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**“Speaking after the Phenomenon: The Promise of Things and the Future of
Phenomenology”**

by

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Phenomenology speaks primarily not of phenomena but of the appearing of phenomena. In so speaking it moves from the level of things with generic or proper names, the level of things which are present or potentially so, to the level of universal terms and that which cannot be made contemporary, a past which was never present and a future which will never be fulfilled. This change of view happens within experience leading us to think metaphysically, but a metaphysics which can validate itself at the tribunal of experience. This situation which grounds phenomenology can be expressed in the preposition ‘after’ understood in its twofold sense: coming later and going in pursuit. In speaking of the appearing of what appears, phenomenology is a response to that which remains always past and aims towards that which is forever to come. In this sense phenomenology is a passion and against any superficial Cartesian reading of its project, it has always been a radical rejection of the account of philosophy as self-fulfilling act. Speaking after as striving is motivated by desire, which again needs to be heard in a twofold manner: To desire is to lack - only through absence is there desire; but to desire is already to have the absent as excess, as that which exceeds what is present.

We have then a constellation of three spheres: time (the temporality of ‘after’), desire (the dynamics of lack and excess) and language (the expression of what is in speech). The relation of these three spheres to each other is the theme of this article. The question is how to speak philosophically, which means how to speak when the very resources of speech in its directedness towards phenomena are themselves in question, how to speak while remembering *both* that speaking seeks grounds, reasons, *and* that speaking cannot but aim for that which it seems unable to attain, namely the thing glimpsed in that silence which is somewhat clumsily expressed by the little word ‘after’.

This article is divided into three sections with a brief conclusion. The first section begins with the question of seeking grounds, but in doing so shows that a phenomenological account of speaking as logos, reason, shows the interdependence of faith and reason. This is so because speaking of phenomena is speaking of that which is promised in the thing which gives itself to appearance (I). The second section discusses how we can speak phenomenologically, i.e. on the level not of what appears but of the appearing of appearance and there it is shown how such speaking retrieves the pre-modern account of transcendentals (II). The transcendentals do not simply express the appearing of appearance, but rather the modes in which appearing is alluring, draws the perceiving self to the self-giving thing. This requires an account of empathy which is aware of the temporal structure of a being past which makes possible the presence of things as self-expression (III).

I: Faith

Thinking and speaking come after the event, do not begin at the beginning but rather begin with that which is already given, already manifest. To reason is to seek grounds, but always on the basis of what has been given. In other words, to reason is already to express faith, faith in an origin which is not mine. Faith here is something other than belief. A belief can be stated propositionally: I believe that my coffee mug is on the desk. Reasoning is hardly possible without the articulation of such beliefs. But faith cannot be expressed in this way. It is rather a prior act of trust in that through which the content of such belief is made present. Such trust is rooted in love – first and foremost self-love, most particularly love of my own body¹, but also love of others as things in the world. By love here is meant an openness towards and a binding of oneself to that towards which the self is directed; both a self-giving and a desire for self-giving.²

Being directed towards things in their appearing requires a loving openness towards things in their own self-expression, as they radiate towards us. While it is true that for something to appear is for it to appear to someone, more fundamentally it is for that thing to express itself

¹ This theme of love of the body as foundational to thought and existence is to be found in fundamental documents of both Greek Philosophy and Judeo-Christianity. Aristotle begins the *Metaphysics* speaking of the “delight (*agapēsis*) we take in our senses; for even apart from their usefulness they are loved (*agapontai*) for themselves” (Metaphysics, 980a2); St. Paul in the Letter to the Ephesians states: “no man ever yet hated his own flesh; but nourished and cherished it, even as the Lord the church: For we are members of his body, of his flesh, and of his bones” (Ephesians 5: 29-30)

² Love in other words, which is to be understood both erotically and agapeically, see on this theme F. Ó Murchadha: “Love’s Conditions”.

as a singular promise of being itself.³ My faith in the world is my trust in that promise of things. As Merleau-Ponty puts it: “To perceive is suddenly to commit an entire future of experiences in a present which never strictly speaking guarantees that future, it is placing one’s faith in the world.”⁴ My faith in the world is the trust that things in the world have the promise which they appear to have and that promise is the yet to come of the thing in its relations to me and the world. There is nothing which appears to me without some promise to come to be in a certain way, and my understanding of things is in terms of how they may fulfil that promise: whether a rock on a mountain stream is safe to step on, whether the river will be flowing with salmon for my fishing, whether the person blocking my way will politely move at my request or whether the other side of the ball will be red, whether the back of the building will be in harmony with its façade. Perception in the widest sense is a process precisely because the promise of the thing is not immediately evident and whether it will fulfil its promise is something which I cannot know in the present. My faith is an openness to the possible fulfilments of the promise of the thing; perception in that sense is anticipatory.⁵ As such, faith in the world is trust in the *promise* of the world.⁶

To talk of the promise of things may seem a loose way of speaking. A promise is after all a pledge which is entered into only by a responsible, rational being, i.e. a being which can commit itself into the future to be true to a declaration made in the present. Clearly – to return to the examples above – neither the rock nor the river nor the ball nor the building can do this and not so much the person blocking my way as social convention promises that he will let me pass. But fundamental to promising is that the promising thing expresses in the present that a possible future ought to come about through the power of its being and that there is a binding (though uncertain) connection between the thing in the present and that future. Such expression need not be deliberate, need not be conscious in fact, and does not require a self-responsible agent to make it. It is in this sense that we talk of a child as a promising tennis player or an event as promising, or the cloudless sky as promising of a good day for a mountain hike. What is meant is that without any reference to conscious agency (even the child swinging the racket may have no idea of being a tennis player), a particular thing indicates in certain qualities of its being a specific possible future. Promising in this sense is characteristic of all things and refers both to the thing itself and to the one for whom the thing

³ On this theme see D. Landes: *Merleau-Ponty and the Paradoxes of Expression*, pp. 96-98.

⁴ Merleau-Ponty *Phenomenology of Perception*, p. 297.

⁵ See Husserl: *Erste Philosophie*, p. 45.

⁶ Cf. Bergson who speaks of perception in terms of the promise or danger in the object. *Matter and Memory*, pp. 32, 57.

holds promise. A peach promises to be sweet and juicy: this refers to my desire to taste it, it is promising for me only because I have that desire and certain taste-memories. But it also refers to the peach: the colour and texture of the peach expresses the promise of being sweet and juicy. If I taste it and it is sour, I may throw it away angrily because it has not fulfilled its promise to me. To be angry with the peach is irrational if we think that its promise is a conscious thing, but really it is not: the peach was deceptive, it appears to be what it was not, it promised what it did not deliver.

A thing does not promise in isolation; its promise is the self-explicating of the thing in relation to itself and to others. For a thing to have promise is for that thing to be in relation both to itself and to others, that is to be a self. Again, it may be objected that only certain 'things' are selves, those which are subjects, self-conscious beings. But to be a self means minimally to be in relation to itself, to others and to its own origins and ends. A tree relates to itself in the manner in which its leaves and root systems are each directed towards its nourishment, it relates to the sun by turning towards it and the wind by turning away from it, it relates to its origins and its ends as the limits of its existing being. None of this appears to be fully conscious of course, but we can say of a tree that it has needs in terms of water, sunlight, depth of soil; that it can be harmed by having its bark cut; that it is a sapling or an ancient oak; that it is flourishing or doing badly and in saying this we are speaking of the tree as a self, as a being which relates to its environment and itself, has needs required for its to flourish.⁷ In the semi-dormancy⁸ of its self-relation the tree is a self which responds to itself, to others and its origins and ends as that which concern it. In a similar way, a desk needs certain climatic conditions, is threatened by fire, wobbles when placed on an uneven surface. Again, we can speak here of the desk having needs, and these needs are the modes of the desk's self-relation to itself in the world. In the case of the desk this is a slumbering self-relation and while that slumber is presumably permanent, the self-relation and the relation to the world is no less real: difficulties in one respect (say overly damp conditions) may in time effect it in other respects of itself (say its legs crumble and collapse). It is of course with self-aware beings, with certain animals including us humans that we can speak of awakened self-relations. If we as human beings have a certain privilege here, it derives from that which only

⁷ On this question see C.D. Stone: *Should Trees have Standing?*, p. 11 and the fascinating account of the life of trees in P. Wohlleben: *The Secret Life of Trees*.

⁸ Half-awake in the sense of responding to its environment, half-asleep in the sense of not doing so with any self-awareness a tree shares dormancy with non-living things, but also wakefulness with a dog or a human being. There are many differences of degree among entities in the world, but at the level of complete dormancy in the form of inorganic things the boundaries and self and other become much more fluid to the point of *apeiron* – being without boundary and hence without self.

certain other animals seem to perform and then only minimally: hesitation.⁹ To hesitate is to falter in response due to some inhibiting thought or sentiment. The origins of the word are to be found in the Latin verb for stammering (*haesitare*) and it is hard to see how language itself would be possible without hesitation, without the drawing back of the self in the face of its relations. Out of such hesitation comes wakefulness; faltering in its forward movement such a self becomes aware of its relations to objects (intentional relations). Such awareness takes the initial form of interest. It recognizes itself in relations of interest with things and also the relation of other selves to those same things. But more than that, it recognizes itself and those others with whom it shares a common belonging in relation to things which call on it for response in various and diverse ways. The hesitation in the face of a thing allows the self to recognize in that thing and in itself a self which has a name, a nature and an integrity.

To perceive things as appearing in this way, as selves, and see this in hesitation, is that which allows us to sense the other thing both as that which moves us towards or away from it and as that which moves us through its own self, the radiation of its own being. A thing presents to a perceiving being a surface which invites that being to explore it further or perhaps repels it or indeed leaves it indifferent. Each of these modes are modes of promising: the thing attracts us as something functional for us, as something giving pleasure to us or as something which we desire to know better or the thing repels us as that which is of no use to us, which causes displeasure or which we have no desire to know. The thing may promise this of itself or of something else. In the first case that which it promises is an expression of itself. It promises to be a certain manner of thing or to express in itself certain qualities. It shows itself in that way to be a possible source of pleasure or of displeasure, of satisfaction or of dissatisfaction, of fulfilment or of ruin. In each case there is a correlation between the thing's promise and the mode of being of the perceiving self, but in this correlation is disclosed the promise of the thing as exceeding the correlative perspective of the perceiver. For a climber a rock promises a challenging climb, but that in the rock which makes it a challenging climb can also for a non-climber express its beauty, its grandeur; for a geologist, its origins and nature; for a photographer, the perfect foreground of a photo etc.¹⁰ The thing promises more than what any one perspective can contain. When the thing is promising in relation to something else, when it functions as a sign of that thing, we are not drawn so much to it as to that of which it is a sign. But this is not a clear cut distinction. We see this in particular in the case of religious

⁹ On this question see Alia Al-Saji: "When Thinking Hesitates".

¹⁰ Cf. J.P. Sartre: *Being and Nothingness* (London: Routledge, 1969) p. 627; C. Romano: *Au coeur de la raison*, pp. 610-15. The term 'correlation' here is one which can be found within the work of Husserl, Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty. The allusion to Meillassoux's *After Finitude* is of course deliberate.

signs: the pages of an illuminated manuscript, icons of Christ or the sacraments of certain religions promise pleasure in themselves and attract the self towards them as incarnations of that which surpasses them, the invisible divinity or the holy itself.

Understanding things in the promise of their being requires of the self not alone a trust in that promise, but a subjection of its own instinctive drives in respect to the thing. At the level of drives, the self responds to things in the world in a generalized manner. The instinctive drive for food or instinctive aggression towards a threat or sexual drive are responses which map out things in the world in generalized forms: that which can be consumed and that which cannot, those who are threatening and those who are not, the objects of sexual interest and those who are not. At this generalized level, nonetheless, the thing is perceived dynamically as promising a nourishment for the self or as threatening its survival or as a source of pleasure. The self learns of its instincts through that which elicits them; it becomes an instinctive being through responding to that which calls on its inborn drives. The thing appears to the self as that thing which elicits action from it: the act of killing a living embodied being and transforming it into a flesh to be eaten; the act of copulating with a woman or man who attracts a sexual response. The generalized structure of instinctive drive shows to the self a general structure of its own being which seems more primordial than the ego. Its instinctive feelings open it to a general structure of itself, that of generalized needs and desires of which the ego is only passively aware. Such instinctive being in the world is not the final word, but it is fundamental to all which can be understood of the human. As Husserl says: "Reason itself is transformed instinct (*verwandelter Instinkt*), instinctive affection and intention goes through all rational life".¹¹ Instinct is transformed through repetition, through the repeating of a pattern of drive and satisfaction; instinctive life is given an order which is constitutive of the lifeworld in which the self finds itself. In seeing the repetitions within instinct itself – the repeated need for food for example – the self discovers in itself a pattern, an order and the world can guarantee and maintain that order. Where that order is lost, we strive to regain it, we strive to find another pattern of repetition. Inherent in the instinctive drive is a discrimination between things. At its most basic level this discrimination is between that which attracts and that which repels and between that which can dominate the self and that which the self can dominate. The development of the self's affective relations involves the refinement of these generalized modes of being through the development of more and more fine grained forms of affective response to things in the world

¹¹ Husserl: *Grenzprobleme der Phänomenologie*, p. 134.

which in becoming more discriminating allow the self to affectively distinguish things in the singularity of their kinds, specific natures and finally their own singular being.

In recognizing the promise of the thing the self reserves itself obediently before the thing. Such obedience – literally such listening to (*ob-audire*) – is fundamental to all relations with things: even the killer obeys the promise of particular vulnerabilities in his victim. There is in any such relations with things the need for a certain ascetics, i.e., a relation of working of the self on itself, to prepare that self for that manner of appearing of the thing.¹² Such ascetics require of the self above all the capacity to wait upon the thing, to let the thing become itself before me. It requires also a continual examination of the self's ownmost habits of thought, speaking and action. It does so because habits tend to reduce such obedience to the general structure of things by translating the givenness of things into learned patterns which are ideally both transparent and predictable mapping out the future possibility of the thing in terms of an image of that thing. The danger here is that of reducing things to caricatures of themselves and in so doing occluding the singularity of the thing of experience. This danger is inherent in thinking and in speaking and is indeed fundamental to language itself. What Heidegger terms "idle talk"¹³ is nothing other than the replacement of the thing's promise with caricatured and petrifying images of it. Phenomenological thought, if it is to uncover the appearing of the appearance of the thing, needs to find a way beyond such caricatures and beyond the simply instinctive response to things, to find a language which both responds to the promise of things and allows us to speak of this response philosophically.

II: Transcendentals

The question here is twofold: how do we speak such that we are true to the thing in the promise of its being and how can we speak philosophically, at a meta-level so to speak, about this relation. The promise of things is a call, a solicitation. Things solicit us with more or less intensity. In soliciting us, in alluring us to them, things appear to us in certain ways calling for our attention. That which calls us in the thing is its appearing to us, it radiating of a certain way of being which seeks a response. That response is one which occurs on the trajectory of attraction and repulsion, whereby this 'trajectory' is rather an ambiguity, a kind of doubling in experience, whereby the opposition is not between attraction and repulsion but

¹² On this topic see F. Ó Murchadha: *A Phenomenology of Christian Life*, pp. 145-7; see also Husserl: *Grenzprobleme der Phänomenologie*, p. 129.

¹³ Heidegger: *Being and Time*, § 35

rather between these two and indifference or inattention.¹⁴ In speaking of things in this experience, the mode of speech is not one of simple propositional description, but rather that mode which expresses already a being moved by things, which Chrétien terms *la parole blessée*, wounded speech: “Wounded by this listening and this summons which always already preceded it, that discloses it to itself in this truth always suffering, always agonal ... which means that speech is all the more confident the least sure it is of its own capacities.”¹⁵ In other words, speaking is a passion, a response to the world as that place in which the self perceives (listens to) things in suffering them. Understood in this way speaking does not begin with an inner intention which then gets articulated, nor does speaking involve simply the participation of the self in the interplay of sameness and difference in a language game. Rather, to speak is to acknowledge the anteriority in being of that which summons it and to open the speaking self to the thing as that which can draw it into itself. Speaking gestures before any propositional statement and this lies at the heart of Chrétien’s claim (quoting St. Augustine) that “desire prays always even when language is silent.”¹⁶ Indeed, arguably prayer discloses something essential about speaking. Already Proclus pointed out a strange circularity in prayer: “those who pray ought first to render thanks to the gods for the very fact that he has received from the gods the power to turn towards them.”¹⁷ This circularity of prayer is instructive for language as such: to speak is to respond to that which first turns us towards it and the very capacity to speak is impossible without that which our words attempt to express. To imagine otherwise is to betray the very heart of language itself, namely the bringing to articulation that first sensed in the thing itself, that which is the gift of the thing. As such all speech is a giving thanks, all speaking begins and ends in prayer. Speaking is address, address to another which responds to a prior solicitation. But what then makes possible this address, what is it that gives us the sense that our words do more than simply express inchoate sounds or even meanings which we share, but actually serve to articulate an appearance to which it owes its being? Clearly words can be expressive, but by the same token they can often become simply images or caricatures. They are not saved from this by any potency of words themselves, but by something more fundamental. To find this we need to work through a phenomenological reduction as it concerns language. The

¹⁴ This doubling of attraction and repulsion is one which Rudolf Otto identifies with the numinous. See R. Otto: *The Idea of the Holy*, pp. 62-3, 73, 163-4. For Otto too, though, the numinous is not a realm of things but that mode of appearing of things which breaks with the mundane, the ‘natural’ in his terms. The numinous in this sense is a mode of appearing of things which breaks with the caricaturing context of habitual practice.

¹⁵ Chrétien: *The Ark of Speech*, p. 37.

¹⁶ Augustine, *Sermon LXXX*, quoted in *ibid.*, p. 29.

¹⁷ Proclus, “Commentary on Timaeus”, quoted in *ibid.*, pp. 24-5.

phenomenological reduction is not simply a leading back to appearances, but more importantly to the principle of appearance, to the appearing of appearance, to that which is first in and of appearance. Appearance is always of this or that, but the appearing of it is not characterised by the qualities of that which appears. The appearing of a dog, for example, has nothing doglike about it. It makes perfect phenomenological sense to say as Heidegger does that the world worlds, or that the thing things¹⁸, but it would be nonsense to say that a dog dogs! To express the appearing of a dog one needs to think in a way which will make sense of the wordliness and the thingliness of the dog, that is what it is for a dog to appear in the event of appearing. To express that we need words which have to do not with that which appears, but with the appearing itself, the principles by which it appears. In attempting this Phenomenology encounters a problem which lies at the core of philosophical reflection, namely how to think those first principles on the basis of which all knowledge is possible. This is not a question of foundations, rather foundational thought is a way of responding to this question. The problem is that philosophy cannot justify its beginning in the same manner as that which it says on the basis of its beginning and it cannot do so because its beginning is never contemporary with that which it is thinking. While I can say that the glass is on the table and in doing so can so to speak reproduce that snapshot of the glass now on the table, I cannot do the same for the origin of the appearing of things, the *how* of the appearing of glass or table or uponness. To think that question, I need to speak differently in a manner already reflected in prayer. But while prayer simply lays open my lateness, reflection on this situation needs to ask what is it about appearing which is irreducible, which I cannot get behind. In the Thirteenth century, as part of the response to Aristotle and Arab philosophy, the Scholastics began to practice in philosophy a process in some senses similar to the reduction which they termed *resolutio*: the attempt to work thinking backwards to those ideas which are primary, cannot be preceded in thought. Those ideas were termed ‘*intentiones*’, intentions. It is important to see here that the ‘intentions’ in question were neither subjective nor objective, but rather those ideas without which the intelligibility of things would be lost.¹⁹ The first such idea according to some (e.g. Albert the Great) is the good, for others (e.g. Thomas Aquinas) being. In either case these ideas were termed “transcendentals” because they refer to that through which things are and according to which things can be thought. In this sense the transcendentals form the openness of thought and speech to things as they give themselves to

¹⁸ Heidegger “The Thing”, pp. 178-180.

¹⁹ Albert the Great for example speaks of “the most general and common” intentions, see J. Aertsen: *Medieval Philosophy and the Transcendentals*, p. 50.

be thought and spoken of. The crucial point here is that although I can be present to a dog or a tree or an explosion I cannot be present to being, one, truth, good, beauty, rather I am present to things and things are present to me by virtue of such transcendentals.²⁰

Transcendentals are not general terms, in the sense that they are not generic terms of which we find instances in reality. Such words as ‘being’, ‘one’, ‘truth’, ‘good’ and ‘beauty’ are not of things of which we can find instances: I can show or point to a particular dog or painting or rock, but I cannot show or point to a particular one, good, true, beauty, but at most one thing, a good thing, a true thing, a beautiful thing.²¹ While the word ‘cup’ or ‘human being’ or ‘daffodil’ can be used only of a limited sphere of entities, these transcendental terms can be thought as expressing that which is the condition of the appearance of any entity. Nothing can appear without that which being, one, truth, good, beauty, express. This is so because each of these words are in a very real sense convertible. They are convertible but not synonymous, not as Kant claimed tautologous, but rather each transcendental “manifest the different ‘faces’ of being”.²²

The transcendentals refer to intentions. The intention of the thing is that which it gives to thought, that about the thing which expresses it in a manner that can be understood, is meaningful. It does this in a manner which differs from the way in which the thing can be meaningful as a particular kind of thing. When we use language propositionally, as in stating of this room that it is rectangular, of this vessel that it is made of glass, of this person that he is ill, the tendency of such usage is to express a presence and a substitutable object. “Room”, “vessel”, “person”, are things I can point to, but that which I point to is a particular instantiation of that thing. There are other rooms, other vessels, other persons and my words are such that they can be employed at other times and places to refer to such other things. Language remains at the level of appearances, giving sense to that which appears. The transcendental functions differently and this indicates its ontological and cognitive significance.

The transcendentals are universal in transcending the specificity of any particular kind of entity and by the same token open up entities in their totality to the thinking, speaking and

²⁰ My concern here is systematic rather than historical, although a rethinking of the historical trajectory from Albert the Great to Kant (and beyond to Maritain) in respect of the transcendentals would potentially be a very rewarding project. In this context my concern is limited to the suggestiveness of the medieval account of the transcendentals for a language of phenomenological reflection.

²¹ This is true also of qualities more generally, e.g. smoothness, brightness, harshness, etc. But while these qualities signify in a restricted sensory field (smoothness - touch, brightness - vision, harshness – hearing, and so on) the transcendentals concern appearing as such.

²² Cf. *ibid.*, p. 429.

being of the self in its self-transcendence. Heidegger already in *Being and Time* points to this and shows the manner in which Aquinas' account of the transcendentals gives expression to Aristotle's statement (itself tracing Parmenides' enigmatic statement that thought and being are the same) that the soul is in a certain sense being (*ta onta*).²³ While particular arts and sciences are directed towards certain types of entities and our sense capacities are directed towards entities as visual, aural, tactile or olfactory appearances, thinking, speaking and being are directed towards things in their thingliness and worldliness. As such the transcendentals form a fundamental openness towards things and that openness in things through which there is appearance.

Let us say a robin lands close to my feet. I can of course describe its movement, its colour etc. But if I want to express the appearing of its appearance, then I need to try to express what it is for that robin to appear, what in its appearance traces its coming to appear. What seems to be most obvious and most primitive is that the robin is, the robin exists. While I can now see it, hear it, touch it, its being is anterior to all of that. It is only due to its being that it can appear. Its being is a contingency, there is in this self-disclosing robin before me nothing which makes necessary its own being. It *is* through the contingency of its own coming to be. When I see it, I see it in the contingency of that being. But contingency does not mean accident: its being is not an accident of any underlying thing or substance²⁴, rather the contingency of its being expresses that which is universal, that which is singularly and uniquely expressed in it and in all appearing entities. Being in this sense is not transcending in that it signifies something separable from things, but rather it runs through all things.²⁵ This contingency is beyond all reason, all grounds. The robin as this singular entity is in its being without why. In this sense, the robin is unsubstitutable: there is only this contingently manifest robin, it surpasses in its coming to be anything which the word 'robin' expresses, because what the word tries to capture in that expression of being is this entity without which the noun, the proper name remains an empty sign. The being of the thing is that to which I have opened myself and which in appearing has opened itself to me. This mutual opening is in each case that which surpasses me and surpasses it. Its being is not its alone, rather it *is* by its being, its being is that which it receives in the most radical sense: it appears to me as the expression of its own having received being which makes possible its own relation to itself and to the world. Its own expression of that original reception radiates from it; it manifests

²³ *Being and Time*, p. 13 (H. 14)

²⁴ See Meister Eckhart: Prologue to the *Opus tripartitum*, pp. 152-3.

²⁵ Cr. Aquinas: *De virtutibus in commune*, 2 ad 8: "in transcendens, quae circumeunt omnes ens", quoted in Aersten, op. cit, p. 93

here uniquely, momentarily, what it is to be. In this sense the thing in showing itself shows itself as a mode of receiving being. That mode of receiving being cannot be grasped by abstraction or by deduction, but rather by perceiving the thing in the singularity of its being as a unique making manifest of being. This unique making manifest of being (but also the making manifest of the other transcendentals) I will call, borrowing from the poet Gerald Manley Hopkins, ‘selving’.²⁶ All things in being selves make being manifest in themselves and in doing so appear to me as an unfolding of their self-relation to their own being.

To appear in its own being is to appear in this sense as one. To appear as one is to appear in the integrity of its own being. The robin appears to me as this one robin, as this robin which is not anything other than itself, as having a boundary of itself which marks it from that which is other than it. Such boundaries and such integrity is not a matter of the way we ‘carve up’ the world, rather the words – nouns – we use are imperfect ways of responding to this prior sense of the oneness of the thing. Again this oneness does not imply something separate or indeed an indivisible monad. The one as self is in its (awakened or dormant) self relation: the one, in other words, is always two: the thing as it shows itself and as it is to itself. That which shows itself as one, is that thing which shows itself in the unity of its own being. In its selving it appears as that which is both what it shows itself and what remains unseen. Again this oneness is not that which appears to me, rather the thing can only appear to me as a manifestation of its oneness. The oneness of the thing is its own appearing to be in the unity of the being which it promises to be.

The thing appears to me in its truth. To say of something that it is true is to say more of it than that it is and that it is one. When we speak of a true diamond, a true athlete, a true fossil, we are speaking of it as appearing as it is, giving itself to be what it is.²⁷ This truth is a promise – the true fossil is one which promises to disclose a world which is past, but which like a ruin presents that past world in its own passing. A true athlete is one who discloses the promise of athleticism without deception. In showing itself the thing is other than itself, is a relation to itself and that self relation is a space for untruths of different forms: deception, dissimulation as well as concealment. As true the self shows itself in the space of its own relation to the perceiving self. The perceiving self can only see the phenomenon in these terms, in terms of its own relation to the world. The truth of the thing in its relation to others appears as it is or as it is not. In appearing as it is or as it is not the thing shows itself to the perceiving self in relation to that self’s interests and concerns. What is true here is not a

²⁶ See in particular poem 57, “When kingfishers catch fire” *The Poems of Gerald Manley Hopkins*, p. 90.

²⁷ See Heidegger: “On the Essence of Truth”, pp. 137-8.

quality of propositions, but rather a mode of appearing of the thing. The true appearance of the thing is its mode of appearing and the worldiness of that appearance. A straight stick under water will appear bent because of the mode in which it appears, gives itself to vision. The thing appears truly for a being which is open to the thing and desires to behold it as it is. To perceive the thing as itself is to perceive it as it gives itself to be. Such a givenness is a promise not alone to be in some sense, not alone to be one and true, but also to be good. To be a self is to manifest the goodness of that self, to manifest what it is to be a rock, or a tree, or a soldier or a lover. To be good in this sense is to be true to the promise of that which the thing is. That which the thing is, is the promise of its being in relation to that being which it has received. We perceive things in the world as for the most part unchanging in their relation to that goodness to which they relate in the passivity of their being. Even within human life this is for the most part the case. Nevertheless, reflection on the good as we receive it opens up a space of receptivity in which the self takes responsibility for that reception. The goodness of my being is for me a choice and in the case of the moral beings this is complicated by the dual possibilities of self-love and love of the law as Kant saw²⁸. Kierkegaard further complicates this picture by introducing the leap of faith which is motivated neither by self-love nor love of the law, but by the singular call of love.²⁹ We might complicate this picture further by introducing the consideration of authenticity: the self's good as its singular expression of its own being, oneness and truth, which we might understand in, for example, questions of sexual orientation and gender selection. Understood dynamically the good is that being towards itself, in which the self appears to itself and to others in its responsive relation to what it has always already received and its refiguring of that anteriority of itself in relation to a future which remains unfulfilled.

The thing appears to me in its beauty. Stendhal defines beauty as the “promise of happiness”.³⁰ The first keys of a piano sonata, the glimpse of the willow tree in the evening sun, the figure of my lover in the distance, in all cases I find myself beholden to that which appears to me in beauty. Its beauty is not a property of the thing as the sound of notes, the smoothness of the bark, the bearing of the woman are, but rather the mode of its expression as that which attracts me to it. But in each case the beauty of the thing is the mode by which I am taken in by it, allured and enraptured by it. The beauty of the thing is that which fascinates me, places me in its spell. But that which captivates me is not that the thing is a

²⁸ Kant: *Religion within the Bounds of mere Reason*, pp. 53-4.

²⁹ Kierkegaard: *Fear and Trembling*, pp. 83-95 on the ‘teleological suspension of the ethical’.

³⁰ Stendhal: *De l'amour*, pp. 64-5

particular manifestation of beauty, but rather that the thing's appearance to me expresses itself as promising not alone pleasure but also to make the world for me a happy place. This promise is however not to be understood egotistically: the beauty of the thing challenges me to accept the world as given to me by the object of beauty. Beauty transforms my phenomenological gaze, decentering me, dispossessing me of the world and reducing me to one more for whom this thing in its beauty is the world's centre.

What has happened in this decentering is that the thing expresses itself as a self. This is what is at play in all the transcendentals, namely the selving of the thing. Gerald Manley Hopkins speaks poetically this selving when he states: "Each mortal thing does one thing and the same: / Deals out that being indoors each one dwells; / Selves – goes itself; myself it speaks and spells".³¹ Each thing in other words in appearing shows itself (as a card dealer shows the cards) but as that which dwells within itself. In showing itself it appears as an expression of itself. To catch its appearance is to be drawn into the thing's relation to itself and the world in which I as the perceiver am but one perspective. But what I see in the thing is not simply an object but a promise, indeed in Hopkins' terms what is expressed is the thing as a vocation: "Crying What I do is me: for that I came." In each thing is a promise of a fulfilment, an anticipation of that which is to come, the appearing thing as a self, the appearing of its inner self.

The transcendentals are originary moments, moments out of which meaning can be instituted and moments which promise a fulfilment. They are utopian moments, moments of no place and of a time which is no present time, but that time without which there would be no present. The question we are then faced with is what that time is and who we are who stand in it.

III: Time and Emotion

If perception is of things in their promise, then perception is both passion and empathy. Being, oneness, truth, goodness, beauty are not categories or value judgements on the thing, but rather the modes of appearing of a thing in relation to a perceiving linguistic being. That relation is one of attention (attraction/repulsion) tending towards null when the perceiving being is inattentive or indifferent. In other words, the transcendentals indicate modes of being moved by things. I am moved at a most basic level to attend to a thing, to stretch towards it. I am stretching towards that thing which appears to me as a promise, as an anticipation. What I

³¹ Hopkins: "Poem 57", *The Poems of Gerald Manley Hopkins*, p. 90.

attend to is the thing as it 'selves', as it (partially) shows its indoor being to me. It is this which the artist expresses by saying that it is as if the object is looking at me.³² In literal sense this is not true; but it is also not simply a figurative anthropocentric fancy. The thing in appearing expresses itself and that expression requires my empathy, i.e. my capacity to perceive the object as expression.

Again such an emphasis of empathy seems misplaced: surely my empathy can only be for a being which feels as I do. But not alone is the assumption of a necessary prior feeling in me based in an analogical theory which fails to account for genuine self-transcendence in empathy³³, it also imposes a particular learned experience of empathy as universally given. Scheler argued on the contrary for the presence of a kind of universal grammar of expression³⁴ which we gradually become less sensitive to due to a process of de-animation: "a continuous process of disenchantment, in that only a proportion of sensory appearances retain their function as vehicles of expression."³⁵ While clearly empathy seems easier the more like us the other being is, this is contingent on other factors which are not essential to empathy itself. Empathy in such a view is the perceiving of the other being as expressive of itself. The painter painting a still life is trying to capture that self-expression, that being of the apple in its twofold movement of selfhood.

The self-expression of the thing again does not arise out of conscious agency, but rather comes from the duality of the thing itself. A thing as an object of perception is dual in the sense of facing towards and away from the perceiving self. What I see is the object facing me, but that which faces me gives expression to a movement away from me, a movement which is not the contrary of its outward movement but rather constitutive of it. In facing me the thing turns away from me and in so doing expresses for me its way of being in the world as a manifestation of being, oneness, truth, goodness and beauty. Its intentional being is nothing other than that manifestation, which happens for me in that space between us. In expressing itself in this way, it expresses being, oneness, truth, goodness and beauty in the singular manner of its own being. What I perceive there exceeds any literal description I can give. The intentional being of the thing gathers together its own sense as an expression of its relational being, that is, as an expression of the worldliness of its appearance. This worldliness cannot be reduced to the thing itself, nor to my perception of it, but rather to the thing as it relates to all around it including to me who perceives it. My perception is essential

³² On this see Merleau-Ponty "Eye and Mind", p. 299.

³³ Zahavi: *Self and Other*, p. 119.

³⁴ Scheler: *The Nature of Sympathy*, p. 11

³⁵ *Ibid*, p. 238.

to its appearing, but contingently so: the thing could have appeared without me and only accidentally does it appear to me. The utter contingency of this appearance is falsified once we begin to give a causal account of its appearance as such an account will always function retrospectively – as Bergson would say through a retrograde movement³⁶ - through a later reconstruction of the coming to appearance. Such an account is not false, but it falsifies the contingency of this manifestation of the plurality of its faces of being without which it would not be. The seeking of grounds comes too late to capture this contingent event; the contingency is that which I experience in faith. But this faith is not discrete, is rather a being-affected by the thing in its worldiness. Such being-affected is the atmosphere of being that the thing manifests for me.

A tree standing isolated in a field, leafless, bare and dark against the grey winter sky, appears to me melancholically, a face of decay and death. The tree appears to me as melancholic in appearing to me as bare and leafless. The tree presumably cannot experience melancholy and in perceiving it that way I may be said to be projecting my sense of melancholy onto it. However, the tree no more experiences itself as leafless than as melancholic, but appears to me as both leafless and melancholic. I, in turn, can know the tree is leaf-less without having to have experienced leaflessness myself. I experience things both animate and inanimate as showing me better than any feeling of my own what an emotion can be. Only when we begin with an actual subject, immediate first to itself and then extending perceptually and actively into the external world do we conclude that emotions are first felt auto-affectively and then projected onto objects. Once we begin with the thing as it moves me to encounter it in the openness of that transcendental field which opens between us can we see that the thing appears to us in the passion of being through which we are swept up in the world in a desire which works first on the instinctive core of our being.

Many implications derive from this, but here we can only explore the temporality or rather the temporal ontology of such an account. When I perceive the thing as a self, I perceive it in the temporality of its being. In so doing I perceive the thing in its past which was never present to me and its to come which will never be mine. But by the same token I recognize that this past and present of the thing was never its own either. The self-expression of the thing is its 'selving', that is its coming to manifest a singular being, oneness, truth, goodness and beauty. But this selving is itself a temporary delineation, a contingent being set in play as a self which can never be its own origin or ends but rather is in relation to that from which its

³⁶ Bergson: *The Creative Mind*, p. 11.

origins and ends arise. How to understand this ‘from which’ is the ultimate metaphysical question. Phenomenologically it has to remain undecidable because any decision will replace the original phenomena of experience with constructs or with the privileging of particular revelations. But this is not to say that the diverse traditions from which these ‘answers’ emerge cannot prove fruitful for phenomenological discussion and reflection. The selving of a thing is its coming to relation to itself in respect not alone of what is not itself (others, the world) but also that which it cannot fully incorporate in itself, its origins and ends. Phenomenologically we have to ask where (if anywhere) this coming to be a self comes to appearance in its origins. To respond to this we can turn to the experience of self-aware beings in their coming to be and we can discuss this from the first person perspective.

To be is to suffer being. I cannot give myself being, my being is given to me and the same is true of those various expressions of this being in its appearing (oneness, truth, goodness and beauty). To suffer being is not to be without responsibility for being, on the contrary the burden of being is that I am responsible for that which I did not do. My responsibility for that which I did not do has at its source the recognition that the coming to be is not alone something I am passive against, but that which belongs to no one. There is no one and nothing at my coming to be because the singular coming to be is not someone else’s, so cannot be claimed by someone else and is not mine, so cannot be claimed by me. The myth of Pygmalion demonstrates this situation: Pygmalion loves his creation and seeks its ultimate fulfilment in life. This desire is for his creation to be both his and not his, the result of his skills and labour but a being other than and distant from him. In this desire is the recognition that there is a moment when that which is made becomes itself and that moment is one which belongs neither to the artist nor to his creation, but in a third instance, a third time and space which can never be present, cannot be perceived or conceptualized, but which nonetheless impresses itself upon the self as its very origin. That third time and space has no selfhood, no identity, is no substance, but is rather that which – working backwards in the history of philosophy - Merleau-Ponty tries to articulate with his account of flesh, Husserl with the thought of horizon, Aristotle in his supposition of prime matter and Plato with three peculiar names: *apeiron*, *chora* and *exaiphnes*. Plato speaks of ‘this queer thing’ ‘the instant (*exaiphnes*)’, a moment in which “the one changes from being to ceasing to be or from not being to coming to be”.³⁷ Aristotle speaks of (prime) matter as “not in itself a something ... not a quantity nor

³⁷ Plato: *Parmenides*, 156d

said to be any of the other things by which that which is is defined”.³⁸ Husserl in his account of the horizon, recognises the being of porosity, a fulcrum through which the thing comes infinitely to be itself³⁹, while Merleau-Ponty’s speaks of the flesh in saying that “it eclipses itself at the moment of producing itself, is always of the two things the one”.⁴⁰ Such two things, such porosity, such a moment between two states, brings us to the limits of thought, but it can be painted and sculpted – this is the crucial insight which M-P has relating to Painting and sculpture – an image that portrays the body in a gesture across space and time, introducing what Donald Landes terms ‘fictive linkages’ from which ‘transition and duration spring forth from the canvas or bronze’.⁴¹

Being moved to be towards a thing is to be shown that thing in the promise of its being. That means that the self must give itself over to the time of the thing in the how of its appearing. That how of appearing is an event, is the becoming outer of the inner and the becoming inner of the outer. Appearance is in this sense transformation. The appearing of the thing is its making manifest of being, oneness, truth, goodness and beauty and doing so in that between-space in which it appears to me. That between space is a middle which logic tries to exclude, a both/and which is neither/nor. That middle space in the space of transformation where the thing becomes a self for itself and for others. What phenomenology tells us is precisely not that the thing is only in its correlation with my consciousness, but rather that the thing comes to be for my consciousness always in the moment of its transformation to being, oneness, truth, goodness and beauty. That which Merleau-Ponty captures in his account of the moment of reversibility is that which saves thought from contradiction, for thinking the contraries at once; it is a moment which escapes both perception and conceptuality. MP speaks of “this unique possible which our world is, is not, in its fabric, made of actuality.”⁴² In seeking this moment, between inner and outer, phenomenology is on the way to rediscovering the question which animated the later Plato, that of finding that third thing which can be grasped neither by reason nor by sense, but rather is glimpsed in a dreamlike thought which sees in the between of being and becoming, of rest and motion, of inner and outer that movement of expression in which there is sense.

³⁸ Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, Zeta, iii, 1029a20-21. The question of ‘prime matter’ is of course a controversial one in Aristotle scholarship. In this context what is significant is that Aristotle understands such matter as that which can be posited even though it stands outside the intelligible context of his account (as can be seen in the manner in which following this passage he denies that matter so understood can be counted as substance).

³⁹ Husserl: *Ideas II*, p. 299

⁴⁰ Merleau-Ponty: *The Visible and the Invisible*, p. 191.

⁴¹ Landes, D.: *Merleau-Ponty and the Paradoxes of Expression*, p 160

⁴² Merleau-Ponty: *The Visible and the Invisible*, p. 277.

IV: Conclusion

The pronouncement of the death of phenomenology have accompanied it since its inception in the work of Husserl and the newest manifestation of this can be found in the so-called “speculative realists”.⁴³ This is not the place to address the arguments marshaled in different ways within that realist turn. The fundamental issue, however, concerns the justification of transcendental philosophy and this it seems to me is a question which does not revolve around issues of idealism and realism, but rather as to the place of philosophical reflection, where it begins, how it deals with its objects and what it aims towards. Against those who wish to decry any philosophy of access⁴⁴ as a victim of correlationist prejudice⁴⁵ denying to objects their proper place and reality⁴⁶, I have tried to show that a philosophy of access recognizes itself as coming too late, the correlation of perceiving self and thing self is not a pernicious anthropocentrism but rather an openness onto a transcendental field of emphatic passion and that in that field is disclosed that third instance out of which all selves emerge into phenomenal reality. This is so because the thing in appearing as a self in the world appears as that which transcends itself. Such self-transcendence is not peculiar to Dasein or the knowing subject but rather is essential to appearance as the self of that which appears. The appearing of a thing is the appearing of that which draws the self into communication with it and shows the self what it means to be.

Phenomenology thinks and speaks from and of the passion of being. Before we can speak of the activity of a knowing or acting subject we need to think the passivity of the self in its being drawn out by the world. The world draws out the self through the allure of the phenomenal being of things. These speak affectively to the self’s desires and emotions. The affective appearance of things is not – when investigated phenomenologically – a subsequent projection onto the thing, but rather the way in which things communicate their being, oneness, truth, goodness and beauty.

What emerges from these reflections is an account of reason not as a capacity of the rational subject somehow divorced from his affective being but rather of the self as driven by the desire of reason: reason’s desire and rational desire. Far from being beyond or above the passion of being, through reason we see most clearly that in the being of things which inspires desire in us, namely the dual aspect of the thing as appearing and hiding itself,

⁴³ See L.R. Bryant, N. Srnicek & G. Harman (eds.): *The Speculative Turn*.

⁴⁴ Sparrow: *The End of Phenomenology*, pp. 114-145

⁴⁵ Meillassoux: *After Finitude*, p. 5.

⁴⁶ Harman: “Object-Oriented Philosophy” in *Towards Speculative Realism*, pp. 93-104; Harman: *Tool-Being*, pp. 224-235.

showing the self to itself in its lack and excess. The desire of reason finds itself in the continual striving to overcome this duality, to see things in the full transparency of their being. In the face of this unhappy place of human reason there are two possible trajectories of response: that which sees human reason as destined to overcome its limitation on the model of some form of divine reason, or to see reason as a peculiarly human striving to be in community with other things, a striving which will always be limited by the alterity of the other. Phenomenology is Kantian to the extent to which – in all its different manifestation – it remains committed to the latter course.

The thing directs me to the transcendental constitution of its being which is radically contingent on the historicity of my being in community with it. My being towards things is a commitment to such a community. This depends on the factual presence of a world towards which I can open myself in hope and love. Not alone is the presence of such a world not at all guaranteed, neither is its continuance. Dependent on hope and love, phenomenology understands the philosophical self as continually faced with the possibility of despair. The world is a fragile place, trust in the world can be dangerous. Indeed, to understand philosophy from the passion of being is to understand it as risking all for the sake of things and world. To risk all in this way is perhaps foolhardy, it is at any rate certainly an adventure of thought and of speaking. The adventurous, as Simmel tells us, is letting ourselves experience that what we normally trust to our own powers and capacities comes about only through a “mysterious efficacy [of our capacity] together with the powers of fate.”⁴⁷ This adventure finds the self with that which already is and directed towards a promise which is never fully fulfilled, but which shows the human being at the very heart of her experience, her reason and her faith that the temporality of things and the world is one which she can know only in the manner in which she comes up against the limits of her own capacities. In that sense finally all thought and speaking is a form of prayer, albeit a prayer towards that which remains without a name, but which is encountered in being, oneness, truth, goodness and beauty.

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⁴⁷ Simmel: „Das Abenteuer“, p. 184.

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