BEING RECONFIGURED. By Ian Leask. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2011. Pp. 128. ISBN: 978-1-4438-2551-1.

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EDITH STEIN, THOUGH BEST KNOWN, PERHAPS, FOR BEING EDMUND Husserl's assistant and for the controversy surrounding her canonization by Pope John Paul II in 1998, has emerged in the last ten years as an important philosopher in her own right. The German publishing house, Herder, in co-operation with the Carmel Our Lady of Peace in Cologne, began work in 2010 on a twenty-seven volume republication of her complete works in German. Fourteen volumes of her original thought are already available in English translation through the Institute for Carmelite Studies, and more are on the way. Additionally, in the last decade, her philosophical work has drawn increasing attention in the English language secondary literature; the latest book by Ian Leask, *Being Reconfigured*, is a welcome contribution to this growing list.

Leask's book places Stein's later ontological reflections, found primarily in *Finite and Eternal Being*, into dialogue with some broad trends in contemporary phenomenological thought, as found in the works of Emmanuel Levinas, Jean-Luc Marion, Michel Henry, and Maurice Merleau-Ponty. The theme of his book is, perhaps, best summed up by its first sentence, "At best neutral, even neuter, at worst suffocating, even evil, Being — so it now seems — is the bane of phenomenology" (1). The book comprises three parts, each of which contains two chapters. His negative thesis, argued in the first two parts, contends that any attempts to do phenomenology without, or otherwise than, Being inevitably result in one of two less than desirable positions: egoism or dualism. Part 1 focuses on the first of these two negative consequences, the reign of the autarchic ego. As we will see below, he locates this tendency in Husserl and Marion. Part 2 argues that Levinas' attempt to do the same, namely, phenomenology without or otherwise than Being, culminates in affirming a dualism by which Being is evil and suffocating, and, accordingly, true ethical salvation can only come from the Other because the Good is distinct from Being. Both of these are the result, Leask argues, of a trend to "'enframe' Being in quasi-gnostic, neo-Manichean or Newtonian-Kantian terms" (5). This enframing — and the resulting denegation of Being — is wrapped up in the concern that ontology and epistemology are too closely related, which is to say, to be is to be known. The two chapters that comprise Part 3 argue that Stein's view of Being

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overcomes these pitfalls. Here we find the author's positive thesis: Edith Stein's ontology of Being is best understood as "sweet and blissful security" (*Seinssicherheit*), for de-prioritizing the question of Being rather than Being itself provides an alternative understanding, one which can, "indicate that, primordially, Being is not an issue, but is more an axiological presupposition" (128).

Chapter one focuses on Husserl's genetic phenomenology in an attempt to initiate and contextualize historically the rest of the work. From reading Husserl's *Analyses Concerning Active and Passive Synthesis, Experience and Judgment,* and *Formal and Transcendental Logic*, Leask contends that Husserl's phenomenology pursues, "the question of selfhood to the point where any self-satisfied subjectivity threatens to turn on itself and come undone" (10). Husserl's brand of genetic phenomenological investigation does so by focusing on embodiment, hyletic materiality, and receptivity. Once the phenomenological results of *Ideas I* are reworked in terms of time consciousness, it is revealed that the ego is constituted, "in the flux of retention and protention" (11). Furthermore, while the noetic side of consciousness is revealed as temporally constituted, the noematic side, too, is discovered as multi-layered and historical. Genetic phenomenology breaks through to a founding proto-intentional substrate, to a founding "sense-moment pertaining to externality" (13). Knowledge of the world depends on the prior givenness of that very world; intuition, it seems, is finally to be granted its "full dignity" (17). However, Husserl does not allow his analysis to unseat intentionality from its privileged position within his system. Instead, he uses his genetic findings to reinforce his egology. After all, the world may show itself to be a surplus of meaning and givenness, but "this surplus is only there for me via my own experience" (20). Ultimately, genetic phenomenology cannot overcome the primacy of the ego because it was never meant to do so. Husserl maintains that phenomenology is not concerned with ontology except insofar as the latter's function is to provide guideposts for the former. As Leask quotes from *Ideas III*, "the question is not how things in general *are*, nor what in truth belongs to the as such, but how the consciousness of things is made" (22–23).

The theme taken up in chapter two is Jean-Luc Marion's recognition of the problem of givenness in Husserl and his attempts to overcome it through the positing of the dative subject. Marion famously attempts to be truer than Husserl to Husserl's own 'principle of principles': "that every originary intuition be a legitimizing source of cognition, that everything originarily offered in intuition should be accepted as it presents itself" (25). Marion reckons that Husserl's

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insight in this principle should set phenomena free; in other words, they are no longer to be considered as dependent upon extra-phenomenal intentionality, and his focus on saturated phenomena is intended to show just this situation. In the saturated phenomenon, intuition exceeds intentionality. The phenomenon, in all its glory, gives itself as more than intentionality could ever have foreseen or constituted. In short, "Marion suggests, Categories must give way to giving; the principle of sufficient reason is overcome by both 'a principle of sufficient intuition' [...] and a principle of *insufficient* reason; and intentionality is overwhelmed by an unforeseeable, 'bedazzling' excess" (27).

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The result of Marion's third reduction, the reduction to givenness, is that the "I" is de-centered. It finds itself as the passive recipient of so much intuition. It is stripped of its privileges, present only as declined in the dative. The turn to givenness itself means thinking the "I" as constituted by the phenomena rather than constituting them. However, Leask aptly points out that this leads to an unwitting prioritization of the dative subject in Marion's project that is precisely the opposite of what he would intend. "Givenness seems to require a dative subject, *to whom* the phenomenon shows itself inasmuch as it gives itself" (32). Thus, the author points out cryptic passages in Marion's work that refer to the "more original dative subject," the gifted subject as "primary point of reference *vis-à-vis* givenness," as well as select passages that emphasize the dative subject's response in transforming the phenomenon from givenness into manifestation (32–3). To be sure, Marion's dative subject is no a priori transcendental ego. However, Leask worries about whether or not there is still a specter of the subject that necessarily haunts Marion's project without his realizing it.

In the final analysis, it is Marion's attitude toward ontology that makes such a haunting possible. Marion sees a mathematization of Being in the history of philosophy since Descartes. The prioritization of the subject since Descartes has, in an effort to overthrow Aristotelian ontology, replaced Being *qua* Being with Being as that which is known and knowable. It has, in other words, replaced ontology with epistemology. In the author's view, Marion universalizes this view of ontology as "disguised epistemology." Marion, then, *must* posit the dative subject as, "a necessary medium (for givenness)" because, "givenness, if it cannot (and 'must not') be said to *be*, can only be manifest in its appearing *to me*" (43). However, the author's deeper point is that, in universalizing all modern ontology as epistemology in sheep's clothing, Marion has prematurely

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closed the door on another way of envisaging Being, one that is not about its knowability, and this is precisely what Leask thinks that Stein provides.

However, before getting to Leask's positive argument, it behooves us to see his analysis of the second pitfall, into which an attempt to do phenomenology as otherwise than Being falls: namely, the pitfall of neo-Manichean, neo-Kantian dualism. This is the task of the book's second part. In this part, he addresses Levinas' attempt to do phenomenology as otherwise than being by opposing himself against Heidegger's fundamental ontology. Chapter three reviews Levinas' anti-Heideggerianism in general. This theme is so widely discussed in the secondary literature that I will only draw a sketch here.[1] Levinas sees the individual existent as neither grounded in, nor a manifestation of, Being; rather, it is ripped out of Being. Being is the anonymous and minatory *il y a* ("that there is") that threatens to swallow the individual. It is, as Leask writes, "suffocating horror" (63). Individual existence is separation and escape from Being; consequently, individual human life is characterized by the constant attempt to break through and escape from the suffocating evil of the *il y a*. The individual, in any constancy she achieves, emerges thusly as opposed to Being. This stage of "heroic individualism" is antithetical to a Heideggerrian authentic Being-toward-death. Of course, this stage of egoism is a necessary step, for Levinas, to open the individual to the call and injunction of the Other. The individual would be immune to the call of the other if not previously in the stage of separation from Being, a stage Leask describes, quoting Levinas, as "'virility, a pride and sovereignty, [...] occupied with itself' in its sheer materiality" (64). Having thus achieved a kind of self-satisfied interiority, the individual is, thus, amenable to the call of the Other.

Levinas' general anti-Heideggerianism reviewed, Leask then turns to his more specific concern: Levinas' reading of Kant *contra* Heidegger's reading of Kant. In chapter four, Leask identifies how Levinas' neo-Kantianism is posed as self-consciously antithetical to Heidegger's reading of Kant. Leask writes, "Levinasian ethics are supposed to be about 'asymmetry,' not universality; Levinas prizes heteronomy, as a general principle, over autonomy, and the Other over the transcendental ego; and, of course, the Levinasian 'subject'

[1] A very good sketch of the early relationship between Levinas and Heidegger may be found in Adrian PEPERZAK, "Phenomenology — Ontology — Metaphysics: Levinas' Perspective on Husserl and Heidegger," *Man and World* 16 (1983): 113–127. For Levinas' own thoughts on his relationship to Heidegger, and the latter's association with the Nazi party see, Emmanuel LEVINAS, "As if Consenting to Horror," *Critical Inquiry* 15 (1989): 485–488.

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(using this term guardedly) is — to a huge extent — passive and affected, not spontaneous and self-regulating" (69); the claim Leask wishes to argue for in this chapter is that, despite surface tensions between Levinas' project and Kant's, his distance from Heidegger becomes a closeness to a classical modern dualism that places Good beyond Being. The primary difference that Leask marks in this "battle" over Kant is the role receptivity plays in the two philosophers' versions of Kantian philosophy. For Heidegger, the receptivity that Kant marks in the Transcendental Aesthetic is the mark of finitude, the "ontological *aesthesis* which makes it possible 'to disclose a priori' the Being of beings" (74). Levinas' interpretation of Kant is diametrically opposed to this reading. He sees sensibility as the very possibility for going beyond being, the "'site' which allows us to transcend ontology" (75). Leask sees this position on sensibility as opposing Levinas and Heidegger's respective readings of Kant vis-à-vis the question of infinity. For Heidegger, "Kant's four great questions [...] confirm our finitude" (76). For Levinas, asking these questions indicates our finitude, but this shows nothing more than our need to move beyond ontology. All of this is relatively standard fare in Levinasian interpretation. What Leask sees here is something slightly more sinister, if I might call it that. In locating meaning, the Good, and the ethical in a realm that is beyond ontology, Levinas does not, or so Leask argues, depart as far from High Modernity as one might initially expect. Claims such as, "[i]n Being as such there cannot be meaning," indicate to the author that Kant's two worlds might be Levinas' two worlds (E. LEVINAS, *God, Death, and Time*, 183. Cited by Leask, 78). In short, the price that Levinas pays for his understanding of ontology as value-free is the revival of Manichaeism.

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As we have seen, Parts 1 and 2 comprise Leask's negative claims against any phenomenology that would rid itself of Being; Part 3 makes up his positive thesis that Edith Stein's generous ontology is able to overcome these pitfalls. In this final part, he looks to follow indications that Edith Stein provides in *Finite and Eternal Being*, indications of a conception of Being that, although necessary, is not suffocating and hostile like Levinas' *il y a*. Chapter five, a crucial chapter in the argument, follows the contours of the second half of this work by Stein. It begins with an outline of her phenomenological rehashing of "Augustinian movement from a primal 'self'-awareness, to a wider being-certainty which any self must presuppose" (81). For Stein, self-awareness is the starting point of her investigation. Interestingly, this self-awareness is more Augustinian than Cartesian. It is, in other words, "a certitude which seems deeper than that which any standard epistemological act might provide, a certitude which no scepticism can shake. Indeed, it may not even be 'known' as

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such" (82). This certitude of self-awareness is not a first principle, from which other truths may be deduced. It is, instead, a certitude that precedes any self-certain "I." She describes it as a primordial starting point that is pre-reflexive, pre-intentional, and pre-representational. This, however, is just an indication.

It would seem as though there is little to be said regarding this starting point. It is in this effort that Leask turns to Michel Henry's notion of flesh as auto-affection, whose adventures in Cartesianism are relatively well-known. The Cartesian turn of phrase '*certe videre videor*' ('certainly I seem to see') is of insurmountable importance. It indicates that, rather than being, "split between representing and represented," the Cartesian I reveals the sheer immediacy of the *cogitatio* over the *cogito*. Before I know, I *seem* to know. Before the unshakable assertion of self-being that the *cogito* accomplishes, there is a more primordial stirring of the *cogitatio* as already accomplished. "Before, there is any intentional gaze, there is an immanent 'there is'" (84). What this means, for Henry, is that the *cogito* is not foundational; therefore, it is the *cogitatio* that must be presupposed. The primacy of the transcendental ego is, thus, withdrawn. He interprets this immediacy of the *cogitatio* in terms of self-affection and terms this primordial self-affective nature of the self, the "flesh." In the flesh, phenomenology runs up against what looks like its limit point: a phenomenon that cannot be known as object and an immediacy that is non-temporal and out of which there is no ecstatic movement (85). Here, Leask puts Henry's descriptions in the service of the previously mentioned Steinian primal self-awareness. Henry, as Leask takes it, "articulates what was perhaps left adumbrated in Stein's reading; now we can 'see' (so to speak) something of what cannot be seen by the eyes of flesh: flesh itself" (86).

However, Stein's self-immediacy cannot be identical with Henry's flesh because, for Henry, there is no further ontological basis. Self-affection is primary, originary, and the most basic ontological issue. For Stein, Henry has confused *epistemological* dependency with *ontological* dependency. Whereas self-immediacy is both the starting point and end point for Henry, for Stein, it is just the starting point. The Steinian subject, finite as it is, is dependent upon an infinite source. In the section of *Finite and Eternal Being* in question, her ontology begins very much like Heidegger's fundamental ontology. The individual, human subject is inescapably temporal, always hung between that which it was and that which it is not yet. As such, it comes up against its limits in its fragility. Leask points out an "almost rhetorical confluence" between Stein and Heidegger's treatment of finitude. However, Stein will eventually challenge

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Heidegger's fundamental ontology. The individual's fragility and thrownness into Being do not indicate that it posits itself in the face of its own death; rather, it is, itself, *posited*. The more closely one looks at finitude, the clearer this picture emerges: "I am not just placed into existence but *sustained* in existence from moment to moment" (89). My self-awareness of Being is an immediate being-certainty (*Seingewißheit*). What is most important for Leask's argument is how this being-sustained is a charge against Husserl. My Being is not a primordially self-confirming autarchy of the transcendental ego. For Husserl, Being is always a secondary consideration, whereas the I is primary. Stein's "phenomenological modulation, or progression, is [...] a kind of de-centering, or eversion, whereby the starting-point [...] necessarily moves over and beyond its 'ownmost' immanence" (90). This, though, makes Leask wonder if there is anything else that can be said about our being-certainty. It is with this in mind that he turns to the later, intra-ontological writings of Merleau-Ponty.

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The structure of Leask's treatment of Merleau-Ponty is what follows. He turns to his conception of "chiasmic flesh" to outline a pre-intentional, pre-reflective experience (something that might just be called a pre-experience) that does not refer strictly to any object or intentionality. In this regard, chiasmic flesh is very much like Henry's self-affection. Contra Henry, however, this pre-experience is not isolated within itself but is "shown as *dependent upon* that 'wild' or 'vertical' Being [...] which always exceeds it" (96). To put it in alternative terms, before or beneath any intentional, reflective experience, there is Being, which is there pre-intentionally. I do not 'know' it or constitute it, and I cannot avoid it. Whenever reflection asks itself what precedes it, I can "gesture towards" it as that which enables me to reflect in the first place. It, therefore, avoids the solipsistic problem that seems to haunt Husserl's, and even Marion's, account of subjectivity and that is inherent in Henry's account of the absolute nature of self-affection. Ultimately, Leask reads Merleau-Ponty's chiasmic flesh as a supplement to Stein's analysis of *Seingewißheit*. Understood thusly, the Being that precedes me is a plentitude that is not mine but is my irreducible precondition. However, Leask maintains that, in at least one respect, Stein's descriptions go beyond Merleau-Ponty's, and it is the nature of this particular surpassing that he treats in the final chapter.

The final chapter has three primary and interrelated goals. First, Leask wishes to expand upon Stein's notion of Being as "sweet and blissful security" (100). He elucidates this notion, in part, by arguing that Stein's phenomenology of self-awareness as "sheer immediacy, before representation or constitution"

cannot be taken as a neutral description that could, in turn, be recast, "within, say, Deleuzian terms (as confirmation of univocal immanence), or Levinasian terms (as the 'suffocating' *il y a*), or Heideggerrian terms (as ontological difference), and so on" (99). In the final analysis, Leask wants to argue that her descriptions are immune to this re-inscription because of the wider, generally Scholastic, and specifically Thomistic background of her thought. However, I find Leask's argument lacking at this point in the text. He admits that "the main force that shapes Stein's distinctive ontology" is a Scholastic understanding of existence *qua* creation, in which, "there is no distinction between the divinity's creating the universe and maintaining the universe" (102). However, he offers no argument as to why one should accept such an ontological picture. With due support lacking, it could be seen merely as a matter of preference, style, or taste to choose between Levinas' and Stein's divergent ontological pictures.

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The second, related task of the chapter is a re-visitation of Levinas' undoing of Heidegger in terms of the theme of separation from Being. In one of the more surprising and provoking moves made in the book, Leask re-appropriates Levinas' descriptions of our primal enjoyment of the world while removing their foundation in his notion of Being as a suffocating horror. These descriptions are re-appropriated in support of Stein's claim that our primary experience of being-in-the-world is not anxiety in the face of our inevitable death but, rather, "an unspoken faith in our being sustained" (103).

The final goal of the chapter is to argue that Stein's ontological descriptions are not susceptible to dismissal as onto-theological. After all, one might question whether Stein's description of Being as sweet and blissful security, with the primary mood of human existence as faith in being sustained, is possible without one's finitude suggesting another, infinite being: specifically, God. Do we have in these descriptions an overstepping of philosophical boundaries? Several good arguments are given in Stein's defense. First, hers is not a "maximization of ontology" (114). Being-certainty, or Being-safety, is not knowledge *per se*. It is especially not knowledge of being-causally-sustained in Being, and there is no appeal to anything like the principle of sufficient reason in her ontological reflections. Thus, even if "Stein does move, without any apparent phenomenological justification, from Being to God," which Leask is happy to admit she does, it is not done in a way that meets the "philosophical requisites of 'the onto-theo-logical constitution of metaphysics'" (114). The final chapter then concludes with a comparison of Levinas and Stein's varying phenomenological

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descriptions of the night and a sketch of Stein's "dark epistemology of faith," taken from her mystical, philosophical work, *The Science of the Cross*.

Aside from the aforementioned criticisms of Leask's argument, my primary concern with the book is its length, as the entire work comprises a brief 128 pages. I do not take it that good philosophical books have to be long. On the contrary, I take brevity and clarity to be philosophical virtues; indeed, the perspicuity of his interpretation of Stein in Part 3 is, for me, a highlight of the book. However, given the goals that the author sets out to accomplish, I believe that a more thoroughgoing treatment is in order. Indeed, there are sections of this book that suffer because of their brevity and would have benefited from a more sustained argument. The most notable example of underdevelopment occurs in chapter four, wherein Leask accuses Levinas of succumbing to a neo-Kantian dualism. I believe that we can admit to Levinas' Kantianism while simultaneously argue that his dualism — a word, I think, we have to use carefully here — is significantly different from Kant's. Leask asks, at the conclusion of said chapter: "Are Kant's two worlds, ultimately, Levinas' two worlds?" (78). I would answer in the negative, and his account seems more of a suggestion than an argument to the contrary. In other words, Leask may be right, but the argument calls for further development. And the same lack of development haunts his defense of Steinian pre-reflective, self-awareness against re-inscription in negative terms in the final chapter.

In the overall scheme of things, this criticism is a minor one. *Being Reconfigured* is a well-written and accessible tour of contemporary phenomenology, and it was a pleasure to read. It is also a welcome addition to the growing resources on Edith Stein's philosophy, particularly the philosophy from her late period, which is often ignored in English secondary literature. Overall, this book proves the importance of taking Edith Stein seriously as a philosopher, as well as the value that her work can bring to some of the most important debates in contemporary phenomenology.

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