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THE HISTORICAL GROUNDS  
OF THE NEW TRENDS IN PHENOMENOLOGY

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Alexander Schnell

THE PHENOMENOLOGICAL INFINITE

The phenomenological or transcendental status of [the idea of the infinite] is, if not inconceivable, at least absolutely exceptional. It shall seem as though in coming to save phenomenology, it would change its meaning in doing so.

J. Derrida (1954)

In the following paper, I will attempt to treat one of the fundamental concepts of contemporary phenomenology, that of the (phenomenological) “infinite”, which I will approach from a point of view independent of any so-called “theological turn”. This concept is fundamental if only for the simple reason that it calls into question, as N. Depraz has already pointed out for some time, the tacit link between “givenness” and “intuition”. But it is above all, and quite obviously, one of the concepts that allows us to connect “phenomenology” to “metaphysics” in a very relevant way: might we even go so far as to say, as Derrida seems to insinuate in the opening quote, that the infinite – as a metaphysical concept – allows us to “save” phenomenology?

In the present homage to Tengelyi, I will take his conception of a “phenomenological infinite” as my point of departure in order to examine whether it confirms the results of an *Auseinandersetzung* that is absolutely decisive for this question of the relation between “phenomenology” and “metaphysics” – namely, the dispute between Richir and Levinas, whose object was precisely this very notion of the infinite. It will be thereby a matter of re-asking the question of the status of “finitude” such as it was

62 first introduced by Heidegger<sup>1</sup> and against which these major representatives of contemporary phenomenology have made arguments that deserve to be placed front and center.

What were Tengelyi's last philosophical words? He was working out a "diacritical phenomenology" – the final complement to his "meta-ontological transcendentalism" – whose goal is to promote a phenomenological concept of the "infinite" understood as an "open infinite". Let us retrace what this fundamentally means.

It was a question of "diacritical" "system" or "value" first in Merleau-Ponty, and then in Richir. But it is a concept that can also and especially serve as the guiding concept of the project of Tengelyi himself – from *The Wild Region in Life-History* all the way up to his last book. In what sense does the concept of the phenomenological infinite determine this project of a "diacritically turned" phenomenology?

Tengelyi's point of departure is the (Husserlian) idea that the infinite is not a simple "object" for thought, but a formal concept (as a "category of experience") or, more precisely, a categorial form, to which, correlatively, a categorial intuition corresponds. According to Tengelyi's enlightening – albeit "simplified" – formulation, "the infinite, according to the phenomenological conception, comes into the world along with us"<sup>2</sup>.

In Husserl, the infinite effectively is already at play in the identification between the experienced thing (*Erfahrungsding*) and the idea in the Kantian sense: a *continuum* of *infinite* appearing (of an appearing thing) can, according to him, be self-evidently (although *inadequately*) given. This by no means amounts to compromising the *reality* of the thing, but for him it guarantees the fact that the thing can be *perfectly determined*. This structure of the thing – namely, its appearing within a system of infinite possibilities – is precisely what constitutes, in Tengelyi's eyes, a "diacritical system", which he places at the heart of his project of a "diacritical phenomenology".

But since, for Husserl, this characterization of the infinite system of possible experiences as a Kantian regulative idea is always linked to the "I can", and therefore to the power of the ego which presents itself as "habit", it runs the risk – at least in Tengelyi's opinion – of leading to an unacceptable idealism, insofar as this view would limit the horizon of experience to a simple objective correlate of consciousness. In this way, diacritical phenomenology assigns itself the task of *differentiating* this system *at once* from the totality of the thing's being *and* from the total reality of the world. For Tengelyi, this implies that the idea of the thing being completely determined

in the world in itself must be abandoned. The consequence of this is therefore the conception of the "*open infinity* of the world".

However, despite what was just said, this conception is also found in Husserl. As Tengelyi rightly points out, Husserl wonders in §64 of the *Ideen II*, on the basis of the idea of the emergence of new properties of things (Tengelyi is thinking especially of cultural and social predicates based on natural objects<sup>3</sup>), whether the "infinite" character of the world does not signify an "openness" that puts into question the idea of a transfinite infinity<sup>4</sup>. In other words, things have an "open essence". What this notion of open essence means is precisely that things are not completely determined – and it explains exactly why Husserl turns his back on the Cantorian idea of the transfinite.

The name Tengelyi gives to the argument that has to be mobilized to this end is an argument "having to do with a theory of otherness" (and which we might also call an "alterological argument"). It concerns the *theoretical* aspects of otherness, in particular the possibility that things possess of *becoming-other*. Tengelyi sees in this possibility a "dynamization" of the *continuum* of infinite appearing. In this way, it is more particularly the *tendency*-aspect of the "tendency to agreement" that is emphasized.

But in Tengelyi's work this emphasis placed on the indeterminacy at the heart of his understanding of phenomenology remains in turn somewhat under-determined. One way of combining a consideration of the theoretical aspects of the alterological argument with the implicit presuppositions of this dimension of indeterminacy can be found in Richir's discussion with Levinas at the beginning of the 1990s<sup>5</sup>. Tengelyi was obviously familiar with this discussion, but the question arises as to whether we might not get more out of it than what *Welt und Unendlichkeit* took from it. What I am wondering above all is whether the idea that the infinite comes into the world "along with us" is really tenable all the way and what the consequences are for phenomenology, in general, and for its relation to metaphysics, in particular. Let us therefore examine more closely what understanding of the phenomenological infinite results from this debate.

Levinas' fundamental philosophical project in his second masterpiece (to which Richir's reading is entirely devoted) is, as its name indicates, concerned with thinking the "otherwise than being". Its task is to think about a radical otherness with respect to "being", to "essence", as Levinas says (he would have preferred to write: "essance"), i.e., first of all, a radical otherness with respect to its primary determination which is the fact of its *appearing*. In short, this thinking about a radical otherness aims to thematize a basic "unappearance".

64 Now, the paradox for Levinas is that what is at play in this very thinking of a radical otherness, and *despite this unappearance*, is the origin of the ethical which is the site of the intrigue of the human (and I will come back to this shortly). Thus, the first thing we notice is quite remarkable: there is, at the heart of this characterization of the phenomenological infinite, a *link* between unappearance and the origin of the human. “The origin of the human” – here, this means: the origin of that which links the self to the other.

This link must be analyzed at the level of the two terms that it involves. First, it is here that the intrigue of the *self* is at stake, of the reflexive accusative that precedes any nominative. But this is also an original trauma (*cf.* the Richirian “sublime ‘moment’” that will be discussed later) which invests this “self” with a “positivity in responsibility” that establishes from the very start a relation to the other person. More specifically, it is a matter of a *double* positivity. First of all (at the level of the other), of an answer that answers a “non-thematizable provocation”. And secondly (at the lever of the self), of a debt that “grows as it is paid off” and ends up being a self-infinitizing gap out of which “the glory of the infinite shines”. And yet, everything – i.e. every link between the “self” and the “other” – is concentrated in this divine infinite insofar as it renders possible a “coming toward me” as a “departure that lets me carry out a movement towards my neighbor” or still “a retreat *into the self* that is an exile in the self” (AE, 135). The divine infinite is then the source of two interdependent double movements: 1/ a mutual “*Anstoß*”, coming from the outside (from an unthematizable, unapparent beyond), and from a mobile gap that infinitizes itself “from within”; and 2/ a “coming” (to “oneself”) and a “departure” (from “oneself”), establishing the fundamental relation between the self and the other.

On the basis of this, Richir proposes a remarkable reconstruction of the ground covered by *Otherwise than Being*, one which is centered on the notions of “diachrony”, “substitution”, “*illeitas*” and “propheticism”.

*Diachrony.* The principal site of this “double double-movement” is diachrony as a “trace of the infinite”. This diachrony is a beyond that is also an immanence. The task is to “retrace” it, to “show the meaning immanent to the Saying before the thematization of the Said” (AE55). But in reality, “to show this meaning” means “to leave the diachronic blinking in the impossibility of its synchronization in the stasis of time and of essence”. In other words, it is a “retracing” that does not arrive at a new “sphere” – a transcendental or phenomenological sphere immanent to *or* beyond the objective or appearing sphere – but at a “passivity that is more passive than any passivity”, which is responsible for the irreducible singularity of the

“self” – and this means: a singularity that is ontologically unidentifiable –, and so at a passivity in which dia-chrony “passes” a time that is in turn irreducible to the Same and, thereby, a time that properly characterizes the self. This singularity is anchored in this “immemorial passivity, outside the presence of any presence, like some One beyond being [...], the self in infinite flight” (PI, 248<sup>6</sup>).

*Substitution.* It is necessary to insist on this interdependence, this deep bond, between the “dimension” (since it does not constitute an autonomous “sphere”) of the “Saying” (a dimension that Levinas refuses to call “transcendental”, whereas Richir, on the contrary, recommends the use of this concept) and the singularity of the “self”. This “dimension” is not completely “a-subjective” (Patočka), i.e., devoid of any “self”. Nor is it a matter of a “neutral” givenness (in the form of an “*es gibt*”) that would be in need of “appropriation” in the *Ereignis* (Heidegger). The thrust of Levinas’ idea – which Richir understood perfectly – consists in establishing that the only way out of Husserl’s (so-called) solipsism is to establish the way in which language can relate to something *other* than itself. And in order to do this, recourse to a “neutral” “a-subjectivity” is not the appropriate solution. What is required, on the other hand, is a “pure, anarchical, immemorial givenness, a pure givenness to the other than “I” which becomes, through the reflexive ‘saying to itself’, the hostage of the other; givenness in virtue only of which, to live on this gap and this pre-original abyss, language can mean something *other* than itself, outside of the tauto-logy of essence or of *Ereignis*” (PI, 248). Fundamental givenness – before the “there is (*es GIBT*)” – is then a givenness to the other of the “self” which the latter does not under-gird, as a *sub-stance*, but for which other it *sub-stitutes* itself<sup>7</sup>. This is the meaning of the expression according to which the “self” in the accusative case, i.e. the reflexive, becomes the “hostage” of the other: language can *say* something (else, something *other*) on the condition that the self *substitutes* itself literally for the other (person), in other words, that it *become another*. And so it becomes clear why Levinas refuses to call this dimension “transcendental”: this term refuses, according to him, not the welcoming of the other (it might do this too, even though Levinas goes further), but the possibility of thinking the self as sub-stitution for the other. In *Otherwise than Being* Levinas takes full account of the priority or the precedence of being-for-the-other person over the Heideggerian being-in-the-world: the sub-stitution – which Richir thinks here according to an understanding that does not (yet) give the priority to the ethical (which is echoed by the Tengelyi’s perspective sketched at the beginning of these remarks) – is the

66 condition, and indeed the transcendental and (at the same time) alterological condition, of meaning saying *itself* and saying something *other* than itself.

*Illeitas*. But substitution is not limited to openness to the other, and in particular to that of the alterological dimension of meaning. The self, in a radicalization to the second power, a radicalization of substitution – which was already in turn radicalization of recurrence – radicalization of radicalization, is “identity in diastasis”. This means, on the one hand, that, in this radicalization, the self *undoes all relational structure* – in particular that which links it to the other person –, it absolves itself not only of the other, but also of itself. The self falls “short of itself, in the diastasis of itself which opens as diachrony” (PI, 250). What opens thereby, on the other hand, is a gap that manifests an “unrepresentable trace, handiwork of the infinite”, a “trace of the infinite”. But this trace is the trace of an immemorial “departure”, which has then always already begun, and which is none other than that of the immemorial passivity discussed earlier.

It is important at this point to get a clear grasp on the status of the infinite that emerges here. The infinite bears the name “*illeitas*”. This term mixes together “il” in French and “*ille*” (“this one”) in Latin, meaning the neutral “it”, which is (among other things, at least) that of Blanchot’s narrative writing, marking the double-movement of self-distancing of the character and of the self-decentering of the work itself in writing, on the one hand; and the “*ille*” of an absolute transcendence (in the Jewish tradition), which is sharply distinct from any assimilating tendency of God’s which is, according to Levinas, characteristic of Christian rational theology, on the other. And for Levinas, *illeitas* does not give itself in presence, it indeed manifests itself at the very most as *trace*, or more exactly “as trace of the retreat that the infinite as infinite carries out before coming” (AE, 148). Thus, the not-exclusively-ethical meaning of substitution – as radicalization of recurrence – appears more clearly here<sup>8</sup>: it is “the most radical *abandonment* to passivity, in which it is not the other as another *self* that obsesses and persecutes me, but rather the trace of the retreat of the infinite [...] in which ‘the self absolves itself of itself [...], beyond the I of me *myself*, the Infinite’ (PI, 251).

What is this God called “*illeitas* of the infinite”? God “is not” in me nor in the other [...], for he ‘is’ not, quite simply, always already and always again elsewhere, in the immemorial trace of his retreat”. Levinas thinks the diastasis of the self together with the retreat of God. And taking our lead from the Richirian commentary on Levinas, we can think the “creaturely condition” of the self (which consists, as Levinas had established it in *To-*

*tality and Infinity*, in “tracing back from a condition to what precedes that condition”)<sup>9</sup> and the idea “that the original expiation is converted into ‘expiation of being’” (AE, 151): insofar as Levinas says about expiation that it “coincides in the final analysis with the extra-ordinary and dia-chronic pouring out of the same into the other” (AE, 187), this means that it is in the retreat of the infinite that the unity of this quest for the unconditional before the conditioned and the abandonment of the one in favor of the other can be accomplished. It seems that “expiation of being” then means: abandoning the weight of being in favor of assuming the weight of the other.

This entire idea can again be expressed in the following way: having a relation with the infinite supposes an understanding that the search for the unconditional means thinking the other, rather than the same – keeping in mind that the condition of this thinking of the other is substitution (for the other) as radicalization of the recurrence (of the self). And thought concerning the infinite does not offer any positive determination to the latter, but makes it appear precisely as retreat.

*Propheticism*. The question must still be asked as to how the divine word, the speech of transcendence, can come to expression, given that “God is not” and therefore cannot be presupposed to exist prior to his manifestation. To answer this question, Levinas introduces the idea of “propheticism”. Richir summarizes this notion in the following terms:

“The status of prophetic speech is entirely exceptional, since, rather than being a return to the voice already heard which would be a syn-chronization of the going with this very coming-back, it is on the contrary a primordial going, a going that is without reservation, open in the diastasis or the de-phasing of the identity of the self, which, by its pre-originary advance in relation to this coming-back, is always already ahead of it, only allowing it to get a late start, [...] as glory of the infinite, [...] infinitization of the infinite, irreducible *in excess* of the coming-back.”<sup>10</sup>

Propheticism is a type of speech – a philosophical type of speech – that deploys itself in and out from the diastasis of the self, as the “infinitization of the infinite”, which does not rely on a prior “vision” (having to do with a “revelation”), but which *first opens* – as this “primordial going” and in a literally “pre-originary” way – *the space of meaning that reflexive thought is only capable of grasping after the fact*. Prophetic speech is the originary carrying out of an opening of meaning that always already precedes any transcendent authority and is *not measurable*, therefore, *by the standard of any preexisting reality whatsoever*. Insofar as it is an answer in absence of

68 the question, propheticism is the voice of phenomenological construction (properly understood).

Once Richir has masterfully laid out and identified this framework, he moves on to its *critique*. This mobilizes – in order to enable us to grasp the meaning of the phenomenological infinite at the level of the “sublime” as Richir understands it – two fundamental concepts: that of “symbolic tautology” and that of “symbolic instituting”.

Richir’s fundamental criticism of Levinas consists in the idea that the openness of *illegitimas*, of transcendence, of the infinite, in the radicalization of substitution and its being put into speech through prophecy, presents, despite everything, an *insufficient circularity* (or an insufficient circular “re-peating”). This circularity supposes that which is contained in prophetic speech finds, as it were, and despite the emphasis placed on the theoretical aspect of these elaborations, its guarantee in the transcendent infinite which is a “*human possibility*”. Richir himself proposes a different sort of circularity, which he calls “symbolic tautology” whose proper “place” is “symbolic instituting” – which bears the “phenomenological infinite” as Richir himself understands it (and we shall immediately see in what terms).

More precisely, the Richirian critique contains three parts. First, he proposes an “extension” or an “enlargement” of phenomenality to the infinite, to a phenomenological *apeiron* which is *distinct from the Levinassian infinite*. The situation is a paradoxical one: on the one hand, Richir calls this Levinassian infinite “the absolutely infinite infinity”, “outside of phenomenality”, but, on the other hand, through the association of this latter with the ethical horizon, and so to *human finitude*, he criticizes it for not being capable of accounting for “absolute transcendence”. For Richir, and this is the second point, this “infinite” does not become effectively conceivable unless a “sublime” moment can be detected in it, i.e., if one admits the “unimaginable” status of the infinite (opening the horizon of *phantasia* that Richir was to exploit in the 2000s). There is reason, then, to take the measure of “that which is *truly* sublime” (PI, 257) or, we might add, of that which is *truly* infinite, beyond any circumscription by a human horizon. This does not mean (thirdly) that we should throw out the baby with the bathwater, that is, that this abandonment of any attachment to the human must not lead to an “operative ‘rationality’ that is supposed to function on its own” (PI, 259): indeed, he asks himself the question how we can account for it, how we can “say it or ‘know’ it”, how we can, in other worlds, respect “the minimum requirements of phenomenology” (Desanti), while renounc-

ing this ethical approach at the same time. The answer for Richir consists in the need to admit the *symbolic tautology* of the infinite outside of phenomenality. To understand the meaning of this notion, it is useful to refer to the first chapter, which is very instructive and enlightening on this topic, of *The Crisis of Meaning and Phenomenology*.

The notion of “symbolic tautology”, Richir explains, refers first of all to that of “symbolic institution”. The latter expresses the idea that man is not the “master of meaning”. This opens onto the problem of knowing how signifying in general is connected to the significance of the real, and therefore the significance of reality. It is precisely “symbolic tautology” that solves this problem: it is “the place of symbolic identity between the symbolic ‘system’ and the world” (CSP, 12), therefore, in other words, between the symbolic and the real. The whole problem being not to reduce this “identity” to a fruitless circularity.

How can such a reduction be avoided? By understanding that this place must be understood in the light of *another* place, which is “the enigmatic place that is supposed to contain within itself the *meaning of its meaning*” (CSP, 14), and therefore the place of “*truth*, i.e., of a certain adequation or a certain adjustment, to be sought, between its significance and that which surpasses it from what is beyond it while at the same time nourishing it” (CSP, 14 *sq.*). The significance is to be found in the fundamental relation to that which surpasses it while at the same time nourishing it – this is the precise meaning of the “symbolic tautology of truth” insofar as it is not the expression of a fallacious circularity. How should we understand this “beyond”? It is a relation that manifests “at the same time as *itself*, *the beyond* that give it its meaning” (CSP, 15), so a sort of redoubling of the real. But the distinctive characteristic of this “redoubling” is that it is not the duplication of an order instituted in some other *positive* order, which is supposed to be institutive, but that it opens up “the true place of the beyond” which is “a sort of pure harmonic *logos*”, playing “music of nothingness with itself”, “alone able to deliver the meaning of meaning” (CSP, 19). Thus, the meaning of meaning “is not of the same order as meaning, and despite this there is an enigmatic complicity between them, such that symbolic tautology seems to hold meaning from the vantage point of a meaning of meaning that escapes into *non-giveness*” (CSP, 20). This “redoubling” he mentions opens onto an order than cannot be given, but which instead uncovers what Richir calls “the *phenomenological dimension*, the *phenomenological horizon*, inscrutable by means of *any instituted language*” (CSP, 23).

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This phenomenological dimension, this “order” about which we cannot say that it is “higher” – it is rather a beyond that, once more, is at the same time an immanence that therefore escapes givenness – *generates plural meanings*. In this way, Richir re-appropriates a famous understanding of Kant, by affirming that propositions stating symbolic tautology must be synthetic *a priori* propositions.

As far as the fundamental attributes of symbolic tautology of truth insofar as it opens onto the beyond are concerned, it is important to remember that it is characterized by non-givenness; that it generates (multiple) new meanings; and also that it is indeterminate and indeterminable (“unless it is through the formal, self-referential saying of the harmonic *logos*” (CSP, 23)).

But this observation of the “phenomenological requirements” and the explanation of the way in which we can “say and ‘know’” that which symbolic tautology expresses demands even more radically, Richir affirms, to assign it its “place” or “site” which is none other, as I have already mentioned, than “symbolic instituting”. Indeed, Richir writes:

“With respect to the enlargement and re-founding of phenomenology that we are proposing, the ‘site’ of this symbolic tautology would be what we are calling a ‘symbolic instituting’, which is anarchic inasmuch as, in contrast to the God of onto-theology, by itself it institutes nothing of the order of being, but is only the bearer of the question or of the enigma of the identity without a concept (of *ipseity*) that is human identity. And this distance from what arises out of the *instituted* symbolic order [...] can reveal itself to us only in what we have named the *phenomenological sublime* (PI, 256).

For Richir, it is then the sublime as ultimate dimension of the infinite that is up to the task of answering the enigma of human identity. “The Other *qua* Other [...] only maintains itself as such because, already, behind its phenomenality, but also, we might add, in it as its blinking, the Infinite is “at work” as the dynamic trace of its own flight, as the ‘gasp for air’ or the “emptying of being” which it leaves in its absence. The Infinite, the site of a symbolic tautology that is one of a kind, is that very thing which, in the field of encounter and of proximity, can *be experienced phenomenologically in the being-out-of-phase* of that which, each time, seems to appear from the face, with respect to that which withdraws from it to infinity, sucking it into estrangement and absence” (PI 257).

Now, to understand the exact meaning of this “symbolic instituting” (in relation, therefore, with the “sublime”) and of what it implies for the under-

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standing of the phenomenological infinite, one must go beyond the sketches begun in “Phenomenon and Infinity”. In his last writings – and we see once more then that the question of infinity receives the honors it deserves at the *end* –, Richir gathers together (without however explicitly establishing their link) the different fundamental elements of the preceding developments in the conceptual elaboration that is central to his final work – and which he calls the “sublime ‘moment’”<sup>11</sup>. His last works – especially the ones entitled “*Variations*” – deal with this concept almost exclusively. In the following I will rely on the very valuable sketch “Architectonic Analytic and the Transcendental Phenomenological Genesis of the Self” in his work that appeared in 2010<sup>12</sup>.

Among these elements, one in particular must be mentioned: the question of the origin of the human (and its link to unappearance (and so to phenomenology in the Richirian sense)), the question of the genesis of the self and of its relation to the other person (which prefigures what Richir would call “transcendental inter-facticity”), substitution understood as the fundamental element in virtue of which meaning “says” something other than itself (and is not simply its own meaning) and the generative quality of the infinitization of the infinite. Now, the point of the “sublime ‘moment’” is to account for the relation to the real and the understanding of it that we have – and all of this outside of both an *ontological* perspective and a *legitimizing* perspective. This perspective implies a decisive relation to “absolute transcendence” in an *infinite* flight – and this is where Richir’s final word on the infinite takes shape. Here is how he characterizes this “sublime ‘moment’”:

“In its phenomenological depths [and at the ‘starting point’ of the Richirian analysis], the sublime ‘moment’ is the ‘moment’ when, in the most archaic register of the phenomenological field in which schematism and affectivity are blended and interlaced, there is, first of all – and this ‘first of all’ is a genetic one – a hyperbole of affectivity and schematic interruption, i.e., an overgrowth of affectivity in intensity that puts the latter in excess, condensing (*systole*) it into a super-dense and extra-schematic ‘core’, such that, in a second, equally genetic, step, what comes out of it [...] is affectivity’s return to itself. A surprising, unexpected, instantaneous return that opens up a non-temporal and non-spatial *gap* between the affectivity and this excess [...] This excess, then, in turn initiates the schematic *diastole* of this gap by means of its gap [...], and all at once makes absolute transcendence<sup>13</sup> blink phenomenologically as an absolute (non-spatial) ‘outside’ of the *question* of meaning.”<sup>14</sup>



In this conceptual constellation (I would say: in *this schema*), the relation between thinking (consciousness) and being, mediated precisely by an absent infinite, contains three moments<sup>15</sup>: the condensation into a superdense affection of a self (the emergence of a literally unthinkable “proto-being”<sup>16</sup>), the opening of an absolute transcendence (in infinite flight) and the reschematization of the schematism (a sort of “resetting” of thinking that had been interrupted by the hyperbole of affectivity). We might see in this an answer to the “concept-light-being” schema by means of which Fichte had already tried, in his 1804 *Wissenschaftslehre* (second version), to exhibit the fundamental principle of the transcendental correlation of being and thinking. In this response, Richir eliminates the fundamental legitimizing principle of transcendental knowledge (which Fichte names “*Soll*” implying, according to Richir, an unjustified ontological argument). He eliminates it precisely because he refuses the legitimating perspective for phenomenology. For Richir, phenomenology is looking to understand, not to legitimate. And in this respect it is to the infinite (at the heart of the “sublime ‘moment’”) that the essential function belongs: For the Fichtean configuration (which weds so to speak the ontological argument with legitimizing reflexivity), Richir substitutes one in which absolute transcendence, in its retreat, in its *infinite flight*, opens – as “absolute outside” – onto the question of *meaning*, and causes the self to emerge (by virtue of affectivity’s entering into contact with itself thanks to the above-mentioned opening of a gap between affectivity and excess) and constitutes the origin of the human.

To summarize. What are the main axes that emerge from these reflections on the phenomenological infinite? The opening question, at least implicitly, was how the infinite can be held and maintained in the phenomenological field of correlation (which is manifestly finite) – a question which, let it be mentioned in passing, echoes (although a bit differently) the perspective of “speculative realism”, which justifies its reserves about correlationism precisely by the so-called impossibility of accounting for the absolute (“after” and “beyond” “finitude”) in the framework of transcendental correlation. Be that as it may, a coherent line of progressive detachment seems to be able to be identified in the territory that has just been covered: while Tengelyi was seeking to keep the concept of the infinite within the limits of a “categorical form” the *indetermination* of which he emphasized, Levinas conceived of it as a “trace” of its own “retreat” opening onto a “radical otherness” which is in the final analysis incompatible with phenomenological correlationism. Richir, finally, goes even further, for, in his eyes, Levinas’ ethical approach confines the infinite to a human perspective that must in

turn be challenged. This, according to him, demands – beyond the need to extend phenomenology to the *apeiron*, like Tengelyi rightly aims to do –, taking seriously the “infinite flight” of absolute transcendence, which is the condition of a gap that first opens up meaning, ipseity and even humanity. But does this not mean, finally, that with the infinite what we are dealing with is a limit-concept that causes the inside of the phenomenological field to implode in the direction of a metaphysical perspective? Must we not see in this a metaphysical tendency inherent in phenomenology, on the simple condition that it be pushed to its ultimate consequences in a rigorous way – which would vindicate Derrida insofar as this metaphysical “conversion” would effectively change its entire meaning? The conversion of meaning involves the question of whether, after all, “open essences” can do without transcendence or, on the contrary, what is connected to this (insofar as absolute transcendence refers to the infinite), whether the phenomenological infinite is not rather at the heart of phenomenology itself. As long as phenomenology interrogates itself about its own limits, it shall be faced with this question that, at the same time, concentrates within itself a decisive aspect of the question of the meaning of being.

### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> For an elaboration on this first problematic, cf. M. Richir, *Phantasia, imagination, affectivité*, 237 sq. (the paragraph is entitled “Fini et infini”).
- <sup>2</sup> WU, 535.
- <sup>3</sup> The examples he gives are those of temples, villages and towns built directly out of hewn boulders and rocks.
- <sup>4</sup> *Ideen II*, 299.
- <sup>5</sup> See “Phénomène et infini”, in *Lévinas*, L’Herne, 1991 (cited as “PI”).
- <sup>6</sup> As Richir clarifies: “That which, within the self, in its recurrence, is before the self, is likely already, as an immemorial anarchy, the infinite that calls and inspires the self’s infinite flight” (PI, 250) (*cf.* below).
- <sup>7</sup> And the condition of this substitution is recurrence (whose “movement” is “persecution”), *i.e.*, an incessant “searching for oneself, for one’s non-conceptual, non-ontological identity, for one’s irreplaceable unity [...] for a self that is not the self that is already identified to oneself in accordance with a stasis in self-consciousness” (PI, 248). Another aspect of the infinite analyzed here is expressed in the idea that this search is incessant – on this topic, Richir speaks of an “infinite recurrence of the self – an infinite regression” (*ibid.*).
- <sup>8</sup> This non-exclusively ethical reading – which I share with Richir – can be extended, this time against what Richir affirms, to a reading that is neither theological nor religious. For this, it is necessary and sufficient to recall the definition of

- 74 religion Levinas gives in *Totalité et infini*: “We suggest naming religion the bond that is set up between the Same and the Other without constituting a totality” (TI, 10), which appears clearly to allow for a non-religious understanding of “religion”.
- <sup>9</sup> TI, 58.
- <sup>10</sup> PI, 255.
- <sup>11</sup> While “the sublime” had already been addressed in Richir’s work from the 1980s and 90s, the phrase “sublime ‘moment’” appears for the first time, to my knowledge, in terms of “the experience of the sublime” in the last chapter of *Fragments phénoménologiques sur le temps et l’espace*. For the “sublime ‘moment’” properly speaking, see in particular *Fragments phénoménologiques sur le langage*, p. 93 sq. (cited as “FPL”).
- <sup>12</sup> VSS
- <sup>13</sup> In many other places Richir emphasizes that this absolute transcendence is “in infinite flight” (cf. for example *Sur le sublime et le soi. Variations II*, 125 or *Propositions buissonnières*, 10).
- <sup>14</sup> VSS, 197 sq.
- <sup>15</sup> See especially FPL, 77.
- <sup>16</sup> Let us note, in order to be perfectly precise, that the self, strictly speaking, “is” not, or at least it cannot be presupposed as being always already constituted: it is neither positional, nor intentional, and it is neither fixed nor stable.

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**QU’EST-CE QUE VIVRE SUR PLUSIEURS  
PORTÉES À LA FOIS? SENS ET  
PERTINENCE D’UNE ARCHITECTONIQUE  
PHÉNOMÉNOLOGIQUE**

**1. La spécificité paradoxale de l’idéalisme  
transcendantal phénoménologique**

D’aucuns auront souvent reproché à Husserl de « s’enfermer » dans l’idéalisme. Mais qu’est-ce que cela peut bien vouloir dire? Cet idéalisme dans lequel l’esprit de la phénoménologie aurait sombré après des débuts prometteurs porterait atteinte à l’*altérité* des choses, des autres sujets et du monde. À cet égard, l’*a priori* de corrélation constituerait un empêchement fondamental pour penser le sens de l’altérité. Or nous nourrissons la ferme conviction que derrière le sens d’un « idéalisme transcendantal *phénoménologique* » se cache, justement, une position philosophique d’un tout autre ordre, dont on n’a pas toujours mesuré la rupture avec l’idéalisme classique et, plus fondamentalement, avec le débat, classique, réalisme-idéalisme.

C’est à ne pas avoir dûment réfléchi le sens profond de l’idéalisme transcendantal phénoménologique que toute une myriade de malentendus et faux débats sont venus à émerger. Pour le dire en quelques mots: si l’idéalisme transcendantal au sens de la phénoménologie ne se réduit pas à être le simple opposé du réalisme métaphysique, c’est que, en un sens, il ne se situe pas du tout sur le même plan. C’est bien pour cela que, comme on le verra, il renvoie dos à dos réalisme et idéalisme métaphysiques<sup>1</sup>; et c’est bien cela qui fait tout le sens du changement de coordonnées que promet la réduc-