1. From One Question to the Other

As out of date as it might seem, the topic of first philosophy is fraught with stakes, as real as they are symbolic, and still occasions polemical and passionate discussion. This should not be surprising since establishing a first philosophy is neither optional nor outside the orbit of philosophy considered as such. In fact, philosophy, when it does not resign itself to joining the ranks of ordinary sciences—founded (or finally without foundation, a possibility that remains within the horizon of the foundation), derived, in short, secondary—should stake a claim to primacy, or at least to a certain type of primacy, in its very definition. Philosophy will remain true to its own essence only by claiming itself to be, in essence, a first philosophy. For a second philosophy either becomes a regional science (the science φυσικη in Aristotle) or simply loses its philosophical status. In fact, the two terms are equivalent—without the adjective, the substantive vanishes. One therefore cannot reproach philosophy for claiming primacy since lacking this primacy it would disappear as such. Therefore, if the primacy of philosophy presupposes first philosophy, the difficulty should consist less in the legitimacy of this primacy than in determining its type. At once the nature of the difficulty changes: from now on it concerns defining and establishing the primacy that philosophy must exer-

Donation has been translated as "givenness," except in one instance where the French has been retained because the author is discussing his reasons for translating Gegebenheit as "donation."—TRANS.
cise if it is to remain itself. We will no longer ask if first philosophy is still thinkable, but what determination of primacy can legitimately be exercised.

2. Two First Philosophies

The phrase "first philosophy" comes, we know, from Aristotle. He introduces it in a discussion where in other places, as we have shown, the same term φιλοσοφία possesses only the commonsense meaning of a form of knowledge, more exactly of a knowledge bearing on... The famous text from The Metaphysics 6.1 is therefore about arranging a hierarchy of the sciences according to that with which they are concerned. They can concern three domains: (1) nature, which considers bodies that change (thus that are indeterminate) but are separate; (2) mathematics, which considers realities that are nonseparate (therefore ontically incomplete) but unchanging (therefore knowable); (3) finally, the φύσις τίς μια, the divine, which, if such can be found, will be at once unchanging (therefore epistemologically perfectly knowable) and separate (like a complete entity). Within these conditions, primacy has to be accorded to the φιλοσοφία that considers such a domain. It is well known that the tradition of interpreters, Greek as well as medieval and even modern (Werner Jaeger, Martin Heidegger, Pierre Aubenque), has privileged the question of knowing if such a first philosophy, closely linked to a domain that is by definition exceptional (separate, unchanging, and divine), could claim to assume all philosophical primacy in a universality without remainder—just consider the interpretation of the enigmatic formula that Aristotle

uses to justify the primacy of the science of the divine, καθόλου οὐτως ὑπὶ πρώτη, universal in this way because first. As famous and, no doubt, as decisive as it might be, this debate should not be allowed to hide another. The universalization of φιλοσοφία πρώτη becomes the object of a debate only if it first satisfies a previous, still more essential condition: not only is it necessary that the οὐσία on which it bears be universalizable or able to universalize its authority but above all such an οὐσία needs to be given. And Aristotle officially posits this condition of first philosophy: εἰ δ’ ἔστι τις οὐσία ἀκίνητος, if there is such an unchanging “is-ness.”

This hesitancy obviously should not be understood as a sign of atheism, which would be anachronistic to the point of being a misreading. It can in fact be understood in another way, one that is perhaps foreign to Aristotle but not to our modern, therefore necessarily nihilistic, attitude toward it. What does such an οὐσία ἀκίνητη mean for us? I am speaking about neither the existence of such an entity nor its unchanging (therefore divine) quality, but simply its characteristic as οὐσία, therefore—following the translations introduced by metaphysical usage—its characteristic as substance or essence. Now the concept “substance” has been subject to the Cartesian (and already the medieval) criticism according to which substance remains for us unknown as such, if not in terms of its epistemological dependence on its attributes and its accidents. It has also been subject to the criticisms of Hume and Kant, who admit it only as a function of the understanding, therefore by limiting its validity to phenomena alone—that is to say, precisely to what, for Aristotle, it should surpass. As a result, Nietzsche had to dismiss it at the same time as he smashed all the other metaphysical idols. Should one try to avoid this aporia by understanding οὐσία as an essence? But what is left today (after the arguments of Descartes, Kant, and Nietzsche, but also of Wittgenstein) of the notion of essence, except, in the best of cases, the definition of what a being is, therefore what we know about it with the utmost of certainty, that is to say with a knowledge of the being not as it is but as it is known, which is precisely what Aristotle claimed to overcome by acceding to an οὐσία? I therefore conclude that a justification of first philosophy on the basis of the fact that it studies an οὐσία seems weak not only because it claims to bear on something unchanging and separate (divine), but quite simply because it admits that such an instance can, as such (simply as οὐσία), be defined and understood and therefore qualify a primacy.

One has good reason to object that the real institution of the notion

“first philosophy” comes less from Aristotle than from his heirs. Since I obviously cannot pretend to do the detailed work of a historian, I will consider straightaway the position of Thomas Aquinas. Or, more precisely, I will stick to his attempt to redefine the different senses of the single science that is attributed, with the borrowed title “metaphysics,” to Aristotle: “It is called divine science or theology inasmuch as it considers the aforementioned substances [praedicta substantiae]. [It is called] metaphysics inasmuch as it considers being and what follows from it. . . . And it is called first philosophy inasmuch as it considers the first causes of things.”

This could be understood as follows: the science of the divine, which is based on substance (and which suffers, for us moderns, from the impracticability of ὁσὶα in general), can and should be backed up by two other sciences. First of all, by the science of beings as such, already established by Aristotle in The Metaphysics 4.1, but which here receives the title metaphysica, taken in a restrained sense. This innovation, which dates essentially from Aquinas, will exercise a decisive influence on two fronts: first, it will end up as the science ontologia; next, it will concentrate within it the ambiguity of onto-theology. It is quite clear that today these two characteristics appear problematic enough for us not to attempt using them in a new determination of first philosophy. On the other hand, the second of the new sciences added to theologia not only defines a philosophia prima, but does so in terms quite different from those of the φιλοσοφία πρῶτη. It is no longer a matter of considering an ὁσὶα, but the causae of things, of ὁσιαί, henceforth removed from first philosophy by the level of cause. But as God causes not only the created beings (ontic causality), but also their beingness and their esse (ontological causality), the consideration of causes by philosophia prima will lead back to what was already considered, though in a different way, by φιλοσοφία πρῶτη, namely God. Aquinas, however, sets a limit to this approach: in God, cause does not pass through an ὁσὶα. Does this displacement suffice to validate, for us, first philosophy? This can be contested: the concept of cause, as well as all the categories of metaphysics, should be banished from the things themselves and limited to the “concepts of the understanding.” What follows from this is the illegitimacy of using them transcendentally beyond the limits of possible experience, concretely beyond the limits of sensible intuition. Consequently, causality can neither reach the divine nor can it sustain a first philosophy. More generally, cause no longer allows us to secure any primacy whatsoever, since we have seen the possibility of reversing the priority of the cause (which “explains”) and the effect (which alone “proves”—and therefore existence in fact precedes cause, which merely comments on it (as Descartes and Nietzsche have established). And, for that matter, doesn’t Aquinas show his agreement when, after having at-

tained God by following the lead of causality, he refused to conceive him in terms of and as subject to cause, by rejecting the pertinence of any causa sui and leaving the divine esse incausatum?³

3. A Third First Philosophy

But don't these two denegations of first philosophy wind up with a totally opposite result? In effect, they base their argument on another anteriority, that of the noetic over cause and ousia, which lose their primacy before—precisely—the prior conditions of knowledge. In this case, why not imagine defining the primacy of first philosophy directly by the primacy of knowledge? This hypothesis is all the more justifiable as it was the explicit tactic of Descartes as well as Kant.⁴ (1) When he justifies the title of his Renati Descartes Meditaciones de Prima Philosophia . . . , Descartes explains, “I do not confine my discussion to God and the soul in particular, but deal in general with all the first things that can be known by philosophizing”; he even adds “by philosophizing in an orderly way.”⁵ Thus he redefines primacy, understanding it no longer on the basis of certain, ontically privileged ousia, but as anteriority in the order of acts of knowing, in the “order of reasons.” In philosophy, that is first which can be known with certainty in the first place, without presupposing anything and whatever this truth might be—finite (ego sum), abstract (ego cogito), formal (equation, figure, equality, and so forth), indeed empty (ego dubito). Ontic excellence no longer intervenes in hierarchizing the first terms, which become first only as known, never as beings. (2) When Kant demands that “the proud name of an Ontology that presumptuously claims to supply, in a systematic doctrinal form, synthetic a priori knowledge of things in general (for instance, the principle of causality) must, therefore, give place to the modest title of a mere Analytic of pure under-


5. Descartes, letter to Mersenne, 11 Nov. 1640, Oeuvres de Descartes, 3:235, ll.15–18, 3:239, ll. 2–7; The Philosophical Writings of Descartes, 3:157, 158; trans. mod.
standing,” he is ratifying the passage to a primacy of knowledge;6 but, in fact, he also retrieves the very definition of ontologia that he believes he has cast into ruins. That is, Johannes Clauberg, who definitively introduced the term into metaphysics, justifies the privileged object of the new science—the intelligibile rather than the aliquid, or substance—by the argument that one must begin “universal philosophy with cognizable being, just as first philosophy, beginning with the singular, considers nothing before cognizing thought.”7 Noetic primacy thus allows not only for first philosophy to be regrounded, but also for ontology, or rather the science of the knowledge of beings in general, to be reattached to it.

It is immediately evident that this transfer and this enlargement of primacy to the single noetic instance rest entirely on the primacy of the I. But that the I can ground itself in a manner that is radical enough to secure with its primacy that of first philosophy, this is precisely what philosophy has never ceased, since the advent of nihilism, to put into question. Two major arguments effect this crisis. (1) The I can legitimately exert its noetic primacy only by assuming a transcendental status, but this status necessarily separates it from its empiricalness. What is truly first in me would not individualize me, would no longer exist in space and time and would not open onto any other subjects. Therefore the transcendentality of the I, on the one hand, leaves it without ontic determination (I is nobody) and, on the other hand, separates it from itself (an I foreign to the empirical I). From Kant to Husserl and through to the nonspecified universality of Dasein, this splitting suffers no exception. Consequently, noetic primacy has a price: the disappearance or the bracketing of he who plays the role of the first, without Being. (2) Supposing that this primacy can be accomplished even without the ontic individuation of the I, it would be no less exposed to another objection, one more grave than the first: noetic primacy, possible base of a first philosophy, would not imply any primacy of the I, and knowledge would be deployed according to an anonymous process, with neither origin nor subject. Or, if a subject thinks, he thinks or rather rethinks in an empirical mode what is thought about thethinkable, what is proposed to thought, formally or structurally.

7. Johannes Clauberg, Metaphysica de Ente, Quae Rectius Ontosophia (1647, 1663), in Opera Omnia Philosophica, 2 vols. (1691; Darmstadt, 1968), 1:283, §4–5. As we know, Clauberg ascribes this ontologia to the patronage of Descartes’s philosophia prima (ibid., n. e). Kant will confirm this decision: “The first and most important question of ontology is knowing how a priori knowledge is possible. . . . The highest concept of human knowledge is the concept of an object in general, not that of Being or non-Being” (Kant, Leçons de métaphysique, trans. M. Castillo (Paris, 1993), pp. 133–35; my emphasis). It cannot be said more clearly: ontology, in the sense of metaphysics is not the science of Being, but the science of science itself. The noetic primacy of first philosophy leads to critique, by no means to beings as beings. Many contemporary defenses of ontology thus defend what they destroy, or destroy what they believe they are defending.
The empirical ego is limited to repeating the thinkable, without ever drawing from it even the least bit of primacy, neither ontic nor noetic primacy. It is thought in me, who officiates behind the scenes, without initiating or mastering the thought. Let us not dwell on this argument, which is as much Nietzsche’s as Foucault’s; it has been endlessly reproduced by the “human sciences” and the ideologies attached thereto.

These few reflections will be enough to at least pose the inevitable conclusion: none of the types of primacy that metaphysics can propose assures, today and for us, the legitimacy of any first philosophy whatsoever.

4. Phenomenology as the Possibility of Another First Philosophy

This conclusion nevertheless did not stop Husserl from claiming the traditional title “first philosophy” for phenomenology. The famous course of 1923–24 that bears this title explains it from the outset: “If I am assuming the expression forged by Aristotle, this is only because I take advantage of and profit from the fact that it has fallen into disuse and no longer evokes for us anything but its strictly literal meaning and not the numerous varied sediments deposited by historical tradition which mix confusedly under the vague concept of metaphysics souvenirs from the different metaphysical systems of the past.” What a strange argument: it is precisely because not one of its real actualizations (philosophia prima, φιλοσοφία πρώτη) has been retained that the principle of a first philosophy is maintained all the more, this first philosophy being redefined quite formally as a “scientific discipline of the beginning.” How is this to be understood? Perhaps by the completely equivocal nature of the phrase? But Husserl immediately dismisses this hypothesis by claiming that “with the breakthrough made by the new transcendental phenomenology, a first version of the breakthrough toward a real and authentic first philosophy was accomplished.” In short, phenomenology resumes (or claims to resume) the project of first philosophy and is thus constituted as the philosophy by which one must make a beginning so as to then put into operation second philosophies or regional sciences. There is a second hypothesis: the unequivocal revival of this science escapes metaphysical aporiae (ούσια, causa, subjectivity) because phenomenology itself does not belong to metaphysics. This claim, too, remains to be justified; for it is not at all self-evident. But didn’t Heidegger, who, more than any other, tried to disentangle phenomenology from metaphysics, also give up a claim to the title “first philosophy”? And if Levinas brought to the fore the doubtfulness of ontology’s claim to fundamentality, he did not carry to the end

his own claim to the title “first philosophy,” nor did he impose its renewal. It therefore falls to us to confirm this rupture so as to then try clarifying the meaning and the import of another sense of “first philosophy.” To this end, we will proceed in four steps: (1) the principle of phenomenology; (2) the recourse to givenness in its relation to reduction; (3) removing the objections to the intelligibility of givenness; (4) the faultless primacy of givenness.

Determining the principle of phenomenology can seem, at first glance, all too easy, as the formulations Husserl used to reach it are so numerous. But this very proliferation should also trouble us. A single formulation would be enough for a principle to be first; several formulations, on the other hand, muddle primacy. Let us therefore quickly review the three formulations used by Husserl. The first, “so much appearing, so much Being,” harbors an obvious metaphysical origin—first because it comes from Johann Friedrich Herbart (1806), and especially because it uses the pair appearing/Being, whose perfectly metaphysical arrangement it merely reverses (like Nietzsche, too, at times), without explaining why and how this operation is brought about, namely, by the reduction. The second formulation, “Back to the things themselves!” suffers from a twofold imprecision concerning first the identity of these things (empirical reality or the “matters at stake”? and next the inverting operation that would allow this return. In short, in both cases the reduction is always missing, and without it the slogan quickly falls into atheoretical cynicism, a misology. As for the third formulation, which is the sole one qualified as the “principle of principles” and the sole one invented


by Husserl, it posits that “every originally donating intuition is a source of right for cognition, that everything that offers itself to us originally in intuition is to be taken quite simply as it gives itself out to be” (I, 3:51, §24; IP, 1:44, §24; trans. mod.). Its authority surely cannot be contested, but it must be limited. (1) By what right does it fall to intuition to decide all phenomenality? Doesn't this Kantian presupposition, even when corrected by the addition of the gaze on essences and categorical intuition, submit every phenomenon to what intuition fills, that is to say to intentionality, therefore to objectness? (2) What good is a principle, especially one connected to intuition, that comes up before, therefore perhaps also without, the operation (and even the simple mention) of the reduction? (3) Finally, what role is played by givenness, explicitly used but nonetheless never determined as such? These shortcomings led me to propose a fourth and last formulation of a possible first principle of phenomenology: “So much reduction, so much givenness.”\(^\text{12}\) I base this proposition on, among many other texts, two passages in Husserl that are drawn from the work that was the first to offer a theory of the reduction, *The Idea of Phenomenology* (1907). First: “Only through a reduction, the same one we have already called phenomenological reduction, do I attain an absolute givenness owing nothing to transcendence.” Next: “The givenness of a reduced phenomenon in general is an absolute and indubitable givenness.”\(^\text{13}\) Thus confirmed by the letter of Husserl’s text, my formula reveals what is most interesting about it: it alone thinks explicitly the givenness of the given—where appearing in fact passes into Being (first formulation), where one returns to the matters at stake (second formulation), and where intuition announces the right to appear (third formulation)—but always starting from the operation that prompts it, the reduction. No givenness without reduction, no reduction that does not end up at a givenness. Now, the reduction eliminates all transcendence, that is to say the intentional *ecstasis* of consciousness toward the thing, which alone allows for uncertainty, error, illusion, and so forth. Therefore, the givenness of the given, on the express condition that it is already found to be reduced, becomes absolutely indubitable. None of the reproaches made against the supposed intuitionism of phenomenology, its so-called naïve confidence in evidence, or its supposed complacency with subjectivity, could stand for a moment if one really took seriously the radicality of the reduction such


as it suspends precisely the transcendencies that weaken it. If philosophy is deployed in immanence (which is often claimed and can sometimes be claimed with good reason), then phenomenology, following the principle “so much reduction, so much givenness,” is even more deserving of the title philosophy.

The intimate intertwining of reduction and givenness therefore defines the principle of phenomenology. What appears gives itself, that is to say, it appears without anything being held back or left over. It therefore comes forward, arrives, and sets itself up as such, not as the appearance or the representative of an absent or hidden in-itself, but as itself, in person and in the flesh. What appears pours itself out, so to speak, totally (with its “is-ness,” its substantial background, its material individuation, and so forth), to the point that it passes from the rank of image, from the simple appearing or orphaned appearance, to that of the unique thing at stake. And if the phenomenon did not give itself as such, it would remain simply Being’s other. But just how does it succeed in giving itself and not remaining the simple image of itself without itself? Because the reduction eliminates from the flow of appearing all that does not give itself unrestrainedly: the seemings and the confusions, the imaginings or the memories of the given, all connected to transcendencies that confuse the lived experience (in certain cases intentional) with the object intended (by definition only outlined), are spotted, filtered out, and finally separated from the remaining given. The reduction therefore must control givenness, reconduct it to its given core (or noematic core). Thus, strictly in the degree to which the reduction is correctly carried out, it becomes “absurd” (as Husserl says) to suppose that givenness does not give the given certainly. And it follows that the given of givenness suffers no doubt.

Is this a repetition of the unconditional certainty of the ego sum, ego existo? Despite the acquired habit (dating back to Husserl himself) of comparing them, we will insist first on what distinguishes them. According to Descartes, the absolute certainty of this first truth concerns quite precisely nothing but the field where thought returns to itself, more exactly its “autoaffection.” But, and the difficulty in subsequently winning other truths will confirm this, autoaffection remains essentially trapped within a real solipsism, of the thing gained (res cogitans) to the other thing, inaccessible or almost so (God and the world perhaps, the other assuredly). According to phenomenology, absolute certainty resides in the affection of consciousness by lived experiences of all sorts (not only, nor even especially, by the thought of self), on the express condition, however, that these lived experiences accomplish a givenness—that they abandon themselves and in certain cases that they also engage the intentional objects at issue. It is therefore every lived experience (and in certain cases the intentional object) that, if it is given by a reduction, is confirmed absolutely. Put otherwise, phenomenology universalizes the Cartesian result. It does not secure the ego alone and to itself; it certifies an entire world
because it no longer bases it on thought (thinking itself), but on the given such as it gives itself (to consciousness). To be sure, this displacement would fall back into empiricism if the intentional given of the lived experience did not align itself with the reduction, if therefore it did not give itself in a reduced immanence. Thus, the given phenomenon also includes, with the experience of its givenness, the experience of its certainty. One cannot doubt a given, for either one considers it precisely as given and, whatever its mode of givenness might be (sensible intuition, imagination, gaze on essences, categorical intuition, and so forth), it will indeed be given, or else one discovers a deception, and that simply tells us that, by error (lack of reduction), one assumed as given what is not genuinely given—but which no doubt is already given, though in a mode not yet distinguished in its specificity. There can and must be indefinite degrees of givenness, but no exception. In short, to say it as Husserl does, "Absolute givenness is an ultimate" (Id, p. 61; IdP, p. 49; trans. mod.).

From this certainty, it strangely follows that givenness, as certain, is also universalized. For what can be said not to appear as given? Husserl has already established the list of what is given in diverse modes: thought, immediate memory (retention), the unity of appearance in the flux of the lived experiences of consciousness, their variations, the thing of so-called external perception and other synthetic representations, but also the logical givens (predicates, universals, states of things), essences, mathematical entities—better, even nonsense and contradictions attest a givenness. And to conclude: "In every case, givenness, whether it be announced in a mere representation or a true being, in what is real or what is ideal, the possible or the impossible, is a givenness in the phenomenon of consciousness, in the phenomenon of thought in the most general sense of the term" (Id, p. 74; IdP, p. 59; trans. mod.). This suggests two outcomes. (1) Givenness is in fact equivalent to the phenomenon itself, whose two faces, appearing (on the side of consciousness) and what appears (on the side of the thing), are connected according to the principle—which Husserl often calls "wonderful"—of correlation only because the first counts as a given that the second, givenness, gives (Id, p. 74; IdP, p. 59; trans. mod.). Without entering more fully into the proof, we take it to be established that the fold of the phenomenon, such as it unfolds in its appearing, is equivalent to the fold of givenness, such as it harbors the given in itself. This equivalence stems directly from the identity of givenness and reduction: the reduced given has the rank of full and radical phenomenon. Put in another way by Husserl: what is called "an absolute givenness [eine absolute Gegebenheit]" is not the psychological phenomenon but "only the pure phenomenon, the reduced [phenomenon] [das reine Phänomen, das reduzierte]" (Id, p. 7; IdP, p. 5). (2) Whence the other outcome: if everything is a phenomenon and as a phenomenon, then nothing makes an exception to givenness. Here again, we cannot set out the full demonstration; but, along the lines of Bergson's critique of the idea
of nothing (which always ends up at another given), without contradicting the Heideggerian analyses of the same nothing (which ends up or would like to end up at the phenomenon of Being) and of death (which still gives in its own right, as much in a being-able-to-die as in the fact of the death of the Other), following the possible description of absence (which always designates a determinate absence) or of any privation whatsoever, we suggest that there is no appearing that escapes the fold of givenness, even if it does not fully accomplish its phenomenal unfolding. Givenness is never suspended, even if and precisely because it admits an indefinite number of degrees. Once again, there can be indefinite degrees to givenness, but there is no exception. Givenness is therefore set up, by its certainty and its universality, as an unconditional principle. There thus could be a first philosophy according to phenomenology.

5. Givenness as Last Principle

This hypothesis runs up against a few objections, however. The chief of these concerns the relation of the given to givenness. One can say in opposition that it reestablishes a gap between cause and effect, thus opening the field to the theological interpretation of this same cause: Doesn't God come up in revealed theology and the onto-theological tradition (which, for what it's worth, it is best not to always confuse) as the cause of beings who are his effects and possibly as the giver giving his givens? This unnuanced objection, however, does not stand up long under investigation, not only because causality applied to God remains, at least in revealed theology, such that no reciprocity renders it intelligible in terms of its effects (God is known only as unknown) but also because the givenness evoked here belongs to phenomenology alone, therefore depends on the reduction in its particular certainty—which is to say that it brackets all transcendence, including that of God. It would also still need to be shown conceptually that God, according to revealed theology (which is not at issue here, anyway), falls into the domain of transcendence and not more essentially into that of radical immanence—in the figure of the “interior intimo meo.” But this objection can also be understood in a more sophisticated way, and one can ask why I continue to translate—since the term goes back to Husserl—Gegebenheit by the French donation (rendered in English as “givenness”), seeing as donation

14. See Dominique Janicaud, Le Tournant théologique de la phénoménologie française (Combas, 1991), and E. Alliez, De L’Impossibilité de la phénoménologie: Sur la philosophie française contemporaine (Paris, 1995). Both these works criticize, along with Levinas and Michel Henry, my own work Réduction et donation, but unfortunately their criticism lacks relevance, as they attribute to the work propositions that it never put forth (in particular the causal and transcendent interpretation of givenness).

15. Augustine, Confessions, trans. William Watts, 2 vols. (New York, 1922), 1.3.6, p. 120.
introduces the ambiguity of a giving act on top of the simple fact of givenness, therefore permitting a chasm, if not theological then at least transcendent, to open between the origin and the result of givenness. Why not stick strictly to the translation by donné, indeed, as certain have chosen to do, by présence? Présence has been ruled out for the unimpeachable reason that this term would collapse givenness into what it is precisely a matter of overcoming—the persisting presence of metaphysical substantiality. The real difficulty comes from the term donné, apparently more phenomenologically neutral than that of donation. Appearances to the contrary notwithstanding, there is nothing real about this difficulty. That is to say, no given appears without giving itself or finding itself given according to the fold of givenness. Take the example—irrefutably neutral to the point of being trivial—of what is given as in a problem. Why do we speak of a given and not of a fact or of a presence? Because it is a matter of a question, unknown as such and not yet intelligible, that in each case (even if I understand the solution immediately because I am quite gifted) I have to resolve, to which I must at least respond, precisely because I have not chosen it, nor foreseen it or constituted it from the outset. This given gives itself to me because it imposes itself, summons me, and determines me—in short, because I am not the author of it. The given deserves its name on account of its being a fait accompli, such as it befalls me. In this way, it is distinguished from every foreseen, synthesized, and constituted object, since it comes over me as an event. This unforeseen arrival marks it as given and attests to the givenness in it. Givenness does not so much indicate the origin of the given as its phenomenological status. Better, givenness most often characterizes the given as without cause, origin, and identifiable antecedent, far from assigning one to it. And it is enough that the given—the given phenomenon—give itself on its own basis (and not on the basis of a foreseeing and constituting subject) for the fold of givenness to be attested. The objection thus veers toward the confirmation of our thesis: givenness does not submit the given to a transcendent condition, it frees it from one.

Now it finally becomes possible to conceive how, in terms of givenness, phenomenology allows us to take up anew the question of a first philosophy. It authorizes it, but with several precautions. For if one expects of a first philosophy that it determine what it brings to light by fixing a priori a principle or a collection of principles, in particular by imposing the transcendental anteriority of the I (or something equivalent), then phenomenology does not achieve and, above all, no longer even claims the rank of a first philosophy thus understood. For as we have reconstructed it, the decisive originality of its enterprise consists in rendering an incontestable priority to the phenomenon: letting it appear no longer as it ought (in terms of the supposedly a priori conditions of experience and its objects) but as it gives itself (from itself and in as much as itself). To imagine that the reduction still imposes a prior condition to
appearing (in the mode of doubt or criticism in metaphysics) would be a misreading, since in contrast it does nothing but purify the appearing of all in it that would in fact not appear because it does not yet give itself authentically (under the heading of lived experience or intentional lived experience). The principle of phenomenology—“so much reduction, so much givenness”—as fundamental as it is, is nothing like a foundation, nor even a first principle. It instead offers a last principle—the last because none other is found after it; and the last, above all, because it does not precede the phenomenon but comes after and yields priority to it. The last principle takes the initiative of offering the initiative to the phenomenon. It comments on the act by which what shows itself gives itself and what gives itself always shows itself on the basis of the irreducible and first self of appearing. Of this process, the I becomes the clerk, the addressee, or the patient, but almost never the author or the producer. In this way, the metaphysical and subjective figure of transcendentality here suffers a reversal that is for the first time definitive; like Nietzsche, Husserl speaks of an “Umwertung,” but, better than him, Husserl brings it about (*I*, 3:63, §31; *IP*, 1:59, §31).

But the principle “so much reduction, so much givenness,” if it removes primacy from the I, does not for all that reestablish that of ὀντικόν or cause—since precisely the requirement of appearing and of giving oneself without remainder in phenomenality defines a criterion and opens a crisis. Essence as much as substance suffers from a constant shortfall in appearing; as such, they remain at least in part confused, deduced, reconstituted, supposed, not given or seen. They thus fall back into the position either of the latter individuals or of accidents and attributes, in order to appear by their intervention. In phenomenology, ὀντικόν as well as cause lose their privileges simply because they do not at all appear at the outset, or at best only partially. As we have suggested, they yield before the accident and the effect, which consist only in their appearing and as a result affect us—that is to say, befall us, therefore appear to us. In all these cases, the formula “so much reduction, so much givenness” is in play like a last principle: not only the last found, but above all the principle positing that the last—the seeming, in its supposed metaphysical fragility—is finally equal to the sole and unique first—to the appearing, the unique screen open to receiving all manifestations, all truths, all realities. The last becomes the first; the principle is defined as last principle and therefore phenomenology takes up the title “first philosophy” only by inverting it—“last philosophy.”

6. On the Use of Givenness in Theology

One cannot, at the end of this redefinition of first philosophy in terms of the phenomenological principle “so much reduction, so much
givenness,” avoid the question of a possible use for givenness in theology. It cannot be avoided for at least two reasons. First, because theology, even as revealed theology, has maintained a highly complex and sometimes dangerous relation with the first philosophy of metaphysics, considering it sometimes as an ally (indeed a substitute), sometimes as a deviation, a temptation, or an enemy. One therefore has the right to ask what attitude the last philosophy adopts toward the theology of Revelation. Next, because recent attempts (I cite only Bernhard Casper, Jean-Yves Lacoste, or, most recently, Michel Henry) have tried to identify and clarify the points where philosophy and theology intersect; more precisely, they have tried to establish the possibility of a phenomenology of religion. Our sketch of givenness would shy away from one of the things most obviously at stake in it if we avoided the question about the legitimate (or not) use of a phenomenology of givenness in theological matters.16

Several points are self-evident. (1) The relation between theology and phenomenology has become the object of an intense debate, indeed of a polemic: doesn’t the exclusion of all transcendence by the reduction forbid one, on principle, from imagining even the possibility of applying it to religion? But, besides the fact that the question of God is at play in the field of immanence as well as transcendence, one can hardly say that this operation is more atheological than Husserl’s use of the Augustinian declaration “noli foras ire . . . in interiore homine habitat veritas” and his setting forth an infinite teleology in the texts from the final period of his career would be theological.17 (2) If phenomenology can (something that still remains to be established) “turn” into theology, and this in indisputable phenomenologists (Ricoeur, Levinas, Henry, and so forth), such a turning would be impossible were it not for some predisposition of phenomenology. It is not enough to denounce it (supposing first of all that it is self-evident that this veer constitutes a decline, while one also has every right to see it as an elevation); it is first necessary to explain it. What then does phenomenology harbor in its ownmost essence such that it can thus turn—in the sense of the Husserlian, Heideggerian, or even Wittgensteinian turns? No turning of such importance could come up without a previous turn, hidden but real, anticipating it or preparing for it. The accusation would hit home only if it identified this. As this is not the case, it remains arbitrary. (3) Husserl himself posed a sober rule for arranging


17. Augustine, De vera religione, 39.72, quoted at the conclusion of Husserl, Cartesianische Meditationen, p. 183, §64; Cartesian Meditations, p. 157.
the relation between these two instances: “Our immediate aim is not theology but phenomenology, however mediately important the latter may be for the former” (I, 3:109–10, §51; IP, 1:117, §51). This means that the distinction of domains, objects, and methods remains absolute but that the first can shed some light on the second—without being false to itself or falsifying the other.

How is this balance to be affirmed? A clear distinction must be made between two theologies, which the polemics surrounding this question constantly confuse: metaphysical theology (including first philosophy) and revealed theology. Concerning philosophical theology, that is to say first philosophy considered within onto-theology, no ambiguity remains; since it is based on real transcendence, causality, substantiability, and actuality, it cannot resist a phenomenological reduction. Phenomenology could not in any way admit speculative arguments that pass beyond the given, ignore the constraints of givenness, and lay claim to a nonimmanent foundation. It has here a function that is purely and simply critical, with a strictly Kantian slant. But, paradoxically, it is not the same with revealed theology. For the latter, from the very fact that it is based on given facts, which are given precisely as figures, appearings, and manifestations (indeed apparitions, miracles, revelations, and so forth), comes up in the natural field of phenomenality and therefore belongs within phenomenology’s area of competence. What is remarkable here is found in the fact that phenomenology must disqualify natural and rational theology but cannot remain aloof from revealed (supernatural) theology precisely because no revelation comes up without a manner of phenomenalizing itself. It therefore cannot shy away from, as strict phenomenology, lines of questioning like these: Are the phenomena of revelation still official phenomena? If yes, do they belong to the objective or ontic form of phenomenality or to another type—that of the event, the paradox, the saturated phenomenon, and so forth? Should one enlarge the field of phenomenality heretofore known or admitted? Should one admit nonvisible phenomena, and, in this case, are they so provisionally, partially, or definitively? All these questions, though they can be formulated only in the field of revealed theology, nonetheless belong also and legitimately to phenomenology—since revelation itself claims to deploy a particular figure of phenomenality.

This situation permits two questions to be posed. The first comes from phenomenology and is addressed to the theologians: Why do the latter never, or at least only rarely (H. U. von Balthasar here being exceptional), undertake a phenomenological reading of the events of revelation recorded in the Scriptures, in particular in the New Testament, instead of

always privileging ontic, historical, or semiotic interpretations? The second
goes from theology to the phenomenologists: If appearing is always orga-
nized by givenness according to the principle “so much reduction, so
much givenness,” if nothing shows itself that does not give itself and noth-
ing gives itself that does not show itself, what ultimately does it mean to
give itself? Why has phenomenology always practiced givenness as if it
goes without saying and studied the reduction as problematic, while it
could be that givenness, more essential, also remains the most enigmatic?

Thus givenness radically redefines the possible relations between
phenomenology and forms of theology (philosophical and revealed). This
upheaval follows naturally from the fact that givenness already assumed
and destroyed at the same time the project of a first philosophy. These
paradoxes can be surprising, but they nevertheless correspond, according
to Heidegger, to the question par excellence of phenomenology: “What
does it mean: ‘given’, ‘givenness’ [Gegebenheit], this magic word for phe-
nomenology and the ‘stumbling block’ for all the others?”

der ‘Stein des Anstoßes’ bei den anderen” (Heidegger, Grundprobleme der Phänomenologie
(1919/20), ed. Hans-Helmuth Gander, vol. 58 of Gesamtausgabe [Frankfurt am Main, 1993],
p. 5).