

# FROM PHENOMENOLOGY TO SCRIPTURE: A GENERAL RESPONSE

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In examining a move from phenomenology to scripture, this symposium does not address all possible readers; it addresses a specific readership, for a specific reason, and within the framework of specific assumptions. By way of response, I want first to identify a few features of what I take to be the symposium's specific address or context. Then, I will comment on what messages I believe the authors have delivered to this context.

## *Whom and What the Symposium Addresses*

1. The symposium specifically addresses those who participate willy nilly in the transcendental project of modern philosophy and of modern northern Europe. In that project, knowing, as *noesis*, means intentionality: its subject or agent is ultimately reducible to the unity of apperception; and its object—*noema*—is the object of the ego's intentional knowing—the thematized object. It appears, furthermore, that the symposium identifies phenomenology not only with the species of Husserlian philosophy, but also with the broader genus of all efforts, from Descartes to Kant to Hegel to Husserl to Heidegger, to identify philosophy with an effort to frame the a priori conditions for, or the possibility of, knowing what we would know: from self to world to being itself—or to God.

2. The symposium appears to take as its starting point the fact that this transcendental project stands under censure today:

\* This is, first, a philosophic censure. The transcendental project has generated totalistic and self-referential systems of knowledge and action that can no longer be justified in the philosophy of science after Einstein and

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Heisenberg; and in the philosophy of knowing after Wittgenstein and now Derrida.

\* It is, second, a political censure, because these totalizing systems are implicated in the imperialisms, colonialisms, fascisms, nazisms, and comunisms of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries;

\* It is, third, an ethico-religious censure, because, after Hermann Cohen, Karl Barth, Franz Rosenzweig, Martin Buber, Emmanuel Levinas, and Jacques Derrida, we no longer believe that responsibility for the human *or* divine Other can be articulated within the limits of transcendental apperception.

3. The specific *problem* addressed by the symposium is therefore what to *do* about this transcendental project: what to do, that is, if you ask the question only when you already find yourself *in* the project. There are three options our four presenters do *not* take. One is to renounce the project altogether and to trace an entirely new philosophic project (for example, a radical postmodernism whose agent of knowing is irreducible to the unity of any ego; and whose noesis is *bricolage*, or merely occasional knowing). Another option is to renounce the transcendental project and trace an altogether *old* project, such as an anti-philosophic scripturalism. The third option our authors do not take is to self-correct the project *exclusively* in its own terms: to offer us a better model of intersubjectivity, the way Husserl sought in the *Cartesian Meditations*, or to pretend with Heidegger that Dasein did not veil the persistent agency of the totalizing human subject.

#### *What Message the Symposim Delivers*

My comments are about what options the speakers *have* taken—on behalf of either Levinas or Ricoeur.

Mark Wallace takes on the burden of excluding the self-correcting option. In warning us, with Ricoeur, *not* to argue from phenomenology to scripture, I believe Mark is identifying phenomenology with a foundational project *from which* scripture would take its cue and its rules of discourse. All three authors follow Mark here, as I believe we all should. With Mark, we have all engaged in what, in Part 2 of the *Star of Redemption*, Rosenzweig calls “confession”. This is our disclosing that if we, as participants in the transcendental project, recognise now that some Other could and does love us and thus that we are not alone as subject of our world, *then* we confess that we have known ourselves in the past as not-loved and as alone and as self-enclosed—and that this is sin. To confess our having participated in a totalizing project that we now renounce is to confess sin. So, indeed, with Mark, we may agree that we do not begin with foundational philosophy.

But where do we begin and who is this “we”? Following Mark, the four presenters negotiate between two options, both of which maintain some form of transcendental project, delimited in some way by the obligation to

hear the voice of the other, from outside the transcendental project, in the voice of scripture—with either a capital or a small s.

We may say that the first option Mark considers is to be a “*nice transcendentalist*”. This is, in fact, the option Mark attributes to Ricoeur and appears to advocate: to be a Kantian Ricoeur, which, in the terms Mark knows well from Hans Frei and George Lindbeck, is to be a “mediating philosopher”; or, in the terms of Karl Barth and Dietrich Bonhoeffer, to be a dialectical philosopher. This is a philosopher who seeks to bring the transcendental ego into a symmetrical dialogue with the scriptural other: where each respects the other, neither reduced to the other, neither privileged. Well, “at least almost symmetrical”, we might add! After all, the terms of this dialogue are set by the transcendental philosopher and therefore make use of strategies of empathy for the other, which the transcendental philosopher learns from Wilhelm Dilthey and Friedrich Schleiermacher, as perfected in Edmund Husserl’s peering on what Bob Gibbs calls “the other side of the paper”. In this option, the philosopher sets out from wherever she finds herself, but avows her beholdenness to others and to antecedent traditions and vows to consult with them all before making any critical decisions. Thus, Mark grants this philosopher an “awareness” that both disavows philosophic totalities and interrogates scriptural traditions. This is the healthy, cautious, moderate Kantian self, whose Anselmian side is displayed in the reality of the regulative Idea of God as it speaks to and within the transcendental project and from out of an identifiable text tradition.

Let us say that the *other* option that Mark considers is to be a “*nice Scripturalist*”. This is, in fact, the option Robert Gibbs draws and performs out of Levinas as Talmudist. This Rosensweigian (and, I begin to believe, Bonhoefferian) Levinas likes the title of our session because, unlike Mark, he interprets it as pointing *away* from phenomenological or transcendental starting points *to* scriptural ones. In this view, “From Phenomenology to Scripture” does not trace the order of business (to read scripture on phenomenological grounds), but rather the order of redemption and correction: that the phenomenological project is a place of sin, albeit in the way, after the Flood, the God of scripture recognized that we all sin—our “imaginings are bad from birth” (Gen. 8:21). Not to acknowledge this sin is either to absolve phenomenology of its responsibility, or else to imagine that some wholly other, non-transcendental position, for example a scriptural one, will be without sin. To acknowledge that Bible reading, too, will bear its sinfulness, is not, however, to argue, against Nicholas Wolterstorff, that the divine author should not be privileged. It is, instead, to argue *for* the kind of privileged, authoritative but *fallible* and polyvalent reading that may be exemplified more clearly in the rabbinic tradition of scriptural reasoning than in any other.

As Bob Gibbs argues and demonstrates, the repentant but otherwise healthy transcendental ego may be invited to sit at the Lord’s table—call it

the Passover table, call it the study table where the revealed and engraved WORD is laid out and a company of transcendental agents do eat and talk, converse and eat. These are agents, that is, who *both* carry on their several activities of regress and construction *and* recognize their unity only in that begotten WORD which they are given *as a* company and before whom they are *known* before they begin their several ways of knowing. Ricoeur is eagerly invited to sit with this company—although the company expects Ricoeur may be a little uneasy about the group's (and Bonhoeffer's) requirement that he recognize *its* communal agency as agency prior to the unity of any apperception. Nevertheless, the company, as I sense that Bob presents it, is grateful for the work Ricoeur carries on, mediating what goes on around the table with what goes on outside, in the street. Levinas mediates, as well, to be sure, but the difference (and it could be a complementary difference) concerns the *direction* of the mediating. Yes, which way the arrow points is a factor: from scripturalists to phenomenologists or phenomenologists to scripturalists?!

Between these two options I hear our respondents offer some variants. Glenn Whitehouse brings out Ricoeur's closeness to Paul Tillich's correlational project. This is not to identify the two projects, mind you—Ricoeur reads texts more attentively! It is, nonetheless, to suggest that Ricoeur is closer in this way to Tillich's, and also Buber's, correlational approaches than to Levinas's doctrine of the asymmetrical relation of I to the other, or of the phenomenological ego to the scriptural other. Glenn articulates, as I would want to, the drama and complexity of Ricoeur's ever-mediating position—ever on the line between transcendentalism and scripturalism.

William Young, finally, offers a complementary extension of Levinas's meta-transcendental position. For this position, after all, the discussion is no longer within the terms of the transcendental problem, but, rather, in terms of the biblical names of God: away from epoché to commentary as a mode of discourse. William's cautions about Levinas are not made on behalf of the transcendental ego, but on behalf of justice in the concrete life of the community.

The call of justice brings us back to the ethico-political setting of this symposium. Can we afford *not* to be cautious on either side of the line between transcendentalism and scripturalism? But can we also afford *not* to hear the alterity of the scriptural word more boldly as it sets us, converted and reformed transcendentalists, over-against any culture or society into which we are thrown? Does that boldness mean only talking Bible talk, excluding philosophy? Or, can we learn a lesson from the philosopher and logician Charles Peirce, who taught his post-modern model of formal logic as a model of what he called "engraving" or "scribing"—or "scripture"? The logician, he says, rewrites and interprets what a creator speaks and engraves. The page this logician writes on has two sides; there are holes and folds in

the paper; and the other side shows through. Is the reader/interpreter of Scripture not like a logician in this sense: receiving Scripture, rewriting it on a new page and, in the process of interpreting it, discovering that there are holes and folds in the page? No philosopher sees through the WORD. But does the scriptural theologian not peer through the holes in the parchment or the page? And is this “peering through” not a species of philosophy—albeit scriptural philosophy?