political expression, which can be particularly well-observed in the specifically modern forms of the administration of life characteristic of twentieth-century mass societies. The idea that the self-inauguration of modernity fosters an increasing chasm between the primary interior experience of man and the secondary, degraded and derivative experiences imposed unto him by life in society was already a recurrent theme in Western nineteenth-century literature. In the more narrow field of philosophy, it was once more Henri Bergson who had opened the way: early on, in his *Essay on the immediate data of consciousness* (1889), he had insisted that social habits were constituting in us a “superficial self” from which we had to break away in order to recover our living, dynamic, and unpredictable self.

Bergson’s critique of the objectifying forms of knowledge is thus paralleled by a critique of the objectifying forms of social life, as they unfold themselves on the eve of the twentieth century: the modern social regime, with all its automatizations and rationalizations, could become stifling for the “great work of creation” in which we must “participate” by becoming creators of our own selves.³⁹ The drama of humanity trapped in modern society stems from the fact that technical rationality organizes its great investments around motives that are not the true reasons of desire and that overshadow the needs that ought to be given priority. There is, according to Bergson, a terrible “sensation of emptiness” proper to modern society. As

38. See L. Lavelle, “Destinée du kantisme” (1934), in *Panorama des doctrines philosophiques: Articles 1930–42* (Paris: Aubier, 1967) 101–02: “... car pour Kant, connaître l’esprit, ce serait le connaître comme un objet, chercher à en faire une âme substantielle, c’est-à-dire à l’atteindre par une expérience dont les conditions nous sont refusées.”

39. H. Bergson, *La pensée et le mouvant*, in *Oeuvres* 1345.

long as the rational will succeeds in repressing the instinct in its consequences, this sensation can only intensify until a new energy has converted the instinct itself.⁴⁰ Hence, Bergson believes there is such a thing as a “natural regime” of society, in which it would experience some form of internal balance between the spontaneity of instincts and their rational organization. The entire Bergsonian political program would therefore consist in the promotion of the conditions of such a balance between private experience and common life.

In a similar vein, a more or less vigorous critique of social objectification can be found amongst Neo-Thomist authors: here, and once again, Jacques Maritain, with his book *Antimodern*, emerges as the key figure.⁴¹ The philosophical critique is easily turned into a political critique since he considers that post-Thomistic scholasticism has constituted the start of the logic of modernity that expressed itself in its double aspect of secularization and rationalization. Maritain’s interpretation of history is that of a continuous fall, a “spiritual drama,”⁴² since fourteenth-century individualism destroyed everything, followed by the “reprobate mysticism”⁴³ of the Renaissance, and finally by the devilish succession of thinkers such as Luther, Descartes, and Kant. This led to a complete isolation of man from his supernatural life and to the degradation of the question of man into a vulgar anthropocentrism or a deification of man.⁴⁴ The critique of modern metaphysics can thus easily be turned into a critique of modern politics, since the idea of an autonomy of knowledge is accompanied by the frivolous claim of political autonomy, i.e., the claim that man can entirely be his own law unto himself.⁴⁵ The critique is global: it is not only directed against movements such as the “paradise of anguish” referring to Bolshevism, but also against every form of inner-worldly politics, invariably qualified by the names of “liberalism, Americanism and modernism,”⁴⁶ all of them being ideological forms born from the same “humanitarian optimism” and the “myth of Progress.” In truth, they only express a complete lack of judgment towards reality. In the end, one can say that modernity is globally dismissed as a regime which leads to

40 H. Bergson, *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion*, trans. R. Ashley Audra and Cloudesley Breteron (London: Macmillan, 1935) 268.

41. On the political position of Neo-Thomist intellectuals, see the recent book by Ph. Chenu, *Entre Maurras et Maritain: Une génération intellectuelle catholique 1920–1930* (Paris: Editions du Cerf, 1999).

42. J. Maritain, *Antimoderne* (1922), in *Oeuvres complètes* II, 1081.

43. Ibid. 1042–43.

44. See J. Maritain, *Principes d’une politique humaniste* (1944), in *Oeuvres complètes* VIII, 191–95.

45. J. Maritain, *Primauté du spirituel* (1927), in *Oeuvres complètes* III, 917.

46. J. Maritain, *Antimoderne*, in *Oeuvres complètes* II, 1088.

the rage of domination, the idolatry of the state, the mutilation of life—in short, a regime of pure barbarism.⁴⁷

This idea of “barbarism” is also at the heart of Nikolai Berdyaev’s thought, in particular in *The New Middle Ages* (1927), his first book to be published in France, under the auspices of Jacques Maritain.⁴⁸ Berdyaev’s book was a brutal and aggressive piece of writing, marked by a profound feeling of crisis animating European civilization: with a rare form of verbal violence, he attacks all modern forms of administration of life, as well as the revolutionary hopes of Bolshevism, portrayed as a real “divine punishment” and as the clearest expression of the project of technical domination of modernity. He considered the reality of the spirit to be negated not only by modern philosophy, but also by the “utilitarianism that vitiates life in this world,” by all the “means heterogeneous to the desired ends,” and by “social daily life.”⁴⁹ Philosophical objectivism has led to the “decay of the world,”⁵⁰ a rationalized world “fabricated by concepts,” and has taken the concrete form of the sacralization of objects. (In ancient metaphysics it took the form of religious cults, in modernity it takes the form of the fetishism linked to consumer society.) Berdyaev uses the vocabulary of “primary” and “secondary” realities, the latter dominating us and constituting the most obvious sign of spiritual decadence of the West.⁵¹ In general, Berdyaev’s first texts were still characterized by a very Nietzschean critique of the modern idea of equality, dismissed as a completely pathetic passion of being-similar, lethal to ambition or creativity. In later texts, he actually came closer to Heidegger’s critique of social conventions as the domination of an impersonal *Man*.⁵²

Again, Louis Lavelle on his side did not share such extreme judgments. However, he developed a critique of materialism, as linked to modern totalitarianism,⁵³ while sharing Bergson’s idea that science overstepping its limits necessarily oppress spiritual life instead of expanding it.

47. J. Maritain, *De Bergson à Thomas d’Aquin* (1944), in *Oeuvres complètes* VIII, 69. English version available in *Ransoming the Time* (New York, 1941) ch. 3 and 4. Although presented less rhetorically, Gilson shared similar views of the evolution of modern politics, which he saw “condemned to oscillate perpetually between anarchism and collectivism, or to live empirically by a shameful compromise which is without justification.” See “Concerning Christian Philosophy” 68.

48. N. Berdyaev, *The End of Our Time* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1932); in French: *Un nouveau Moyen-Age* (Paris: Plon, 1927) 72.

49. N. Berdyaev, *Esprit et réalité* 44.

50. *Ibid.* 71.

51. N. Berdyaev, *Essai de métaphysique eschatologique* 58.

52. *Ibid.* 178.

53. L. Lavelle, “La civilisation et la paix” (1940), in *Morale et religion* 134.

EXPERIENCE AND THE RECOVERY OF TRANSCENDENCE

Against philosophical objectivism and social rationalization, the intellectual project of all these authors was to recover a philosophy of being that would allow for the transcendence of both the dominant philosophical discourse and the administration of life in all its forms. It seems that this entire project is articulated around a new valorization of the concept of *experience*, viewed as opposed to the degraded forms of thought and of social life which cut us off from our own experiential being: "experience is the only source of knowledge," programmatically wrote Bergson.⁵⁴ There is no doubt that the mood in the French thirties was propitious for calling for "philosophies of experience" in all their possible forms, reaching from the most naive emotivism to mystical exaltations. One thinks of the popular *Inner Experience* of Georges Bataille (1943),⁵⁵ of the works of another famous Russian *émigré*, Leo Shestov, of the works of Jean Nabert, who tried to escape Kantianism by an "experiential" treatment of liberty,⁵⁶ and few can ignore the success a philosophy centered around the "experience of human reality" would have in the form of Sartrean existentialism. However, there is one further aspect largely ignored by the authors just mentioned: the continuous link that is established between *experience* and *transcendence*.

Again, it is probably in Henri Bergson's work that this philosophical program appears in its clearest form. Although sometimes criticized for being still too naturalistic, Bergson made one of the strongest steps towards the intellectual recovery of the center of this "privileged experience through which man could get into touch with a transcendent principle"⁵⁷ in his desire of tearing religion from the metaphysical constructions that occluded its true nature.⁵⁸ There is no other source of knowledge outside of experience, and it was only this open experience of the soul that could lead to authentic metaphysics, as opposed to the separation between the speculative subject and the thingified object typical of modern philosophy. The same theme can be found in Maurice Blondel's numerous meditations on the experiential nature of consciousness, which cannot be transformed into an object: "one has to make of consciousness not a starting point, but something like a means which allows us to shed light within the beneath, what is at our side, the intimacy, the beyond of thought."⁵⁹ Louis Lavelle's work was again in perfect

54. H. Bergson, *The Two Sources* 212.

55. G. Bataille, *Inner Experience*, trans. Leslie Anne Boldt (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988).

56. J. Nabert, *L'expérience intérieure de la liberté* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1923).

57. H. Bergson, *The Two Sources* 212.

58. *Ibid.* 231–32.

59. M. Blondel, *L'action* (1936) 308–09.

continuity with the Bergsonian and Blondelian insights. Against all the objectivating tendencies, Lavelle claimed that “true knowledge consists in erasing oneself in front of the object” and that “the respect of exterior and interior experience expresses a perfect modesty toward the universe and a perfect piety toward God.”⁶⁰ The renewal of metaphysical intelligence passed through a search of the “ground of being,” the experience of which had to be recovered: “there is an initial experience that is implied in all the others and that gives to all of them their gravity and their depth: it is the experience of the presence of being. Recognizing this presence reverts to recognizing the participation of the self in being.”⁶¹

Nikolai Berdyaev also reproduced this Bergsonian insight according to which only the openness of the soul would render us capable of “escaping to the species,” when he wrote that “the spirit means for man the escape from isolation toward the concrete universal.”⁶² Both Lavelle and Berdyaev insisted on a subtle intertwining of the particular and the universal, the immanent and the transcendent, in their attempt to capture the place where transcendence dawned within the very immanence of the soul.⁶³ “The experience of the transcendent and of transcendence is an interior and spiritual experience, and as such, one can qualify it as immanent The transcendent reaches man not from the outside, but from the inside, from its own depth,” writes Berdyaev.⁶⁴ The immanence here at play is therefore very different from that of social daily life: it is an immanence of spirituality that plays an epistemological and even theological role. Berdyaev’s own thesis about being is stated as follows:

knowledge is rather an event contained within being and it is through it that the mystery of being reveals itself. But it is a being that has not undergone the ordeal of objectification, that is not exteriorized.⁶⁵

Interior knowledge is conceived as an experience transcending the dualism of being and thought: “My own internal experience is not an object,”⁶⁶ concludes Berdyaev.

60. L. Lavelle, *La conscience de soi* (Paris: Aubier, 1933) 32–33.

61. L. Lavelle, *La présence totale* (Paris: Aubier, 1934) 25.

62. N. Berdyaev, *Esprit et réalité* 19.

63. *Ibid.* ch. 6, *passim*.

64. N. Berdyaev, *The Divine and the Human* (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1947), in French: *Dialectique existentielle du divin et de l'humain* 64.

65. N. Berdyaev, *Esprit et réalité* 14.

66. *Ibid.* 11.

In the specific articulations by these authors of the nature of the intertwining of inner experience and transcendence, we can find the specific hallmark of the tradition they call for: experience is not something contingent we could describe through concepts, but has to be lived from its deepest interiority. Maurice Blondel wrote, following Augustine:⁶⁷

Ab exterioribus ad interiora, ab interioribus ad superiora. But, of these three terms employed by Saint Augustine, if one suppresses the mediating term, the bridge is broken, and only incommunicable entities are present to each other. From objective knowledge to the reality of the subject, there is no direct route by means of theory or abstract logic. One cannot attain or define the transcendent except by the route of immanence, exteriority except by interiority.⁶⁸

Experience could not simply be conceived as an interior insight of being within human consciousness, but had to be articulated with transcendent principles revealing the tensional nature of existence. The Self is not that of Fichte, but that of Augustine: “in order to find that perfect identity of our voluntary action, we must look within ourselves, until we reach the point where that which is of ourselves ceases.”⁶⁹ In a word, it is the absolute subject, the *intimior intimo meo* of Saint Augustine.

Berdyayev clearly expressed that we had two conceptions of experience at play: one insight of being which is immediately “infected” by “Aristotelian” categories of thought and so is imprisoned by it,⁷⁰ and against this tradition, a conception of “realism of spirit” that would make it possible to rethink the experience of the relation between spirit and being in its original form.

The Neoplatonic motive of participation plays therefore an important role in this criticism: in no way, however, could the individual experience of being be entirely the expression of being. There is always, as Maurice Blondel stressed, an “incommensurability” in this process of participation.⁷¹ The experience calls for a unification with the principle of thought which is itself *beyond* every intellectual comprehension. This goes back to the clearest criticism: we are not in presence of a metaphysics of understanding or specula-

67. On Maurice Blondel's “Augustinianism,” see G. Madec, “Maurice Blondel citant saint Augustin,” *Revue des études augustiniennes* 14 (1968): 99–122; Aimé Forest, “L'augustinisme de Blondel,” in *Le Centenaire de Maurice Blondel, 1861–1961, en sa Faculté des Lettres d'Aix en Provence*, Publication des Annales de la Faculté des Lettres new series 35 (Aix en Provence: Edition Orphys, 1963): 36–60.

68. M. Blondel, “Le point de départ de la Recherche philosophique,” *Annales de philosophie chrétienne* 152 (1906): 237.

69. M. Blondel, *L'action* 347.

70. N. Berdyayev, *The Beginning and the End*, trans. R.M. French (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1952) 12.

71. M. Blondel, *L'Être et les êtres* (Paris: Alcan, 1934) 164, 176, *passim*.

tion, but in a metaphysics of union with the very first principle. We are closer to Neoplatonism than to Aristotelianism.

The same can be found in Lavelle. Although he adopted a thoroughly univocal position in his metaphysics, his insistence on this presence of a participation in being through the act enabled him to found their mutual independence within dependence. Participation could only take place if the particular acts were not confused with the Pure Act, and it had therefore to be viewed as a never-to-be-finished process. In that respect, he harked back to Neoplatonic theological insights, rather than to Aristotelian ones. Although there is a certain necessitarianism in Lavelle's God, he cannot be simply identified with the Pure Act of Aristotelian-Thomistic tradition, but resembles more the Neoplatonic One who necessarily communicates itself in virtue of his perfect generosity, without ever ceasing to be free.⁷²

POST-WAR PHENOMENOLOGY: AGAINST REPRESENTATION

With the Second World War, this lively spiritualist tradition came more or less to a standstill. Not only did most of its leading figures gradually disappear (Bergson died in 1941, Berdyaev in 1948, Blondel in 1949, Lavelle in 1951, Le Senne in 1954, and Jacques Maritain spent most of his time in America after 1940), but there seemed also to be a global desire to establish philosophical discourse on a new ground. It was precisely in virtue of their promises—probably overvalued—in terms of methodology that first Husserlian phenomenology and then the first forms of structuralism were to impose themselves in an overwhelming fashion and could reasonably pretend to inaugurate a new age of thought. Structuralism presented itself as the dominant paradigm in the realm of social sciences, while phenomenology, with the unchallenged reign of the three 'H's (Hegel, Husserl, Heidegger), sought the title of the only rigorous method for practicing philosophy in Parisian philosophical circles.

Emile Bréhier seemed overly confident when he claimed in a 1950 conference that "the permanence of spiritualism in France, in spite of all the obstacles it encounters, remains the most important hallmark of our actual philosophy,"⁷³ but to a certain extent he was right. One has to recognize today that all these hopes for greater clarity were largely overestimated, to the point that starting from the eighties we have witnessed something like a "return of the repressed," putting an end to the reign of the "antihumanist"

72. On this Lavellian Neoplatonism, see J. Ecole, *Louis Lavelle et le renouveau de la métaphysique de l'être au XXe siècle* (Hildesheim: Georg Olms, 1997) 188–89.

73. Reproduced in *Etudes blondeliennes* II (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1952): 53, introduction to a conference by J. Paliard, "L'élan spirituel selon Henri Bergson et selon Maurice Blondel."

philosophy of the sixties.⁷⁴ The frenzy for method seems to have been replaced by a new frenzy for experience, which oddly enough leads to the rehabilitation of spiritualist themes that were thought to have been definitely relegated to the past or—even better—to have been abandoned to theology.

Because of the predominant place it enjoys currently in French academia, I will attempt to discuss here certain aspects of what Dominique Janicaud has aptly labeled the “theological turn” of French phenomenology.⁷⁵ This turn is a common characteristic of authors such as Emmanuel Levinas, Michel Henry, and Jean-Luc Marion (and even, to a certain extent, Paul Ricoeur and Jacques Derrida, whom I shall not take into account here) to adopt a highly critical stance regarding the classical understanding of “core” phenomenological concepts, such as intentionality, reduction, or subjectivity. They thereby attempt to overcome what they considered as the naively scientific (Husserl) or easily nihilistic (Heidegger) forms of classical phenomenology. As was the case for the pre-war tradition, all these authors enjoy close personal connections and friendships. And again, we will see that their critique of classical phenomenology actually led them to reproduce a much deeper level of criticism: that of a certain type of metaphysics that they believe has dominated Western history, which we need to overcome today.

The critical attitude towards classical metaphysics adopted by authors stemming from the phenomenological tradition can be explained by the heritage left by Edmund Husserl himself in his ground-breaking work published in 1936 on the *Krisis*,⁷⁶ in which he denounced the objectivism of modern science, and by Martin Heidegger in his writings about the “metaphysics of subjectivity” leading to modernity and to its excesses. More particularly, Heidegger’s reading of history, as it can be found in his two *Nietzsche* volumes, was to be tremendously influential.

74. As it is documented by L. Ferry and A. Renaut in *French Philosophy of the Sixties: An Essay in Anti-Humanism*, trans. Mary H.S. Cattani (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1990).

75. D. Janicaud, *Le tournant théologique de la phénoménologie française* (Paris: Editions de l’Eclat, 1991). This little volume initiated a lively debate in French phenomenological circles. One year later, the major proponents of this “theological turn” published a volume entitled *Phénoménologie et théologie*, presented by J.-F. Courtine (Paris: Critérion, 1992), with essays by Michel Henry, Paul Ricoeur, Jean-Luc Marion, and Jean-Louis Chrétien. Very recently, Dominique Janicaud added yet another volume to this controversy: *La phénoménologie éclatée* (Paris: Editions de l’Eclat, 1998).

76. E. Husserl, *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology: An Introduction to Phenomenological Philosophy*, trans. D. Carr (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1970).

Heidegger's famous thesis of the "onto-theology" he considered characteristic of Western civilization—the displacement of the question of being towards that of presence, that of the first being or that of other beings—had considerable success in France. This was due to a few faithful disciples such as Jean Beaufret, and to the academic influence of the seminal work on Aristotelian metaphysics produced by Pierre Aubenque in 1963.⁷⁷ It seems to me that the success of Heidegger's reception in France can also to a large part be explained by the fact that he actually harked back to themes that had been passionately discussed by the previous generation. He was also criticizing the history of "wrong metaphysics," appealing to its overcoming through new meditative efforts, and linking the criticism of metaphysics to a criticism of modernity at large.

The criticism of the "onto-theological" constitution of metaphysics rapidly became a quasi-compulsory exercise for an entire generation of young philosophers aspiring to the honors of the Sorbonne. They all shared, with more or less the same measure of conviction, the idea that Western history was characterized by a specific type of knowledge. Just as before the war the question was that of challenging objectification, now the onslaught aimed at a form of metaphysics globally dismissed as *representative*. The keyword changed, but the spirit remained the same.

The critique of the classical doctrine of representative knowledge was itself already a central point of the phenomenological enterprise right from its beginning in late nineteenth-century debates in Austria.⁷⁸ It is now pursued in a broader way. 'Representation' becomes the name of an entire speculative tradition dating back to antiquity, where the categories of thought were imposed on being. And again, this epistemological debate was transformed into a global critique of civilization as soon as it was acknowledged that representative modes of thought had dominated the entire Western history and generated social forms experienced as oppressive.

One of the first to express clearly this critique in recent French philosophy was Emmanuel Levinas with his influential 1961 treatise *Totality and Infinity*. He clearly placed his entire enterprise under the sign of a subversion of the categories of thought which characterized Western tradition, by calling for a global rejection of classical concepts such as representation, concept, totality and ontology. Levinas opposed "true" metaphysics, which he

77. P. Aubenque, *Le problème de l'être chez Aristote* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1963).

78. On this historical context, see J. Benoist, "A l'origine de la phénoménologie: au-delà de la représentation," *Critique* 577/578 (1995): 480–506. See also, by the same author, an article that clearly expresses the project of this French phenomenological school: "Husserl au-delà de l'onto-théologie?," *Les Etudes philosophiques* 4 (1991): 433–58.

wanted to be restored, to the vitiated tradition of ontology, which stood for the entire process of the reduction of the Other to the Same by means of various processes of thought and action of which the most evident was representation. Levinas assuredly announced that “Western philosophy has most often been an ontology, a reduction of the other to the same by means of the interposition of a middle and neutral term that ensures the comprehension of being.”⁷⁹ Socrates’ lesson was, according to Levinas, the “primacy of the Same,”⁸⁰ and this primacy was to go unchallenged in the Western tradition, especially thanks to Descartes, who based this totalizing relation of the Same with the Other on the primacy of the “ipseity” of the *Ego*—transforming philosophy into merely an “egology.”⁸¹ In that tradition, the Other can only have the status of an object, of a simple *cogitatum* among others, submitted to the *cogitatio* of the *ego*, as the horizon of the only possible *cogitatio*. Levinas reintroduces thereby the concept of objectification, condemning Western philosophy to remain an “objectifying cognition.”⁸² The history of the Western relationship with being is seen as the history of a *neutralization* or a *submission* to the rules of understanding, indeed even the history of a possession,⁸³ an appropriation, a presence always linked to seizure.⁸⁴ For Levinas, the only possible subversion of the Same can be realized by the Other, since it cannot grow on the egological ground of the Same. This means, in short, that the entire metaphysical tradition has to be overturned by something else, which Levinas thinks is *ethics*.⁸⁵ As a result ontology falls down to the level of a “philosophy of injustice” *par excellence*,⁸⁶ since it implies a movement within the Self before an obligation towards the Other.

A similar evolution can be observed in the work of Jean-Luc Marion. Marion’s thought probably reveals an even stronger Heideggerian anchorage, since he assumes as globally valid the idea of an onto-theological constitution of metaphysics and of its announced closure. For Marion, onto-theology is the manifestation of the desire for representation of rational man, which he characterizes—in terms highly reminiscent of the Neoplatonic Greek church fathers—as “conceptual idolatry”:

79. E. Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, trans. A. Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press/The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1969) 43.

80. *Ibid.*

81. *Ibid.* 44.

82. *Ibid.* 67.

83. *Ibid.* 46.

84. E. Levinas, *Transcendence et intelligibilité* (Geneva: Labor-Fides, 1996) 14–15.

85. E. Levinas, *Totality and Infinity* 43.

86. *Ibid.* 46.

what constitutes idolatry, both for the sensitive vision as for the concept, is less due to the inadequacy of representation (since it is provisional and can be remedied or purified) than to the very claim to representation.⁸⁷

The entire project of ontology is in itself labeled as idolatrous, since it is an attempt to think being and God from the point of view of their sole idea, posed as the sufficient foundation of any form of possible discourse.

Marion's work expresses a similar obsession with escaping from a metaphysical discourse equally conceived as totalizing, since it is oblivious to being, and favours an unconditional affirmation of the presence of being, be it under the form of the Supreme being or of being in general. Marion is a Catholic writing after Heidegger, i.e., a twentieth-century Catholic for whom classical rational theology has become impossible to follow, since the access to the "more divine God" (*le Dieu plus divin*) depends on a general emancipation from the metaphysical mode of thought. This is the root of his own project of elaborating a non-ontological and non-representative theology, which finds its strongest inspiration in a revival of Pseudo-Dionysius's treatment of divine names. It was the task he set for himself in his overtly theological essays (moving toward new forms of negative theology),⁸⁸ but it is also the strong speculative thesis that underlies his immense work on Descartes and the Cartesian tradition.

Marion has popularized an image of a "solitary Descartes"⁸⁹ emerging from the ruins of Suarezian metaphysics which had gleefully submitted God to representation, and cast Descartes as the first modern thinker to deny expressly that God could be understood at all—either in the form of *scientia Dei*, or in any other possible form. Finally, this set of themes is clearly present in his extensive phenomenological work, and more specifically in his reflection on intentionality, as will be shown in the following section.

As a result of such a reading of the idolatrous history of the West, Marion depicts the rise of modernity in terms reminiscent of Bergson, Maritain, or Heidegger. Since the logic of representation has dominated Western metaphysics, it will have concrete implications in the realms of knowledge and of power. Marion has tried to link the ontical univocity of post-Thomistic the-

87. J.-L. Marion, "De la "mort de Dieu" aux noms divins: l'itinéraire théologique de la métaphysique," in *L'être et Dieu* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1986) 113.

88. J.-L. Marion, *L'idole et la distance* (Paris, Presses Universitaires de France, 1977), and *God without Being*, trans. Thomas A. Carlson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991).

89. J.-L. Marion, *La théologie blanche de Descartes* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1981) 139: "... Descartes ne se découvrirait-il pas plutôt comme un solitaire, sans outil ni arme, abandonné parmi un champ de ruines, pour une tâche immense: devenir le premier penseur chrétien, dépouillé de la théologie des Noms divins, et donc de la doctrine de l'analogie, et qui doit penser le créé et l'incréé, l'infini avec le fini."

ology with the concrete scientific need for univocity, providing the examples of Kepler, Galileo, and Mersenne, by using the following principle:

in right, if not always in fact, God calculated the world exactly in the same sense as man manages to calculate it, and mathematical laws can be understood in a unique sense for God and for man.⁹⁰

God is no longer submitted to the speculative determination of the concept of being, but to mathematical rationality. Modernity claims a radical univocity between man and God in knowledge.⁹¹ Modern intelligence is obsessed with the possibility of acquiring a type of knowledge in which it would be able to see all things just as God sees them, and by aspiring to constitute a proper concept of God.

A third and last example of this attempt to escape from the history of metaphysics and its political consequences can be found in Michel Henry's work. He starts from a less obvious theological position than that of Marion and Levinas, and he actually reproduces in a striking fashion those patterns of thought that were characteristic of Louis Lavelle's position during the thirties. He did not long for a step toward exteriority, through the form of the Otherness (Levinas) or the Call (Marion), but turned towards interiority, just as Lavelle did, towards the ground of experience, as he expressed it in his major work *The Essence of Manifestation*. As a result, his meditation on the "ground of being" exploded classical metaphysical categories.

The critique of academic phenomenology was fed by a more general critique of history viewed as a permanent objectification. He summarizes the history of metaphysics as the "ruinous confusion of the appearance to the world with the essence of any conceivable appearing," which corrupts the entire development of Western philosophy before reaching phenomenology itself. A presupposition dating back (again) to the Greeks consisted of an attempt to understand what Henry calls the manifestation on the basis of the phenomenon, i.e., on the basis of its appearance as already correlated to consciousness, and not in its original and internal structure.

In his work entitled *Material Phenomenology*, Henry criticized all the classical approaches that reduce the plenitude of the revelation of life to the phenomenality of the world, that is, to the purely visible. He opposed himself to any overtly 'worldly' interpretation of the concept of phenomenon, according to which it would always be conceived as correlated to some abso-

90. J.-L. Marion, *Questions cartésiennes II. Sur l'Ego et sur Dieu* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1996) 228.

91. One of the most striking expressions of this univocity stems from Spinoza, *Ethica* II, prop. 11, corol.: "... cum dicimus, Mentem humanam hoc vel illud percipere, nihil aliud dicimus, quam quod (...) Deum hanc vel illam ideam habere."

lute or transcendental subjectivity. Husserl and Heidegger are both criticized as the representatives of an eidetic-logical form of phenomenological inquiry, since they both presuppose a homogeneity of principle between the “uncovering” (*faire voir*) and the phenomenon, reduced to the visible.⁹² In his *Genealogy of Psychoanalysis*, he takes over this speculative theme once more. There is an occlusion of the initial “pure appearance” by means of the representative ecstasy of the *videre*, that culminates in the Kantian representative consciousness. The *videor* becomes then the unconscious of (and behind) the representative consciousness, of which the modern Freudian concept of the unconscious is the most caricatured avatar.⁹³

Finally, Michel Henry outlines the social consequences of all this with the greatest clarity in his *Barbarism*. This pamphlet reproduces almost word for word the invectives hurled sixty years before by Jacques Maritain and Nikolai Berdyaev. He portrays post-Galilean science and philosophy as completely perverted by objectivism and representationism,⁹⁴ accusing Marxism of being the worst expression of this project of complete domination,⁹⁵ which culminates in the complete decay of literary culture in the midst of a technicized and utilitarian modernity.⁹⁶

Among all these authors, the reading of the history of metaphysics results in the acknowledgment of its failure. All of them appeal to its overcoming. Phenomenology is then enthroned as the only acceptable method capable of providing some new rules to a thinking that dreams itself “post-metaphysical” and is expected to inaugurate an age which one might be tempted to call postmodern. This, however, leads to a radical reinterpretation of several central concepts of the phenomenological tradition itself.

TRANSCENDING INTENTIONALITY

One can say that phenomenology became popular in France through the concept of intentionality, with the publication of a little article, as brilliant in the style as it is vague in its content, by Jean-Paul Sartre, which popularized the formula “we are always already outside” (*nous sommes toujours déjà au dehors*) against all the attempts of “digestive philosophy.”⁹⁷ Paradoxically with the same concept the phenomenological tradition entered a crisis.

92. M. Henry, *Phénoménologie matérielle* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1990) 61–136.

93. M. Henry, *Généalogie de la psychanalyse* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1985).

94. M. Henry, *La barbarie* (Paris: Grasset, 1986) 31–32, 131, 163, *passim*.

95. *Ibid.* 159.

96. *Ibid.* 241.

97. J.-P. Sartre, “Une idée fondamentale de la phénoménologie chez Husserl: l’intentionnalité” (1934), in *Situations I* (Paris: Gallimard, 1947).

Husserl had conceived intentionality as a central concept that would help him to overcome the classical forms of nineteenth-century psychologism. Intentionality meant that there is no such thing as a pure *cogito*, no pre-given mental sphere, but always a preliminary intentional correlation. It is impossible to expel the object from consciousness, or at least the relation to the object. This also challenges the entire classical "adequationist" theory of the relationship between thought and object. By thinking consciousness as intentionality, Husserl aimed to show that the "relating-to" was already part of the reality of consciousness even before the object is correlated to it. This was probably one of the most radical innovations of phenomenology in terms of theory of knowledge. It overturned the classical and modern categories of knowledge by showing that its limits are not external ones, imposed by the object upon a finite consciousness, but that those limits were actually to be located within the internal structures of the constitutive power of consciousness.

As a matter of fact, the first generation of French phenomenologists, that of Jean-Paul Sartre and Maurice Merleau-Ponty, remained faithful to the fundamental Husserlian insight. The essence of intentionality was to be found, by means of phenomenological reduction, in *phenomenal immanence*. The only conceivable intentional transcendence was the one we experience as "giving" itself in the innerworldly horizon. However, this "patient questioning of the visible" (Merleau-Ponty) which was characteristic of this first generation was about to be shattered against a new type of horizon of intentionality, the unconditional affirmation of a Transcendence rather reminiscent of the theological type.⁹⁸

The introduction of this Transcendence was not due, however, to some underhand attempt to introduce dogma deep within the heart of phenomenology, as Janicaud's above-quoted presentation tends to suggest. Rather, it was governed by a desire to overcome some intrinsic limitations of classical phenomenology itself. All of the authors mentioned above agreed on the fact that there were profound insufficiencies in the way Husserl had set out the position of the subject as constituting its object according to the common structure of intentionality (*via* the objectification of the object). Their common aim was henceforth to criticize this phenomenology of intentionality defined by Husserl as the "fundamental property of the modes of consciousness" constitutive of objects, by overturning the universally accepted validity and the original character of intentionality, and by insisting, on the contrary, on the fundamental excess of the *cogitatum* beyond the *cogitatio*.

98. As portrayed by D. Janicaud, *Le tournant théologique de la phénoménologie française* 15.

This overturning appears again very clearly in the way Emmanuel Levinas treats this problem. Once the totalizing dimension of the representative philosophical tradition is unveiled, his own philosophical decision indicates that the totality itself must be broken, something which happens at very few auspicious philosophical moments. One example mentioned by Levinas is Descartes' third *Meditation*, the moment where the infinite irrupts. This constitutes an exemplary case in which the *ideatum* supersedes its idea. Levinas looks for the exceptions to the noetico-noematic correlation by which the *cogitatio* is always put in adequacy with the *cogitatum* that satisfies and fulfills it. Levinas also denounces the risk of the Cartesian drift, that of converting this fundamental discovery into an additional metaphysical proof of the existence of God.

For Levinas, God cannot be reduced to the idea. It is, therefore, through this concept of excess or inadequacy that Levinas criticizes the classical concept of intentionality: "all knowing *qua* intentionality already presupposed the idea of infinity which is preeminently non-adequation."⁹⁹ The disruptive character of the infinite derives from the fact that it completely shatters the closed horizon of immanence, to the point that Levinas appeals to "stride across the barriers of immanence." Doing this, he resolutely opens phenomenological inquiry to "something other" than phenomenology. The transcendence is no longer that of the object, but that of the Other bearing the name of the Most-High.¹⁰⁰ Only transcendence is capable of breaking up the unity of the subject's aperception.¹⁰¹ The concept of experience itself is modified in the course of this operation. It does not take the form of the slow unveiling of things, but appears as a true revelation.¹⁰² From that point of view, if there is a critique of traditional intentionality, it is in order to reintroduce some *intentio* of transcendence, whose precise characteristic is of *not* being ontological.

The intelligibility of transcendence is not ontological. God's transcendence can neither be said nor thought in terms of being, as an element of philosophy behind which it sees only night.¹⁰³

This harks back to an element of the apophatic theology of radical transcendence. The main point is not to reduce God to a projection of human

99. E. Levinas, *Totality and Infinity* 27.

100. *Ibid.* 34.

101. See E. Levinas, "God and Philosophy," in *Collected Philosophical Papers*, ed. and trans. A. Lingis (Dordrecht: Reidel, 1987) 173.

102. E. Levinas, *Totality and Infinity* 65–66: "the absolute experience is not disclosure but revelation."

103. E. Levinas, "God and Philosophy" 172.

qualities but to interpret the symbol "God" as referring to a non-entitative source of being. The God portrayed by Levinas is not the God of Exodus (*ego sum qui sum*) but a God closer to the Platonic *Agathon*, the Good that is beyond being. Again, we see a Platonic motive set against the specific speculative contribution due to Aristotelian science of being.¹⁰⁴

A similar approach governs Jean-Luc Marion's reading of concepts such as givenness (*donation*) and intentionality. Not only does he consider phenomenology to be the only possible philosophy after the end or closure of metaphysics,¹⁰⁵ but he also invests this method with a specific task of revealing what could not have appeared as long as classical metaphysics was dominating philosophy, i.e., to free the phenomenon from all the supposed equivalences that limit its unveiling (such as the object, being, adequacy, poverty of intuition).¹⁰⁶ This would lead to a new understanding of concepts such as transcendence or revelation. Marion develops therefore a specific new form of the concept of phenomenological reduction,¹⁰⁷ one that "would follow a radically non-metaphysical determination,"¹⁰⁸ a third type that would neither be the transcendental Husserlian form nor the Heideggerian existential form. Marion's third reduction aims at unfolding a givenness which would be as originary as it is radical. This is the givenness of the "pure call,"¹⁰⁹ the pure form of the call "that plays before any specification, even that of Being."¹¹⁰

The overcoming of idealist and existential reduction is based on the fact that both of these always suppose another form, givenness as *not* simply phenomenal. Thereby, Marion wants to escape from the principles that have ruled modern philosophy such as those of causality or sufficient reason. By his third type of reduction, the aim is to seize phenomenality as an event "outside of any form of causality."¹¹¹ This form of givenness can then easily be called revelation, "if not Revelation."¹¹² Here the same theme emerges again:

104. Particularly clear in his essay *Autrement qu'être*.

105. As he claims it in his foreword to J.-L. Marion and G. Planty-Bonjour (eds.), *Phénoménologie et métaphysique* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1984) 7.

106. J.-L. Marion, *Etant donné. Essai d'une phénoménologie de la donation* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1997) 326.

107. On this key concept of classical phenomenology, see Fred Kersten, *Phenomenological Method: Theory and Practice* (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1989) Part One.

108. J.-L. Marion, *Etant donné* 9: "si le phénomène se définit comme ce qui se montre en et de soi (Heidegger), au lieu de se laisser constituer (Husserl), ce soi ne peut s'attester qu'autant que le phénomène d'abord se donne."

109. J.-L. Marion, *Reduction and Givenness. Investigations of Husserl, Heidegger and Phenomenology*, trans. Thomas A. Carlson (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1998) 197.

110. J.-L. Marion, *Reduction and Givenness* 198.

111. J.-L. Marion, *Etant donné* 236–38.

112. *Ibid.* 329.

escaping from closure through the openness of the soul towards a form of phenomenality that can not be immediately ascribed to a preexisting and immanent egological or existential structure.

Finally, it is not surprising to see Michel Henry developing a similar critique of the concept of intentionality. The task he assigned to his self-designed “material phenomenology” was to develop a more radical approach than what intentionality allowed, since the latter’s descriptive procedures are seen as incapable of giving a full account of the richness of transcendental life. Henry calls for a return to the foundational experience of originary immanence. This is what Henry terms “immanence” and what he urges us to think is the “original mode according to which is accomplished the revelation of transcendence and hence the original essence of revelation.”¹¹³ The “Verb that comes to this world” is called for in order to transcend the classical phenomenological method.¹¹⁴ The “essence of manifestation” reveals itself through affectivity, thus not through the subjective and “egological experience of a subject,” but through revelation itself, absolute in its internal experience. This revelation leads Henry to affirm a new form of vitalism, reminiscent again of forms the reader may now be familiar with. There is a permanent return to the intimacy in which being affects itself, and through which something like divine revelation can be understood.¹¹⁵ Only with the help of this return of the soul upon itself, something other than the hollow form of intentionality can appear, i.e., the interior immanence in which the soul opens itself to God. Henry’s God is an Eckhartian God, more interior than exterior. In articulating this, he does nothing else than to reproduce the classical motives of the thirties, by stressing explicitly the fact that “all thought is essentially religious.”¹¹⁶

CONTINUITIES PRE- AND POST-WAR

In many aspects, the “theological turn” of recent phenomenology can be interpreted as an almost hyperbolic repetition of the themes of the *philosophie de l’esprit* of the thirties. Both traditions are concerned with an “overcoming” of objectivistic or representative metaphysics. This appeal to transcendence can be clearly expressed with the help of a key concept that played a

113. M. Henry, *The Essence of Manifestation*, trans. G. Etzkorn (The Hague: Nijhoff, 1973) § 30, 227.

114. M. Henry, *Phénoménologie matérielle* 133.

115. This step was clearly made by Michel Henry in his latest book, where he intended to understand the truth of Christianity by means of a “radical phenomenology of the concept of life.” See M. Henry, *C’est moi la vérité. Pour une philosophie du Christianisme* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1996).

116. M. Henry, *The Essence of Manifestation* § 77, 727.

common role in the work of all these authors, that of *débordement*, i.e., “overflow” or “excess.”

Against the subjectivism of experience and the objectification of being, all these authors insisted on the overflowing constituted by the irruption of the unconditioned which allows man to realize the tensional nature of his consciousness.¹¹⁷ One can already find an experience of overflowing in Bergson’s exegesis. Distrustful of an action that reduces the given to our needs, he tried to determine a presence of being that escapes from the classical categories of reflection. Neo-Thomists such as Maritain followed a similar line. He saw one of the most striking expressions of modern gnosticism in its complete transformation of the relation between the creature and transcendence, as it appears clearly in the whole tradition leading from Descartes to Husserl. According to these authors, transcendence is not beyond the singular *cogito* or transcendental subjectivity, as what is always beyond, but became actually the ultimate internal end of the structure of the thinking subject.

Louis Lavelle probably formulated this problem most clearly. He was, long before Sartre, one of the first critics of Husserlian phenomenology, anticipating many later critiques. According to him, the Husserlian “consciousness” was still too close to the Kantian subject, to the Fichtean Self or the Hegelian spirit, and too distant from the interior life that classical French philosophers such as Pascal or Maine de Biran had tried to define.¹¹⁸ He suspected Husserl of introducing a “new form of idealism”¹¹⁹ while claiming that the object should always be understood as being beyond the glance (*visée*) in such a way that it could never be considered as some work or creation, “but always as unveiling itself to the self in a true revelation.”¹²⁰ A fundamental inadequacy should be established between consciousness and that which transcends it:

117. An interesting point of comparison could be the omnipresent analysis, among all these authors, of Descartes’ Third *Meditation*. Both Bergson and Lavelle insisted, for instance, on the subjective metaphysical experience of the *cogito* facing infinity as the fundamental experience from which philosophy could start. We find similar analyses in the works of Levinas, Henry and Marion. See a good summary by V. Carraud, “The Relevance of Cartesianism,” in *Contemporary French Philosophy*, ed. A.P. Griffith (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987) 69–81, who focuses on Marion and Henry.

118. L. Lavelle, “Méditations cartésiennes” (1931), in *Panorama des doctrines philosophiques* 154.

119. L. Lavelle, “Une science de la conscience” (1941), in *Panorama des doctrines philosophiques* 169.

120. *Ibid.* 168.

our thought is coextensive to being both through its power and in its essence, although being always *overflows* (*déborde*) in two ways, both through the eternal act that inspires it and through the very infinity of appearances that unfold themselves in front of it.¹²¹

This *overflowing of being* is an experience that allows us to grasp the reality of consciousness, not that of a being which has to be absorbed within the interior of a thinking subject but rather a being which carries out absolutely the activity in which our consciousness only participates:

the proper of the data, the given, writes Lavelle, is one of always overflowing (and not only of limiting) this act that actualizes it, in such a way that it awakens it, revives it, obliges it to multiply and to tighten itself in order to equal it, but without ever being able to succeed in it.¹²²

We have seen how much Levinas, Marion and Henry made use of a similar form of “overflowing,” by trying to identify those conditions where thought is fundamentally exceeded by its objects. Marion likes to talk about the “exceeding” character of the worldly phenomenality which precludes any attempt of reducing it into something objective or constituted.¹²³ Levinas in particular makes use of concepts similar to those of Lavelle, when he writes that the aim of consciousness “does not consist in equaling being with representation, in tending to the full light in which this adequation is to be sought, rather in *overflowing* this play of lights.”¹²⁴ The aim of philosophical inquiry will hence be to meditate on this relation with an infinitely distant being, overflowing its own concept.¹²⁵ The idea of the infinite is defined as the “overflowing of finite thought by its content.”¹²⁶

CONCLUSION

Let us now turn back to our initial hypothesis. As we can read from this history, the “legitimacy” and “meaning” of metaphysics has been heavily questioned in twentieth-century French philosophy, and the general judgment was largely negative. Either the term of “metaphysics” was completely dismissed itself (as it is by most contemporary writers), or it was submitted to considerable transformation (as was the case in the twenties). It would however be more correct to say that what was criticized was a *specific* type of

121. L. Lavelle, *De l'acte* 23.

122. *Ibid.* 293.

123. See J.-L. Marion, *Etant donné* 242: “d’excédant en excédant, la finitude du monde abrite et concentre une phénoménalité indéfinie, inconstituable, saturante.”

124. E. Levinas, *Totality and Infinity* 27, emphasis mine.

125. *Ibid.* 41.

126. *Ibid.* 197.

metaphysics, broadly of a type inherited from Aristotle rather than from Plato or Plotinus.

As we have seen, by giving so much importance to concepts such as “experience,” “overflowing,” or “excess” in the description of man’s experience in the world, both pre- and post-war authors tried to develop what could be described as a non-hypostatizing understanding of the theologically marked concept of transcendence, one which tends toward an original form of apophatism. More generally, both appear to embrace a metaphysical approach which follows the line of the Neoplatonic tradition rather than the Aristotelian, the latter’s categories revealing themselves to be something like a “prison” for thought, as Nikolai Berdayev had formulated it. The Platonic superiority of the One or the Good over Being can be read as an efficient way of escaping the sweeping Heideggerian criticism of the onto-theology characteristic of Western thought,¹²⁷ by overcoming classical Greek ontology rooted in Aristotle and all its subsequent medieval systematizations.¹²⁸

All these writers share a common wariness of traditional scholastic metaphysics. These metaphysics entail the same risk as “scientific” or “classical” phenomenology. They draw the experience of the self into an object of inquiry, and draw divine transcendence into ontology. This is a movement which they reevaluate using Neoplatonic themes. They develop a doctrine of spiritual conversion or an Augustinian metaphysics of the will rather than a metaphysics of being (particularly clear in Maurice Blondel’s case), and favour a doctrine of Revelation and of God beyond being which reminds us immediately of the *hyperousian* of the Pseudo-Dionysius’s pioneering articulation of the principles of apophatic theology for Christians. Here one can probably notice the strongest continuity, because it touches the ground of being *par excellence*, God, of this philosophical tradition, and it also offers a key to the crucial point in their reading of history. It is an attempt to identify the most radical point in which the Western intellectual tradition reveals its specific feature, that is, the prevalence of an *affirmative* theology which governs the entire metaphysical enterprise itself, and therefore always runs the risk of ending up in the representation, mastery and oblivion characteristic to modernity.

127. One should bear in mind that Martin Heidegger himself, in his early lectures on Plato’s *Sophist*, formulated something like a Platonic alternative to the Western onto-theology he described.

128. Some of the best works on the history of medieval philosophy by French medievalists have been written in this particular spirit. Consider Alain de Libera’s description of Meister Eckhart as a “medieval critic of onto-theology”; see *Maître Eckhart à Paris: une critique médiévale de l’onto-théologie*, ed. A. de Libera et al. (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France/Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes, 1984), or Jean-François Courtine’s grand reconstruction of the systematization of medieval onto-theology in his *Suárez ou le système de la métaphysique* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1990).

It is significant that all these authors were or are tempted by negative theology with mystical overtones: this was evident in the case of Henri Bergson¹²⁹ and Nikolai Berdyaev,¹³⁰ Maurice Blondel and Etienne Gilson,¹³¹ and was also targeted by Louis Lavelle. An often unacknowledged fact is that it was already an important debate amongst neo-Thomists in the thirties. Fr. Sertillanges, for instance, stressed the permanence of apophatic motives in Aquinas' treatment of divine names (against Maritain),¹³² and it has become a crucial issue in most recent interpretations of Aquinas, including that of Jean-Luc Marion himself.¹³³ The aim was to reject all positive attributes or any analogy of magnitude which could only lead to a degradation of the truly metaphysical insight of the *analogia entis*. Again, this reappears today with the attempt to transcend an irremediably affirmative metaphysics by means of a new form of negative theology, helped by phenomenological method. Levinas prefers to speak of God as "antecedent to being," and Marion of a God "without being."

From the double point of view of their critique of the Western metaphysics of being and of their general critique of modernity, it may seem justified to say that there has been something like an unspoken but rampant neo-Augustinianism in twentieth-century French philosophy. This could be described as the call for a new form of religiosity that would take the place of metaphysics which has reached its closure, and whose political or "civilizational" function would be to regain or barely safeguard something

129. On this question, see J. Baruzi, "Le point de rencontre de Bergson et de la mystique," in *L'intelligence mystique*, texts selected and presented by J.-L. Vieillard-Baron (Paris: Berg International, 1986) 81.

130. N. Berdyaev, *Esprit et réalité* 9.

131. See Jean-Luc Marion's description in "Lettre postface" to *L'Action. Une dialectique du salut. Colloque du centenaire Aix en Provence, mars 1993*, ed. Coutagne (Paris: Beauchesne, 1994) 291: "Il ne s'agit pas de penser Dieu comme l'être, mais de penser l'être sur un mode radicalement neuf, qui lui permette de porter un éclat de la gloire de Dieu. Il faut donc penser un tel phénomène d'être, dans un horizon non ontologique. C'est ce que Gilson n'a cessé de faire et sans doute aussi le Blondel de *L'Être et les êtres*."

132. See A.-D. Sertillanges, OP, Letter to Jacques Maritain, May 1930, ed. G. Prouvost, *Thomas d'Aquin et les thomismes* (Paris: Editions du Cerf, 1996) 182. On the interpretation of the implicit Neoplatonism present in Aquinas's thought, see W.J. Hankey, "Dens and Aquinas: Antimodern Cold and Postmodern Hot," in *Christian Origins: Rhetoric and Community*, ed. L. Ayers and G. Jones (London: Routledge, 1998) 139–84.

133. In the first French edition of *God Without Being*, Aquinas was still included in the tradition of onto-theology for having claimed that being is the first of the divine names. However, in more recent writings, Jean-Luc Marion has given a new interpretation of Aquinas' theology, conceived as a "radical agnosticism." See *Questions cartésiennes II. Sur l'Ego et sur Dieu* 224. See also his clarifications in the English translation (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), XVII–XXV, and in "Metaphysics and Phenomenology: A Relief for Theology," *Critical Inquiry* 20/4 (1994).

spiritual against the sensation of emptiness of the modern, ponderously administrated world. This was clearly the desire during the thirties, and it remains perceptible in the call for a modern religiosity by all these authors engaged in meditative efforts to regain a sense for the religious tradition today. Clearly, the ultimate aim remains the perhaps derisory quest for what Henri Bergson had called the *supplément d'âme* that was missing in modernity. The question as to whether the entire reading of this history could have been done differently must remain open here, although it rightfully deserves to be asked.