

Foreword

The various texts assembled in this volume represent an investigation into the possibility—or even the fact—of understanding the word “God” as a significant word. This investigation was carried out independently of the problem of the existence or nonexistence of God; independently of the decision to be made in the wake of this alternative, and also independently of the decision concerning the sense or nonsense of this alternative itself. What is sought here is the *phenomenological concreteness* in which this signification could or does signify, even if it cuts across all phenomenality,¹ for this *cutting across* could not be stated in a purely negative fashion and as an apophantic negation. It is a matter of describing the phenomenological “circumstances” surrounding it, their positive conjuncture, and something like the concrete “staging” of what gets expressed in the abstract.

The attentive reader will probably notice that our theme leads to questions less “gratuitous” than one might imagine given its initial formulation. This is not only due to the importance that the description of the meaning attached to the name or the word “God” can take on for him who is concerned to recognize or contest—in the language of the Revelation taught or preached by positive religions—that it was indeed God who spoke, and not an evil genius or a politics hidden beneath a false name. This concern is, however, already itself philosophical.

Questions relative to God are not resolved by answers in which the interrogation ceases to resonate or is wholly pacified. The investigation could not progress, here, in a straight line. To the difficulties of the space we are exploring, there is probably always to be added the blunders and

slowness of the explorer. Be that as it may, the book we present appears in the form of discrete studies which have not been brought together by a continuous writing. Thus we have borne witness to the stages of an itinerary which often lead back to the departure point. Along the way there also arise texts in which the path itself is surveyed, its perspectives glimpsed, and bearings taken. We have arranged the various essays according to the chronology of their composition. It is possible—and useful—to give the argument in a few pages at the threshold of this collection, however.

One wonders whether it is possible to speak legitimately of God without striking a blow against the absoluteness [*absoluité*] that his word seems to signify. What is it to have become conscious of God? Is it to have included him in a knowledge [*savoir*] which assimilates him, in an experience that remains—whatever its modalities—a learning and a grasping? And is not the infinity or total alterity or novelty of the absolute thus given back to immanence, back to the totality which the “I think” of “transcendental apperception” embraces, back to the system to which knowledge leads or tends across universal history? Is not the meaning of this extraordinary name of God in our vocabularies contradicted by this inevitable restitution to immanence—to the point of belying the coherence of this sovereign signifying [*signifier*] and reducing its name to a pure *flatus vocis*?

Yet what else could one seek than consciousness and experience—what else than knowledge—beneath thought, such that in welcoming the novelty of the absolute it did not, by this very welcome, strip the absolute of its novelty?² What is this other thought that—as neither assimilation nor integration—would neither bring the absolute in its novelty back to the “already known,” nor compromise the novelty of the new by deflowering it in the correlation between thought and being which thinking itself finds? A thought would be required that was no longer constructed as a relationship binding the thinker to what is thought. Or we would need, in this thought, a relation without correlatives, a thought not held to the rigorous correspondence between what Husserl called *noesis* and *noema*, a thought not held to the visible’s adequacy to the intention it should respond to in the intuition of the truth. A thought would be required in which the very metaphors of vision and aiming would no longer be legitimate.

Impossible requirements! Unless they were echoed by what Descartes

called the idea-of-the-infinite-in-us, that is, by a thought thinking beyond what it is able to contain in the finitude of its *cogito*; by an idea that God—according to Descartes’s way of expressing himself—would have placed in us. An exceptional idea, a unique idea, and, for Descartes, the *thinking of God* [*penser à Dieu*].³ In its phenomenology, this is a thinking that does not let itself be reduced, without remainder, to a subject’s act of consciousness, or to pure thematizing intentionality. Contrary to the ideas which always remain on the scale of the “intentional object,” or on that of their *ideatum*, and so exert a hold on it; contrary to the ideas by which thinking progressively grasps the world, the idea of the Infinite would contain more than it was able to do. It would contain more than its capacity as a *cogito*. Thought would think in some manner beyond what it thinks. In its relation to what ought to be its “intentional” correlate, thought would also be *deported*, falling through, not arriving at an end [*une fin*] or at the finite [*du fini*]. Yet it is necessary to distinguish, on the one hand, between the pure failure of the intentional aim that reaches no end, for this would still belong to finality or to the famous teleology of the “transcendental consciousness” destined to an end and, on the other hand, the “deportation” or transcendence beyond every end and every finality. The latter is a thought of the absolute in which the absolute is not reached as an end, for that would still have signified finality and finitude. An idea of the Infinite would be a thought disengaged from consciousness, not according to the negative concept of the unconscious, but according to the thought that is perhaps most profoundly thought; that of dis-inter-estedness which is a relationship without hold on a being, which is not an anticipation of being—rather, a pure patience. As de-ference in passivity, it would be beyond all that which is assumed; it would be a de-ference that is irreversible like time. That is, it is patience or length of time in its dia-chrony, where tomorrow is never reached today. Prior to every activity of consciousness, more ancient than consciousness, would this not be the deepest thinking of the new? Gratuitous like a devotion, a thought that would already go unrecognized in its transcendence when one persisted in seeking, in its dia-chrony and in procrastination, not the surplus—or the *Good*—of gratuity and devotion, but an intentionality, a thematization, and the impatience of a *grasping*.

We think that one can and ought to seek, beyond this apparent negativity of the idea of the Infinite, the forgotten horizons of its abstract sig-

nification. One must bring the teleology of the act of consciousness as its turns into dis-inter-ested thought, back to the nonfortuitous conditions and circumstances of its signifying [*signifier*] in man, whose humanity is perhaps the putting in question of the good consciousness of the being that perseveres in being. We think it is fitting to reconstitute the settings indispensable to the “staging” of this turning of consciousness. This would be a phenomenology of the idea of the Infinite. It did not interest Descartes, for whom the mathematical clarity and distinctness of the ideas were enough, but whose teaching on the priority of the idea of the Infinite relative to the idea of the finite is a precious indication for any phenomenology of consciousness.⁴

We think that the idea-of-the-Infinite-in-me—or my relation to God—comes to me in the concreteness of my relation to the other man, in the sociality which is my responsibility for the neighbor. Here is found a responsibility that I contracted in no “experience,” but of which the face of the other, through its alterity and through its strangeness, states the command that came *from who knows where*. From who knows where: it is not as if this face were an image referring back to an unknown source or an inaccessible original, like a residue and a witness borne of a dissimulation and the makeshift of some missed presence. It is not as if the idea of infinity were the simple negation of every ontological determination that one persisted in seeking in its theoretical essence, thereby suspecting in it the “bad infinite” beneath which the tedium of the frustrated tendencies of an impeded finality were dissimulated. Neither would it be the “bad infinite” in which an interminable series of failures were excused, and in which was postponed the impossibility of coming to an end which opened onto a negative theology. Rather, it is as if the face of the other man, who from the first “asks for me” and orders me, were the crux of the very scheme of this surpassing by God, of the idea of God, and of every idea in which He would still be intended, visible, and known—and in which the Infinite were denied by thematization, or in presence or representation. It is not in the finality of an intentional aiming that I think infinity. My deepest thought, which carries all thought, my thought of the infinite, older than the thought of the finite,⁵ is the very diachrony of time. It is noncoincidence, dispossession itself. This is a way of “being dedicated” before any act of consciousness, and more deeply so than in consciousness, by way of the gratuity of time (in which philosophers managed to fear a vanity or privation). A way of being dedicated that is

devotion. An unto-God [*A Dieu*] that is precisely not intentionality in its noetico-noematic complexión.

This is a dia-chrony which no thematizing and inter-ested movement of consciousness—whether as memory or as hopes—can reabsorb or recuperate in the simultaneities it constitutes. It is like a devotion that, in its dis-interested-ness, misses precisely no goal but is diverted—by a God “who loves the stranger” rather than showing himself—toward the other man for whom I have to respond. A responsibility without concern for reciprocity: I have to respond for an other without attending to an other’s responsibility in regard to me. A relation without correlation, or a love of the neighbor that is a love without eros. For-the-other-man and thereby unto God! This is how a thought thinks more than it thinks. As demand and responsibility, all the more imperious and urgent for being undergone with more patience, such is the concrete origin or the original situation where the Infinite places itself in me, where the idea of the Infinite commands the spirit, and the word God comes to the tip of one’s tongue. Here is inspiration and, thus, the prophetic event of the relation to the new.

Yet this is also—with the placing in me of the idea of the Infinite—a prophetic event beyond its psychological particularity: it is the beating of the primordial time in which, for itself or of itself, the idea of the Infinite—deformalized—signifies. God-coming-to-the-idea, as the life of God.