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Large, William ORCID logoORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0447-5364> (2000) The Difference Between Genealogy and Phenomenology: The Example of Religion in Nietzsche and Levinas. *Journal of Nietzsche Studies* (19). pp. 33-43.

Official URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20717734>

EPrint URI: <https://eprints.glos.ac.uk/id/eprint/851>

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Published in the Journal of Nietzsche Studies, and available online at:

<http://www.jstor.org/action/showPublication?journalCode=jnietstud>

We recommend you cite the published (post-print) version.

The URL for the published version is <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20717734>

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The Difference Between Genealogy and Phenomenology: The Example of Religion in Nietzsche and Levinas.

Not to speak about God is to be afraid of him, is still to feel uncomfortable about him (about his image or place in the interconnections of reality and language...), is to put off till later the examination of the emptiness he represents, put off shattering it with laughter.
Bataille

In what has come to be called Continental philosophy, we are conceivably faced with two possible directions: phenomenology and genealogy. In discussing the question of religion in Nietzsche and Levinas, which is the overt subject matter of this paper, I want to contrast these two possibilities. Under the title of phenomenology, I am thinking of those writers who are inspired by the work of Husserl, and under genealogy by Nietzsche. In respect, however, to the specific question of religion, I wish to focus on the work of Levinas. This is because, as Dominique Janicaud has argued, he is the one phenomenologist whose own work perhaps already presupposes a religious point of view.¹ The intention, however, is not merely to contrast Levinas's concept of God with Nietzsche's, nor even, as some recent publications have done, to defend Levinas from the accusation of being the latest in the long line of the defenders of a slave morality, but to reach the heart of this division between genealogy and phenomenology.²

To do this we first of all need to understand phenomenology. We cannot hope to give a full account of the complexity of this tradition, but it is possible to describe its general orientation by going back to its originator Husserl. It would be absurd to claim that one might be able to give an adequate summary of his work, whose originality, depth, and

above all length is foreboding for any commentator, but it is possible to present the barest of sketches, which is adequate for our purpose here. Without this outline Levinas's own defence of the significance of the word God will remain obscure. We might be misled, for instance, into thinking that Levinas's attachment to the word God arises only from his religious belief, rather than any philosophical justification. Of course Levinas does not prove the existence of God in a traditional manner, but the phenomenological description of the ethical relation allows him to continue to use the word God against what he himself would see as Nietzsche's atheism. He can do so because he believes that this atheism has merely destroyed the theological God as the ultimate signifier behind this world, but not the ancient God of monotheism. There is no doubt that Nietzsche saw himself as having destroyed the metaphysical God, but it is not certain that this is the only object of his critique. Does not God also have a political and social function in Nietzsche whose analysis goes beyond dismantling the metaphysical grammar of theology that believes that simply because we have a word there must be something that corresponds to it? Is not Nietzsche's real interest, for example in the *Genealogy of Morals*, the construction of subjectivity through the interpellation of the voice of God that is interpreted through the specific type of the priest? In other words, is not Nietzsche just as much dedicated to a genealogy of the God of monotheism, as he is in dismantling the God of metaphysics, which is just a pale and watered down reflection of the former?

The difference in approach can be summarised as follows: for Nietzsche, it is the pragmatics of power within language that is the object of the genealogical analysis. It is not the definition of words that is first of all important, but the context of their use. A black on the streets, who uses the word 'nigger' against the police as an affirmation of his power, is quite different from a white policeman who uses this word as a form of abuse. The

genealogical question concerning God is not what does this word mean, but what is its function, how is it used in relation to power. For Levinas, on the contrary, it is what this word means that is the starting point. His question is whether the *meaning* of the word God is the same as its philosophical definition. To demonstrate the partiality of the philosophical approach, which means showing that there is another way of speaking about God that does not belong to any definition, including the definition, as Levinas sees it, of its use, is also to exceed the genealogical critique.

This seems to me to be the sharp difference between phenomenology and genealogy. Is it possible to make this absolute breach between the meaning of a word and its use? One cannot imagine Nietzsche, like Levinas, insisting that the 'books of Judaism' must be read from their 'own proper language' before and outside of reading them as historical or sociological documents.³ This is not to deny that the books of Judaism do not have their own language, one that for Levinas upsets the apparent universalism of Western thought, but it is to insist that every language must be mixed up with social reality. It seems to me that this is the phenomenological legacy of Levinas's approach: the separation of meaning from social reality. This does not mean that meaning does not have a relation to social reality for phenomenology, as for instance in genetic phenomenology, but it is always an 'action across a distance'. Phenomenology rests upon a fundamental ontological distinction between meaning and social reality. This is the whole result of its separation between subjective and objective representation. Of course, Levinas's phenomenology is an exaggerated phenomenology, where meaning is pushed beyond the intentional content of consciousness. None the less, this meaning (and it is the aim of Levinas's work to show that such a meaning is not contradictory) comes from outside of social practices. The Judaic concept of God is therefore not the result of the history of the Israelite religion,

rather the history of the Israelite religion is the result of the intervention of the God of Judaism. Its purity is preserved, even though its ideality is no longer the ideality of intentionality. The latter, however, is Levinas's point of departure, so let us first begin with its description. Then we shall go on to discuss Levinas's justification of the word God and compare it to Nietzsche's genealogical analysis.

Phenomenology and the Ideality of Meaning

The phenomenologist starts with meaning. It is thus quite wrong to think that the famous phenomenological slogan 'back to the things themselves' is a rally cry for a realism that asserts that we can all give up the onerous task of understanding for a blissful plunging into the world. A phenomenologist does not perceive, judge or love things, but a meaning through which this or that thing appears. This means that there is not first of all sense data which I then have to, in a second moment of cognitive synthesis, assemble into a meaningful object, rather the thing is right from the start given to me as something meaningful. I do not hear sense data; rather I hear the sound of the car as it goes past my window. Things are not mute beings that await my magical touch in order to resonate; rather the world already speaks to me, as though it had its own language that I must continually attempt to decipher.

There is something very powerful about this vision, and it would be wrong to dismiss it too quickly. For who really believes that our experience of the world is merely a collection of impressions some how miraculously forming into objects we might recognise? Do things have their own language or do they speak only because we have already named them? In terms of traditional epistemology, we seem to have two alternatives: either meaning is to be found in the subject, or in the object. If the origin of

meaning were to be found in me, then it would have a psychological basis. If, on the contrary, meaning were to be found in the object, then we would seem to be looking at a kind of realism. In the first case, meaning is a mental event, and in the latter, it is something that stands outside us as the very reality of the objects.

Phenomenology is the rejection of both the alternatives. Let us, therefore, examine the phenomenological theory of meaning in closer detail. To repeat: I see a table before me. I do not see first of all meaningless sense impressions, which I then fashion into a table, rather I see right away a table. This is because my relation to objects is already orientated or guided by meaning (or what Husserl will call in *Ideas*, *noemata*). But it would be quite foolish to try to find the meaning of the word 'table' inside someone's head. This does not mean that there could be thoughts without a mind thinking them, but the *meaning* of these thoughts is not to be found in the activity of thinking. The meaning can only be found in the *content* of the thought that for Husserl is quite independent from the mental event that is its psychical cause.

It is because we are speaking beings that we can postulate the separation of what is meant from the act of meaning, whereas the bark of a dog is merely a sign; it contains nothing but what itself indicates. The independence of meaning has as its foundation the linguistic division between expression and content, and it is perhaps this distinction which is the fundamental cornerstone of Husserlian phenomenology, for without it an eidetic science, a pure logical grammar, would be an impossibility. We can perhaps understand signification and expression as the difference between the concept and the word. The word expresses a signification, a certain ideational content or concept. This content, however, should not be confused with word that is merely the vehicle of its signification. It is this property of language, as the transmitter of conceptual content, which is the condition for

the division between the act of meaning and what is meant - for although every word is marked by the individuality of the speaker, the concept is not. We should not just think that the world, like an image in a mirror, is merely repeated in language, rather the ideational content of language provides the organisation, determination and general schema of the world. This is why the problem of phenomenology is not how I know the world, but how the world is already constituted in the act of knowing.

In phenomenology, the ideality of meaning, since it is neither something physical or psychological, is set apart from the world. This is why the only way to reach it is through the reduction, which brackets the world. This bracketing, however, is the result of a decision. This is the paradox: one must have already been convinced by the reduction in order to perform it; that is to say, that one must already know that there is a conceptual sphere (the interconnecting web of linguistic meanings) that transcends the world in order to begin philosophy. The problem is not whether this conceptual sphere exists or not, but what is its origin. For Husserl it is the ideality of meaning itself that produces the conceptual sphere. Thus, social reality is the result of the conceptual sphere and not the other way around. The conceptual sphere falls back upon social practices and produces their reality, just as mathematical abstractions produce the thought in the mathematician's brain. But why is it not social reality, as the arena of the conflict of power, that produces the conceptual sphere, and no longer as connection of essences that have a unitary meaning in relation to one another, but whose meanings are continually in flux in relation to their function, and whose political force cannot be reduced to any objective content? The phenomenologist first of all sets the reality of social practices apart, and then finds the ideality of meaning (no one is saying that this ideality does not exist, but it is social practices that are its origin) and then in a second moment defines social reality in relation to them. The same operation is

present is Levinas's statement, which we referred to earlier, that the books of Judaism have their own proper language that is set apart from the institutions of Judaism, and which then fall back on these institutions and define them from outside of history. But institutions are far more complex than that are they not? Far more devious and cunning? Could it not be social practices that produce meaning and one that is always shifting as the conflict of forces within it change. And could we not also say this of the word God, even the God of Judaism? Is it legitimate to claim that there is *a* proper language to Judaism, which transcends its entire historical vicissitudes, or even that there is only one Judaism? But this is precisely what Levinas does argue for and from a phenomenological starting point.

The Transcendence of the Other and God

The important question is whether Levinas's commitment to Judaism indicates a break with phenomenology. It does not in two ways: first of all it is irrelevant to Levinas whether God exists in a realist sense (thus he follows the phenomenological reduction), but more importantly in terms of this contrast to Nietzsche, the meaning of the word God is abstracted from any social context. Thus, even though Levinas will argue that the significance of the word God lies outside the philosophical concept of God (and this might mistakenly lead us to think that we therefore have left phenomenology utterly behind) it does so only from within a *negative* phenomenological manoeuvre of a double reduction. First of all, you reduce the social and political context of the word's use, then its conceptual content to arrive a pure saying.

Let us first examine this double reduction in greater detail and then compare it to Nietzsche's approach in the next section. The word God, for Levinas, does not signify something real, but neither is it an objective representation. The religious significance of

God exceeds any ideational content and this is where the description exceeds intentional analysis, but not phenomenology, for there is no reason why phenomenology needs to be equated with intentional analysis. There can be for Levinas a phenomenology of the non-intentional. The word God is non-intentional not because there it has referent beyond the word, but the word itself breaks with referentiality. God cannot be subsumed under the concept of God. This would be a traditional negative theology, if it were not for the fact that it is as much a stepping back from the reality of God, as the idea of God. Negative theology rejects the idea of God for the sake of the reality of God, and then faces the problem of how one can testify to the existence of a God beyond words.

In the Western tradition, theology has always submitted itself to philosophy even when it believed that it had surmounted it. Theology appeared to face two alternatives: either the content of its faith could be contained within reason or it exceeded reason. But theology's double bind, for Levinas, is that even if it chooses to oppose reason, its other was *reason's* other. Thus negative theology is always the inverted image of positive theology, faith the inverted image of reason. Reason conceives of God in terms of the ground of the totality of being. The only route left to negative theology or faith, which demands its only uniqueness, is mysticism. Yet this mysticism is the result of reason's victory. For it has no words to speak with, since reason has already decided the limits of what is meaningful. Its meaninglessness is reason's meaninglessness and its silence is merely the other side of reason's speech.

Levinas's stepping back from the definition of God in Western philosophy is not retreat back into a religion that is certain of the existence of God, but to a tradition that has kept alive a significance of a word beyond every concept. This significance beyond the idea Levinas describes in the ethical relation to the Other. God is not present in this

relation, in the sense of hiding behind it, or of being its ultimate reference, rather the ethical relation is the manner in which there is significance to the word God beyond essence and existence, beyond both God's definition and supposed reality beyond this world. Such a God is not the same God as the God of the philosophers, which Levinas believes is the target of modern atheism. Here lies his philosophical justification. If atheism has only demolished the reality and ideality of God, then the God of ethics, which is the actual God of monotheism undistorted by its tutelage to metaphysics, remains untouched, for it is a God that is neither real nor an idea. This is a trajectory of a phenomenology pushed to its extreme: abstract from the real to expose the concept, abstract from the concept to expose the word.

The relation to God is present there as a relation to man. This is not a metaphor: there is a real presence of God in the Other. In my relation to the Other, I hear the Word of God. This is not a metaphor, this is not only extremely important it is true to the letter. I am not saying that the Other is God, but that in his Face I hear the Word of God.⁴

Of course it would be quite simple to say that this too is a definition of God. We no longer define God, for example, in terms of the transcendentals as the Medieval philosophers did, but as the ethical relation to the Other. But it is not in the description of the ethical relation from the position of an observer than Levinas finds God, but in the face of the Other as such, inasmuch as it exceeds any definition. Levinas will describe this exposure to the Other as a pure saying outside of any said. The speech of God belongs to this saying. The speech of God is not said by some one hidden in the clouds, but is expressed in the ethical response. There is no *ideatum* that would correspond to this saying.

It is within this context that we must understand Levinas's belief that there is a *phenomenological* defence of the word God beyond a merely personal commitment to religious belief. Traditional arguments for the existence or non-existence of God take place within an already constituted ontology. Either we can go from the definition of God to existence, or the existence of beings already presupposes the existence of God. For Levinas these arguments have nothing to do with God, but with a metaphysics, with a certain conception of the 'totality of beings'. We first of all begin with this idea and then end up with the concept of God. But the God of monotheism has nothing at all to do with this metaphysics. It names (though this name has no ultimate signified) as the prohibition of pronouncing the word God in Judaism testifies, the ethical relation to Other and it belongs to the 'performance' of this relation rather than to its description and yet it is an event, if we can even call it that, which takes place wholly outside of any social reality.

Nietzsche and the Critique of Values

The question that remains is whether this defence of the word God, its monotheistic ethical significance as opposed to its metaphysical definition, side steps Nietzsche's atheism. Levinas writes as though Nietzsche were almost on his side, as though the demolishing of this metaphysical God, this God that is the invention of grammar, would allow the true meaning of God to arise. Yet don't they start from a different place? Their problems are not the same. Thus Nietzsche destroys the God of metaphysics not to reveal its authentic meaning, but to uncover the social mechanism of which he believes it is indispensable part. If we interpret Nietzsche's statement that God is dead only as atheism, then we have not understood it all. We can be quite sure that Nietzsche was not in the least interested in whether God existed or not, rather he was

interested in the *values* which were expressed in such a belief, and their *extra-moral* origin. This is entirely different from phenomenology, which begins with meanings abstracted from their social milieu, since it absolves them from their origin in discursive practices. Levinas's work, rather than working against this abstraction within phenomenology is only its intensification, since the ethical relation to the Other is stripped of any relation to history whatsoever. The interruption of history is not through possibilities that are at this moment crushed by the present, but from a pure eschatological future.

Nietzsche's response would be that every concept of God, even Levinas's, has a history and one that cannot be thought from within the phenomenological starting point or even its reversal by Levinas. Language is neither the expression of thought, nor the irreducible alterity of the other, but the site of the confrontation of forces, of which our concepts are merely the result rather than its origin. The grave error of philosophy, Nietzsche warns us, is always to take what is last, as though it were first, and then to abstract it from the very process of its emergence. Language is never just the naming of things nor the addressing of an interlocutor, rather it is always the institution of an order. Language exists alongside a field of historical forces that shape, mould and even produce the subject, and its relation to others, which is merely presupposed in the phenomenological or linguistic starting point. The great difference between the phenomenologist and the genealogist is that the former separates language, idealises it, from discursive practice, whereas the latter, knows that syntax and semantics cannot be defined independently from a fluid and indeterminate zone of social conflict. The professor speaks to the student. What matters in this encounter is not so much what is said between them, the ideational content, nor even their own subjective positions in relation to this content, but the relation of power co-extensive with it. Language is first of all a pragmatics

of power, before it is a semantics and syntax: ‘one does not even speak so as to be believed, but to obey or to make obey.’⁵

Take Nietzsche’s example of punishment in the *Genealogy of Morals*.⁶ There are those, he writes, who think that the relation between an object and its meaning is simple, as though the object bore its meaning like a label. There are those, for example, who think that the meaning of punishment is revenge or deterrence. They then, in a second move, place this meaning as a final cause, as the origin of punishment itself. Thus we punish people in order to deter them from committing other crimes, or as an act of revenge either on behalf of the community as a whole or the individuals as victims of the crime. The correct historical method, however, shows that the emergence of an object and its meaning is not contemporaneous. Everything that has come into being can be used for different purposes and aims by different powers. The definition of punishment does not give us its essence, rather it is the external sign of what a power at a given time and place has stamped upon it. If we look at the history of punishment, therefore, we do not find some timeless essence that stands above changing circumstances, rather we discover a continually renewed history of interpretations. These interpretations do not exhibit a logical progression under the attraction of a telos, rather an object is an aggregate of discontinuous and heterogeneous elements which, Nietzsche emphasises, makes it completely ‘indefinable’ (*undefinierbar*). Only that which has no history could have an essence.⁷ The history of an object exceeds species definition not because it is beyond language, but because it consists of a constellation of discourses that have seized upon it and which are divergent and even anomalous to one another.

How might we apply this genealogical method to the word God? Nietzsche gives us such an example in the *Anti-Christ*.⁸ To understand the emergence (*die Entstehung*) of

Christianity, he argues, one must understand the soil from which it grew. This soil is Judaism. Christianity must not be understood as being opposed to Judaism, but as its 'logical conclusion'. Judaism is defined by Nietzsche as the falsification of all nature and reality. Christianity is a copy of this falsification only to a vastly greater extent. This falsification has in turn its own origin. It does not occur in isolation. All moralities emerge from within a network of relations and forces. Judaic-Christian morality is a 'no-saying' against the affirmation of life. What is it that affirms life? That which is 'well-constituted', powerful, beautiful and self-affirming', and it is this which is negated by the invention of a world beyond this world.

Judaism is to be understood as turning away from 'values of nature' (*die Naturwerte*). There are, according to Nietzsche, five stages to this process.⁹ Originally, especially in the time of the kingdom, Israel had a natural relation to all things. What does Nietzsche mean by 'natural' here? He means that their God expressed their own feeling of being powerful. God is an affirmation of their own feeling of righteousness. This first moment is a 'yes-saying'. The second moment was the alteration of this God type into the 'God of justice.' And this was a denaturalising of the idea of God. It no longer has anything to do with the realities of life. This God is a priestly conception of God. And now every piece of misfortune or fortune was the result of obeying or disobeying God. What better way could the priests have gained power, except by inventing such a concept? A God who demands and punishes, rather than gives help and advice. Here, for the first time, God becomes something abstract, something that is opposed to the natural conditions of life for a people. Now the people no longer express themselves in a God which affirms their life, but which negates it. No longer God, but a God-concept (*der Gottesbegriff*). The third moment was the re-interpretation, by the priest, of the whole of the historical past of

Israel in religious terms, such that this history became nothing more than a ‘mechanism for salvation’ (*ein Heils-Mechanismus*). The natural world order was replaced by the ‘moral world order’ (*der sittlichen Weltordnung*), in which every action of a people or an individual is measured by how much or how little it corresponds to the will of God. And who knows the will of God? The priest. In this development, all is measured by the values of the priest. Thus the greatest time of the Kingdom is said to be its decline. For the priests to falsify history in this manner, they needed a ‘revelation’, an exterior symbol of truth. They need a holy book, a scripture. This is the fourth moment. At this moment, of course, he (and it was always ‘he’) becomes indispensable. For who else can interpret the scriptures except the priest; who else will be able to say what the will of God is? The fifth moment is when every part of life, birth, marriage, sickness and death, must be interpreted in relation to how the priest interprets God’s will. The concept of sin is born. Sin only exists in a society where priests have the ultimate power.

The conclusion of this brief discussion is not to face the reader with a blunt choice between phenomenology and genealogy, but to show that their problems are quite different, and thus their defence of or attack upon God is quite different. For this reason, we can say that Levinas and Nietzsche never meet. For Levinas there is an ethical transcendence that exceeds the social field and thus there is a significance to God that is exterior to the conflict of forces. For Nietzsche, such a discourse from nowhere would be unbelievable and would merely be one more cunning manner in which power conceals itself. It follows from the missed encounter, that Levinas can never find a satisfactory response to Nietzsche’s atheism, for to do so would be to deny completely the transcendence of the ethical relation and this explains why Nietzsche’s genealogical critique is lost in his metaphysical one. Nietzsche is seen as merely the last in line destroyers of the God of

philosophy, of which Levinas himself can justly claim to belong. Nietzsche aim, however, is not merely to argue against the God of philosophy at the level of its meaning, but to delineate its origin, and thereby demonstrate its inseparability from the social institution of power in the manner in which it constructs different kinds of subjectivities.

¹ See, Dominique Janicaud, *Le tournant théologique de la phénoménologie française*. (Combas: Éditions de l'éclat; 1991), pp. 25-37.

² See for example David Boothroyd, "Levinas and Nietzsche", in *Philosophy Today*, Vol. 39, Winter 1995, pp. 345-357 and Silva Benso, "Levinas - Another Ascetic Priest", in *The Journal of the British Society of Phenomenology*, Vol. 27, No. 2, May 1996, pp. 137-156.

³ Quelle que soit l'opinion que l'on puisse avoir sur l'historicité des institutions que ses notions suggèrent (clericalism and the Temple – WL), il faut lire dans leur propre langage les livres où se pense la judaïsme, où se fixent les normes en lesquelles s'expriment sa vision du monde et son message. Avant toute histoire et toute sociologie, il faut déchiffrer le propre langage des textes. [Whatever opinion one might have about the historicity of the institutions which these notions suggest, we must read the books in which Judaism thinks itself in their own language, where the norms in which it expresses its vision of the world and its message are fixed. Before all history and sociology, we must interpret the proper language of these texts]. Emmanuel Levinas, *Du sacré au saint* (Paris, Minuit, 1977), p. 62.

⁴ La relation à Dieu y est présentée comme une relation à l'autre homme. Ce n'est pas une métaphore : en autrui il y a présence réelle de Dieu. Dans ma relation à autrui j'entends la Parole de Dieu. Ce n'est pas une métaphore, ce n'est pas seulement extrêmement important, c'est vrai à la lettre. Je ne dis pas qu'autrui est Dieu, mais que dans son Visage j'entends la Parole de Dieu. Emmanuel Levinas, *Entre nous*, (Paris: Grasset, 1991), p. 120

⁵ Le langage n'est même pas fait pour être cru, mais pour obéir et faire obéir. Gilles Deleuze, & Félix Guattari, , *Mille Plateaux*, (Paris: Minuit, 1980), p.

⁶ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Jenseits von Gute und Böse. Zur Genealogie der Moral*. Kritische Studienausgabe Herausgegeben von Giorgio Colli und Mazziano Montinari, KSA 5 (Berlin & New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1988), pp. 313-316.

⁷ Ibid., p. 317

⁸ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Der Fall Wagner Götzen-Dämmerung Der Antichrist Ecce homo Dionysos-Dithyramben Nietzsche contra Wagner*, Kritische Studienausgabe Herausgegeben von Giorgio Colli und Mazziano Montinari, KSA 6 (Berlin & New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1988), pp. 193-197

⁹ Ibid. p. 191.