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## WHAT GIVES? FORCE, GIFT, AND THE ONGOING “CRISIS OF THE EUROPEAN SCIENCES”

In *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Philosophy*, Edmund Husserl wrote, sometime before his death in the late 1930s and following the Nazi takeover of Germany in 1933, the following: “The true struggles of our time, the only ones which are significant, are struggles between humanity which has collapsed and humanity which still has its roots but is struggling to keep them or find new ones.”<sup>1</sup> Like his student Heidegger, who may or may not have had something to do with Husserl’s banishment from the academy as part of Germany’s “Aryanization” of the university system in the 1930s, Husserl was desperately trying to find the “roots” of philosophy, which he located in the transcendental method. Husserl’s transcendental approach, or *epoché*, preoccupied from its inception with what in the *Crisis* he refers to repeatedly as the “enigma of subjectivity,” always seemed to point, however, in a direction beyond the Cartesian, or even the Kantian, notion of the subject. The plenitude of fully experienced subjecthood, the Husserlian ego inextricably immersed in its conditioning *Lebenswelt*, actually consisted in a covert “displacement,” as Jean-Luc Marion would observe more than six decades after the former’s death. The displacement consists in the fact that “phenomenology no longer concerns the knowledge of the phenomena, but the knowledge of their mode of exposition, and therefore it no longer aims at the foundation of the sciences [as Husserl insisted], but at the thought of phenomenality.”<sup>2</sup>

What Marion in the same treatise goes on to call the “phenomenality of the phenomenon” as the secret of the transcendental attitude, which he argues is more about the problem of the “subjective” constitution of phenomenal-ness itself than about the coming-to-presence of the putative phenomenon, is something that the original Kantian transcendental formulation could not overcome, Heidegger suggests in his early work *Kant and the Problem of Metaphysics*. As Marion observes, “consciousness therefore determines phenomenality by reducing every phenomenon to the certitude of an actual presence, far from phenomenality requiring that consciousness be itself determined by the conditions and the modes of givenness—which are always multiple and disconcerting.”<sup>3</sup> It is this observation, which Marion makes relatively early in his career, that serves as the fulcrum for Marion’s own later

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<sup>1</sup> Edmund Husserl, *The Crisis of the European Sciences and Transcendental Philosophy: Introduction to Phenomenological Philosophy*, trans. David Carr (Evanston IL: Northwestern University Press, 1970), 15.

<sup>2</sup> Jean-Luc Marion, *Reduction and Givenness: Investigations of Husserl, Heidegger, and Phenomenology*, trans. Thomas A. Carlson (Evanston IL: Northwestern University Press, 1998), 48.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 51.

"reduction to givenness," a theme Marion elaborates in his later work, especially his magnum opus *Being Given*. Later in *Reduction and Givenness* Marion finds this tendency even in Heidegger's own *Dasein-analytic*. "By the constraining grace of the reduction as the instance of givenness in presence, the reduced phenomenon is reduced to being that is present here and now."<sup>4</sup> If givenness, or what Hegel—who provides the backstory for not only Husserl and Marion but also Derrida, the latter's teacher, terms the "this here" (*dies da*)—is both the starting and end points for phenomenology, then what really is left of the "transcendental" element in any putative *epoché*, or reduction? Marion seems to want to do an end-run around the entire strategy of the *epoché* himself, even if that is not his intention. Appearance "could reach the full status of the phenomenon, only inasmuch as appearing is sufficient for the accomplishment of Being. Apparition is sufficient for Being only as inasmuch as, in appearing, it already perfectly gives itself, but it thus gives itself perfectly by the sole fact that it appears only inasmuch as it is *reduced* to its givenness for consciousness."<sup>5</sup>

Interestingly, this kind of insight, underpinning most of Marion's so-called "new phenomenology," which after the setting of the Derridean sun around the turn of the millennium attracted a brief flurry of enthusiasts, can also be construed as the occasion for the current fashion of "speculative realism" with its peremptory denial of any transcendental position, or form of what Quentin Meillassoux dubs "correlationism."<sup>6</sup> It is, if we may take liberties with the rhetoric of Derrida, a kind of "reductionism without reduction," a subjecting—or "gifting"—of the given without a subject. Clearly, since the entrance of post-structuralist critique into the academic mainstream more than four decades ago, the subject itself has been problematized all the way up to the threshold of extinction.

But what if this inexorable trend of de-subjectification over such a time span missed the point about what Husserl himself had in mind? And what if in some sense the "transcendental standpoint" were really a different kind of threshold for philosophy, not an epoch without *epoché*, so much as a passage into a different kind of presence that does not presence—let alone present itself—but forces the presencing of presence at its very inauguration? In this essay I would argue that both phenomenology and post-structuralism start from the dilemma Husserl posed in *The Crisis*, Kant's problem of "synthetic judgments a priori," or for our purposes the relationship between the formal (for Husserl, the matheme) and sense-givenness. As far as Husserl was concerned, such a "crisis" could be traced to the disconnect between the richness of "lived experience" and the canonization of deductive rationality resulting from the pragmatic triumphs of the "hard sciences." As an Austrian, Husserl was not fully conversant with the so-called "linguistic turn" that was beginning to reshape British empiricism and would eventually by mid-century dominate much of twentieth century philosophy. But he recognized fatefully the philosophical importance of grammatical structure and the functionality of the linguistic signifier, which would become the linchpin of French structuralism and ultimately the

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 53.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 203.

<sup>6</sup> See Quentin Meillassoux, *After Finitude: An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency*, trans. Ray Brassier (New York: Continuum, 2009).

inspiration for so-called “deconstruction.” I argue here that in a sense Husserl’s “crisis” was the crisis of what we mean by “givens.” Is the “given” in fact a “gift” which is the outcome a certain act of ontological generosity, a dynamic “giving” comparable to Heidegger’s notorious *es gibt*? I maintain, finally, that the two main strands of contemporary Continental philosophy emerge from this crisis of givenness and revolve ultimately around the issue of “what” it is that gives, or whether it can be named without effacing the question of the given itself.

### I.

In *The Crisis* Husserl focuses in a manner uncharacteristic of his earlier work on the manner in which the dominance of modern epistemology by the “objective sciences” has made any appreciation by philosophy of its own historic genesis and tasks impossible. In his earlier writings Husserl had insisted that phenomenology must become “the most rigorous science” (*die strengste Wissenschaft*), and therefore resorted to the method of “bracketing” in order to resist the common-sense promptings of reflection from “the natural standpoint.” In sum, the early Husserl amounted to a type of latter day Platonism without Platonism, capturing at the same time the immanent positioning of philosophical inquiry without Descartes’ self-reflexive foundationalism, a ground plan for the full flowering of Greek *noesis* without *skepsis*. In the Husserl prior to World War I the *Lebenswelt* did not matter, and therefore did not have at all to be foregrounded in his charting of the course of phenomenology as a whole, because it was already implied, so far as Husserl was concerned, in the concept of intentionality as the terrain of applicable evidence and unclarified meaning overall.

But Husserl for a variety of reasons, on which in hindsight we can only begin to speculate about, became eventually convinced that the life-world was messier and more volatile, if not unmanageable, than he had previously presupposed. As it builds toward the end, and especially in the Vienna Lecture delivered in 1935 which was added as an appendix, *The Crisis* seems more a work of evangelism on the part of a former philosophical idealist who in his twilight years has suddenly found “religion.” Husserl of course was responding to the flowering fascist menace in Germany and elsewhere, and he unflinchingly alluded to these trends as the basis of what he considered an even profounder “crisis”—that of the Western project, apotheosized in the Enlightenment of the eighteenth century, of the pursuit of autonomous reason itself. What he refers to in the Vienna lecture as the “crisis of European existence” can only be understood, according to Husserl, “against the background of the *teleology of European history*,” a teleology rooted in the cosmological aspirations and speculative preferences of the early Greek philosophers. One must, Husserl insists, “work out the concept of Europe as the historical teleology of the infinite goals of reason.” But this teleology has somehow been aborted, Husserl notes, mainly because the “essence of rationalism” has been “rendered superficial” through “its entanglement in ‘naturalism’ and ‘objectivism.’”<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> *The Crisis of the European Sciences*, op. cit., 299.

Phenomenology, therefore, Husserl suggests elsewhere in the text has as its unmistakable “calling” (*Beruf*) the re-activation of this failed teleology. But, at the same time, this project can no longer be a “dialectical” or Hegelian project. Husserl here has the same intuition as Nietzsche did throughout the 1880s, namely, that dialectical impulse has killed both God and philosophy, leading to a strange sort of “decadence” in thinking whereby the ancient and honorable quest of *scientia* has lost its aim. For Husserl, phenomenology offers an unprecedented new view of *ratio* within which the infinite reach and force of *Geist*, or “spirit”, as Hegel would have described, manifests as a “truly universal and radical coming to terms with itself in the form of a universal, responsible science,” one indeed “where all conceivable questions—questions of being and questions of norm, questions of what is called ‘existence’ [*Existenz*] find their place.”<sup>8</sup>

There is a definite echo of Heidegger’s fundamental ontology here. Yet Husserl’s would-be wake-up call is focused on something much grander than reorienting philosophy away from the *claritas* and *perspicuitas* of Cartesianism toward the condition of *Dasein* and the ambiguities of finitude. In the third part of *The Crisis* Husserl waxes almost rhapsodic on what this new calling for philosophy might mean. It comes down to nothing more or less than a radicalization of the phenomenological *epoché* itself. Husserl says, in effect, that the now well-known *epoché* he articulated in *Ideas* turns out to be only an initial gesture. As a “first methodological step” that “has already come into view through the preliminary reflections hitherto carried out,” it is sufficient. What is required even further, however, is an “*epoché* in respect to all objective sciences.”<sup>9</sup> The different practices and theoretical procedures of the objective sciences themselves need to be bracketed, or put in suspension, in order to allow philosophy itself to discover the illimitable intuitions of philosophy as it explores the life-world. Phenomenology, even as Husserl heretofore had envisioned it, is perhaps bracketed and put in its proper place. Phenomenology is simply one “vocation” among others, since “it is basically a matter of indifference whether one is a cobbler or a phenomenologist, or also, whether one is a phenomenologist or a positive scientist.” What one needs to adopt is what Husserl at this stage terms the “total phenomenological attitude”, in effect, the *epoché* of all *epochés*. It is an *epoché* that constitutes “a complete personal transformation, comparable in the beginning to a religious conversion.”<sup>10</sup>

Such dramatic language, which is unusual for Husserl, overlays somewhat paradoxically both a more modest as well as a more ambitious set of objectives. The less pretentious aim, so far as Husserl is concerned, consists in mapping a new kind of “objectivity” that is not subordinated to the mathematizing of nature as we know it but as a venture into determining in some way, perhaps *panoptically*, the “general structure” of the life-world. Such a view considers “bodies” as “actual,” for example, “but not bodies in the sense of physics.”<sup>11</sup> This second *epoché* amounts to the opening up within conceptual space of a sense of

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<sup>8</sup> Op. cit., 298.

<sup>9</sup> Op. cit., 135.

<sup>10</sup> Op. cit., 137.

<sup>11</sup> Op. cit., 139.

the *Geltungsfundierung*, or “founding validity”, of everything we experience as a whole in its intricate contrasts, shadings, and degrees of perspicuity. It provides us access to an “*a priori*” that is both “experienced” and is the condition for all experience. Later on Husserl seems to be anticipating Marion when he suggests that this new type of apriorism is in reality a universal “direction of interest” toward the “‘how’ of the manner of givenness and in the *onta* themselves, not straightforwardly but rather as objects in respect to their ‘how.’”<sup>12</sup>

Some pages later, on the other hand, Husserl veers back to the transcendental attitude, but now he seeks to establish this new mode of “universality” in the plenitude of intersubjective perspectives and apprehensions. One can in no way be satisfied with the standpoint of the subject alone, even if such subjectivity transcends itself inevitably. “As soon as one has progressed far enough in the reorientation of the *epoché* to see the purely subjective in its own self-enclosed pure context as intentionality and to recognize it as the function of forming ontic meaning, the theoretical interest grows quickly, and one becomes more astonished at each step by the endless array of emerging problems and important discoveries to be made.”<sup>13</sup> Husserl adds that “we could equate this subjectivity with the *psyche* of Heraclitus” that has no boundaries and perhaps foreshadows even the beguiling notion that Deleuze propounded, but did not really *expound*, toward the end of his life—the expression “pure immanence.” The murky intentionalities of the active *cogito* are revealed in this setting as simply the stuff of a vast ocean of cognitive possibilities that open up a realm of transcendental knowledge that is no longer reducible to merely an assemblage of simple intensities or a system of distinguishable positivities. There is no way left to “document” these various strains of *noemata* in a manner that is even “empirically” justifiable.<sup>14</sup>

In *The Crisis* Husserl foresaw the very failures of the reigning epistemology, which would finally take post-structuralism a generation later to dismantle. Whereas Heidegger is often credited with anticipating post-structuralism, as well as so-called “deconstruction”, because of his own innovations with the theory of language he termed the *Destruktion* of metaphysics, Husserl—and this is what makes him the unsung hero of the very crisis of twentieth century philosophy itself—had already envisioned a way beyond Kantian “pure reason” that required neither Derrida’s famous aporias nor Deleuze’s semiotics of desire.

Ironically, according to Edward Baring in his brilliant study of the origins of deconstruction entitled *The Young Derrida and French Philosophy*, it was this kind of almost obsessive wrestling with the issues posed by Husserl in *The Crisis* that framed Derrida’s own transition from phenomenology to what had become by the late 1960s at least a thoroughgoing philosophy of language. Baring shows how Derrida, especially his master’s thesis on the problem of “genesis” in Husserl, was throughout his earliest career a dedicated Husserlian and to a certain extent a closet Christian existentialist. As Derrida argues in his dissertation completed in the mid-1950s, the question of genesis—what

<sup>12</sup> Op. cit., 144.

<sup>13</sup> Op. cit., 169.

<sup>14</sup> Op. cit., 204.

Heidegger in a different context as part and parcel of his project of die *Überwindung der Metaphysik* referred to as the issue of *Ursprung*—raises up an untamed specter for any scientific or philosophical pretension to “objectivity.” Derrida writes: “genesis, when it is examined naively and in the most formal way possible, brings together two contradictory meanings in its concept: one of origin, one of becoming.”<sup>15</sup> In some ways this observation is Badiou’s theory of the event *avant la lettre*.

But Derrida was seeking to refute both conventional historicism and Marxian dialectical materialism in regard to how philosophy is grounded, and how it proceeds. “There is no genesis except within a temporal and ontological totality which encloses it; every genetic product is produced by something other than itself.”<sup>16</sup> In other words, any sort of philosophical *epoché*, or effort to envision like Descartes an “Archimedean” point from which the world might be moved, has an unintended outcome. It does not give us “Being” itself as a form of impassive comprehension of the essence of things, but something akin to Merleau-Ponty’s “wild being,” the being of becoming. Such a genesis “is given at first both as ontologically and temporally indefinite and as absolute beginning, as continuity and discontinuity, identity and alterity.”<sup>17</sup> Here we have Derrida’s own proto-insight, stated in much different language than a decade later, of philosophical argument as discursive self-erasure, of identity as difference and as “deference.” It is this refusal of philosophy to admit that the claim of objectivity is nothing more than a linguistic Pandora’s box from which are let loose all sorts of malicious ambiguities to taunt, and to haunt, the meditations of all “pure” thinkers that leads it to confuse genesis with foundations, and origin with causal factors.

In his one-hundred-page introduction to Husserl’s *Origins of Geometry*, published in 1963, Derrida takes on the very issues Husserl had raised in *The Crisis*, ironically, by seeking to go where Husserl had been unable to advance. Throughout his life Husserl had been preoccupied with discovering the sources of scientific certainty within the transcendental realm. But the transcendental realm, as Husserl finally admitted in the 1930s, is but a repository for volatile indeterminacies that conjure up even more challenging philosophical conundra. In the quest for eidetic certitude the specter of the incommensurable begins to raise its head, much as Gödel as a mathematician himself would admit during much the same era. Goya’s famous dictum about the “dream of reason” breeding “monsters” became more than a metaphorical insight about the failures of the Enlightenment; it pointed to the kind of “crisis” Husserl diagnosed which, in many respects, became a *crisis of phenomenology itself*.

The problem derives, as Derrida understood, not from any confusion of purpose in the analysis of a transcendental ego, but in the fact—which Husserl himself grasped very well toward the end of his life—in the very corporeal character of the “I” itself. It is the incarnate “I”, not the flux of consciousness within its

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<sup>15</sup> Jacques Derrida, *The Problem of Genesis in Husserl’s Philosophy*, trans. Marian Hobson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press), xxi.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

immanent and transcendental—yet still idealized—environment, from which all *Sinn*, or “sense”, is mobilized. Sense is not a peculiar component of the *Satz*, or “proposition,” as Frege (whom Husserl greatly admired) regarded it. It is what transpires within the plane of immanent cognition once the transcendental frame of reference comes to be disclosed for what it actually is, the self-referentiality of the body in space and time as the basis of every logical inference which we can express, in Frege’s own parlance, as *Bedeutung*, “meaning” or “reference.”<sup>18</sup> “One’s own body,” Derrida insists, turns out to “be the primordial *here* and zero-point for every *objective* determination of space and spatial motion.” (*Origins*, 85) In a word, the body—or what in its “universal” determination Derrida describes, following Nietzsche, as the “earth”—is a metonym for the perplexities of the phenomenological undertaking *tout ensemble*. It is the “origins of geometry” or, more precisely speaking, of the eidetic method as conceived by Husserl in his own unique manner. We would leave it to Merleau-Ponty, and to a lesser extent Sartre, to carry forward an attempted solution to this problem as the larger subtext for Husserl’s elaborated positions laid out in *The Crisis*. But where the latter would do so by shying away from eideticism as the inaugural task of phenomenological analysis overall, Derrida in *The Origins of Geometry* sought to reclaim that task itself through what by the late 1960s he had named specifically—as “grammatology” or “deconstruction.”

The geometer, Derrida goes on to argue, invents eideticism from his surveying of the earth, a corporeal act, because he also invents language. And it is the invention of language—the “grammatological” signifiers that replace the amorphous estimations of geological surveys—from which philosophical rigor as *die stregste Wissenschaft* emerges full-blown. “If the possibility of language is already given to the primally instituting geometer, it suffices that the latter has produced in himself the identity and ideal permanence of an object in order to be able to communicate it. Before the ‘same’ is recognized and communicated among several individuals, it is recognized and communicated within the individual consciousness.”<sup>19</sup> By the time he wrote *Of Grammatology*, however, Derrida realized that the “same” is not a feature of consciousness so much as it is the effect of writing. Hence, Derrida’s now famous way of both reading and doing philosophy that we know as *deconstruction* is founded on this duplicity in both “consciousness” and oral communication that requires it be permanently inscribed, or “written down.” The duplicity historically can be assigned to the invention of record-keeping, which anthropologists now are persuaded was the motive as well as the historical “genesis” for writing as a whole.

If it were not for writing, according to Derrida, there would be no Plato, who oddly privileged oral transmission, let alone a Hegel for whom the dialectic itself would be impossible without the contrarieties of the “speculative” sentence-form itself, which are only evident once *logos* has been formalized through the development of the sorities, the codified proposition-structure that by the twentieth century was further refined as *symbolic logic*. For Derrida, it is the

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<sup>18</sup> See Gottlob Frege, *On Sense and Reference* (London: Blackwell, 1960). Frege, *Kleine Schriften* (Hildesheim, Germany: George Olms AG, 1990), 143-163.

<sup>19</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Edmund Husserl’s Origin of Geometry*, trans. John P. Leravy, Jr. (Lincoln NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1978), 85.

movement of this dynamic sentence-structure that belongs first to the labors of inscription and only secondarily to formal, deductive argumentation. In this dynamic movement, which involves everything from reading to reception, interpretation, and further writing, we discover the *deference* (what I have alternately in my own work dubbed “de-position”) of the sign to its meaning-outcome, a broad principle of language Derrida took directly from Saussure’s structural linguistics.<sup>20</sup> Deference is the cogwheels of deconstruction, which only produces “sense” once we are trying to make sense out of ongoing sentences and paragraphs, which require writing. Deconstruction is the essence of writing. As Derrida notes, the “work” of deconstruction is always at work within the work. It is not so much a *Werk* as a *Wirkung*, an ongoing effectuation of the force of the work. The speculative sentence is not so much the reflection of the work in itself and upon itself, but the “working out” of the virtual semiology of the proposition.

## II.

In his proto-deconstructionist essay “Force and Signification” published in 1963, Derrida sallies forth with the “post-structuralist” rendering of Hegel’s speculative sentence in his suggestion that writing is “inaugural.” Inaugural writing is “dangerous and anguishing. It does not know where it is going, no knowledge can keep it from the essential precipitation toward the meaning that it constitutes and that is, primarily, its future.”<sup>21</sup> Writing does not “create” so much as because of its “freedom to bring forth the already-there as a sign of the freedom to augur.” It is a “freedom of response which acknowledges as its only horizon the world as history and the speech which can only say: Being has already begun.”<sup>22</sup> The work, or the text, is being-in-force, which is (as it was for Hegel) being as temporalization, as differentiation, as coming-into-being. In the essay Derrida applauds and cites Hegel. “To say that force is the origin of the phenomenon is to say nothing. By its very articulation force becomes a phenomenon. Hegel demonstrated convincingly that the explication of a phenomenon by a force is a tautology. “Force is the other of language without which language would not be what it is.”<sup>23</sup>

But the force of word, and *mutatis mutandis* the force of thought, derives from the “duplicity,” which Hegel recognized in the dialectical thrust of discursivity overall. For Hegel, force is always dividing itself and “forcing” itself back upon itself—hence the dialectical return of the proposition back to itself. Hegel introduces the notion of “force” (*Kraft*) in subsection III of the opening portion of the *Phenomenology*. It is the bridge notion that joins his initial analysis of “sense certainty” and the primitive determination by the mind of what is meaningful to the fuller exploration of self-consciousness. Force is what shapes, or lends a

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<sup>20</sup> See Carl Raschke, *Postmodernism and the Revolution in Religious Theory: Toward a Semiotics of the Event* (Charlottesville VA: University of Virginia Press, 2012).

<sup>21</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), 11.

<sup>22</sup> *Writing and Difference*, 12.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 27. Emphasis mine.

"plasticity" to, the roiling diversity of elements (*Materien*) in the process of conceptual construction—and "deconstruction," for that matter. These sundry *Materien* "mutually interpenetrate"; but it is only because of the workings of "force" that they come together in an anticipation of Spirit becoming conscious itself in the specification of the "concrete universal."<sup>24</sup>

Following Kant, Hegel describes the process of conceptual analysis ingredient in logic and empirical "science" as the movement of dissolution, constitution, and specification, parrying the transcendental thrust of metaphysical reason. The understanding breaks the "idea into its original moments." Understanding relies on "the tremendous power of the negative," the "most astonishing and mightiest of powers, or rather the absolute power."<sup>25</sup> But the imagination is no match for the "life of the Spirit." Such a life "is not the life that shrinks from death and keeps itself untouched by devastation. It wins its truth only when, in utter dismemberment, it finds itself...Spirit is the power only by looking the negative in the face, and tarrying with it. This tarrying [*Verweilen*] with the negative is the magical power [*Zauberkraft*] that converts it into being."<sup>26</sup>

Derrida's "force of language" is closely akin to Hegel's "force" of persistent conceptual genesis, the venture of Spirit. It is the "other" that keeps impinging, that both backgrounds and foregrounds, that rouses, disturbs, and penetrates all configurations of thought, which might otherwise stagnate. Indeed, force is constantly "soliciting." To date so much of the effort at deciphering Derrida has concentrated on the semiotic exfoliation of texts. But this exfoliation is animated and sustained by the force that runs throughout, though remains invisible within, the semiotic process. There is a "Mephistophelean" restlessness to the proposition itself.

Derrida does not name such a "force" at this point. He does not really "name" the force until somewhat late in his career, and at that point it becomes more problematic than the "name" itself that is putatively named—*religion*. It is the best name under the circumstances and at that juncture that he can come up with. But by naming it he cannot circumscribe it. If religion is force, then there is more to force itself that meets the eye, especially when one is pondering something known as "the religious." His "not-naming" of this force, which early on becomes evident as a force of deconstruction, is contained in his generative reading of Hegel in the essay "The Pit and the Pyramid. Introduction to Hegel's

<sup>24</sup> "The [*Materien*] posited as independent directly pass over into their unity, and their unity directly unfolds its diversity, and this once again reduces itself to unity. But this movement is what is called Force." Force "expresses" itself. Yet force remains "within itself in the expression." Force is what draws and holds together every constituent and its alterity, or "other". Expression is the "materialization" of this force, its shaping and configuring. "Force is rather itself this universal medium in which the moments subsist as [*Materien*]." But it is also the force that drives the formative concept beyond these momentary configurations. "In fact Force is itself this reflectedness-into-self , or this supersession of the expression. The oneness, in the form in which it appeared, viz. as an 'other', vanishes. Force is this 'other' itself, is Force driven back into itself."

*Phenomenology*, 83.

<sup>25</sup> *Phenomenology*, 18.

<sup>26</sup> *Phenomenology*, 19.

Semiology." Derrida challenges in a subtle, yet determined manner the received wisdom concerning the Hegelian dialectic.

In "Hegelian Semiology" Derrida performs a close reading of what is normally considered the "dialectic" by a thorough analysis of the sign-function in the play of difference. "Why is the metaphysical concept of truth in solidarity with a concept of the sign, and with a concept of the sign determined as a lack of full truth?" Derrida asks. If indeed Hegelianism, as conventionally held, is "the ultimate reassembling of metaphysics," why does it defer the meaning of the sign as only an "orientation" toward truth-in-progress, as "the lack and remainder in the process of navigation?"<sup>27</sup> Hegel, according to Derrida, notes a "kind of separation, a disjointing" between the intuition of presence and the movement of signification. The sign is not a representation, but a "fantastic" deposition of the intuition, a "representation...of a representation." It becomes *etwas anderes vorstellend*, "something other representing." In this setting "Vorstellen and represent release and reassemble all their meanings at once."<sup>28</sup> Derrida terms this second-order representation "a strange intuition" (Hegel dubs it *einen ganz anderen Inhalt*), because it remains highly questionable what it "represents," if it represents anything at all. In other words, the production of the sign in the dialectical movement of consciousness, for Hegel, is part and parcel of the generation of what Derrida calls the *trace*. This process of "tracing" in Hegel is at the same time self-generating. It arises from the temporalizing of thought, which reading and writing ultimately certify in accordance with the "marking" of the text. "The production of arbitrary signs manifests the freedom of the spirit," Derrida observes.<sup>29</sup>

In subsequent pages Derrida leverages these same passages in Hegel to expose the incestuous union between phonics and metaphysics (his essential argument against "logocentrism"). The relation of "relevance" between signs, whereby signs signify, is not based on the simple differential that de Saussure indicated. Différance, in Derrida, constitutes a "different" kind of differential that runs throughout the kinetic ensemble of inscriptions, sounds, and significations. But it is more the formal differential between speech, writing, and phenomenon that reveals the mechanism whereby ontology remains the ghost of presence than it is an indicator of how signification itself actually works. Here Derrida ties "relevance" to the Hegelian moment of *Aufhebung* in the dialectic, translated into the French as *relève*, the "relifting" of the sign into "sight" through sound whereby it becomes permanent presence, whereby it "cannot be eaten," Derrida says quoting Hegel himself. The sign that is relevé becomes an ideal object for thought, a mode of "temporal interiority." Such ideal objects are such matter for "phenomenology" in the Husserlian, not the Hegelian, sense. But they remain impassive. They "resist the *Aufhebung*", and they "hold back the work of dialectics.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 80-1.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 81.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 86.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 92. Derrida goes on to show how any genuine *Aufhebung* requires the kind of work that deconstructs the work, which writing accomplishes. But what Derrida fails to

If there is no Easter morning in deconstruction, however, there is yet the “promise” that deconstruction conceals, a *force* that augurs the advent of what is “to come” (*avenir*, as Derrida calls it in French). And this force manifests itself in the performative power of language itself. Heidegger had said famously that it is language that is the performative power of the Aristotelian *todi ti*, the “what is.” *Die Sprache spricht*; “language speaks”. But Derrida makes potent strategic use of this insight of Heidegger in redirecting the linguistic puzzle of the performative toward the question of a crisis of subjectivity itself. It is the *real* crisis that Husserl failed to recognize in the 1930s, according to Derrida.

The crisis of subjectivity is a crisis of the spirit, not in the obvious “spiritual” sense, but in the sense that *Geist* itself had descended into a state of destitution (*Verfallenheit*, as Heidegger would say) as well as “decay” (*Verwesen*). Such decay and destitution, Derrida argues in a somewhat meandering exegesis of Heidegger in *Of Spirit: Heidegger and the Question*, comes down to philosophy’s refusal of the theoretical richness of the force behind the subject in its odyssey manifesting the power of Spirit, what Derrida refers to as the innate “doubling” impact of historical subjectivity as a whole, a subjectivity first discovered at the dawn of the modern in the Cartesian moment of self-reflexivity, but which has

mention in “Hegel’s Semiology” is that the theory of a “grammatology” is already apparent, if not somewhat inchoate, in the latter’s own account of the nature of “spirit.” Written languages push the pure “contingency” (*Zufälligkeit*) of phonic utterances into a grammatical formality, whereby historical languages truly become possible, Hegel writes in the *Encyclopedia*. Citing Wilhelm von Humboldt, who at the time was forging the principles of comparative linguistics through the study of various living languages, Hegel draws a comparison between the philosophical “intelligence” inherence in languages with a structured, linear grammar and those, such as Chinese, which are purely pictorial and representational. “The imperfections of spoken Chinese are familiar. Plenty of their words have multiple, entirely different meanings, sometimes from ten to twenty, so that in enunciating a bare differences a subtle emphasis, intensity, inflection, or cry is made.” In the same section of the *Encyclopedia* that Derrida discusses Hegel he directly ties the operation of the sign to written language. The significance within a text of “mere signs” (*einfache Zeichen*), consisting of “multiple letters and syllables” in which they seem on the surface to be “dismembered” (*zergleidet*), according Hegel, is that they are able to collate and to foster an alliance (*Verbindung*) of numerous representations. That allows for the possibility of many kinds of logical inference and accounts for the superior value of written languages. Several pages earlier Hegel attributes the creation of this “alliance” to the force of language itself. It is a “force of attraction” among similar imagined objects), a force that “forces” the sign toward a unity of representations, and consequently allows for the unity of thinking. Whereas Kant had assigned this tendency toward *Verbindung* in the form of subjective consciousness in the so-called “transcendental unity of apperception,” the I think that conditions the coalescence of thoughts, Hegel explains the force of thought as a kind of “parergon” to the force of language along with the differentiation and reciprocal coherence of signs that comes about with the advent of a written language, a *Grammatik*. Hegelian semiology amounts to analysis of the intra-grammatical field of force which Hegel himself, long before Derrida and without the precedents of structural linguistics, discovered the “power” (*Macht*) of the negative we understand as the dialectic. Deconstruction in many ways the “subsumption” of the text by itself, its “Golgotha” (in Hegel’s sense at the end of the *Phenomenology*) as an *Anschauung* that is God’s “death” put into writing.

played itself out, and worn itself down, in the transcendental project overall. "Through the appeal Husserl makes to a transcendental subjectivity which remains in the Cartesian tradition—even if sometimes to awaken it against Descartes—this discourse on the crisis might constitute one of the symptoms of the destitution."<sup>31</sup>

The real problem is the transcendental attitude itself, according to Derrida. Keeping in mind that Derrida's initial motive in writing *Of Spirit* was to wade into the controversy at the time over the relationship between Heidegger's philosophy and Heidegger's Nazism, Derrida emerges with a surprising set of conclusions. The transcendental attitude—or at least in its general format that in the next sentence he names as "German idealism," perhaps excluding Hegel—has been responsible for the "instrumentalization of spirit." The instrumentalization of spirit masquerades as scientism and technology, or more specifically, the instrumentalization of a longing for a foundational and unshakable truth à la Descartes, an instrumentalization leading to "the degradation of the spiritual into the 'rational,' 'intellectual,' 'ideological,'" in other words, the *Gleichschaltung* (as the Third Reich called it), of all signifying instrumentalities into a totalizing propagandistic discourse that included the dehumanization of the "spiritual" world that Heidegger had sought to describe carefully in his analytic of *Dasein*.

It is force that keeps spirit alive, for Derrida. Derrida does not make this claim explicitly, but it is obvious from his constant referral in *Of Spirit* to the earlier work he did at the time of the publication of "Force and Signification." *Of Spirit* is less a definitive than a transitional work, a kind of meditative and hermeneutical space for Derrida to rescue the reputation of deconstruction as an epochal pivot in the history of modern philosophy, and not as simply a useful critical tool for literary and cultural theorists. With *Of Spirit* we have the first inklings of the themes prevailing in his so-called "political," "religious," and "ethical" later years. Even in *Of Spirit* Derrida plays around with such well-recognized notions from these years as "specter" (*revenant*) and the purely promissory nature of the political, the *avenir*, or what is "to come." But he still seems haunted by the Husserlian "crisis" in his own way—just as his writings are stalked in the first half of career by Levinas and the thought of the "other."

The ongoing crisis, we may assume for Derrida, is a realization of the impossibility of any philosophy striving for eidetic certainty to underwrite the ethical. In short, the crisis of the European sciences in Husserl's time came down to a certain "destitution" of Kantian practical reason. Whereas Derrida assumes Heidegger had a glimmering of this mode of destitution, the deeper issue—the genuine "question of the question," as the former names it in *Of Spirit*—is tantamount to the question of the genesis of subjectivity per se. The origin of the ethical belongs not to the realm of the transcendental (even in plumbing of the abyss of inchoate, self-cognition, Husserl's putative "religious conversion"), but to that of the subject in its "doubled," interior incommensurability with its own moral positing. Every gesture toward the ideal aim of acting on a "maxim" of

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<sup>31</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Of Spirit: Heidegger and the Question*, trans. Geoffrey Bennington and Rachel Bowlby (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 61.

"pure practical reason" results in the failure of the subject itself, the kind of inconsolable double-mindedness that Kierkegaard (whom Derrida ponders extensively through the Czech philosopher Patočka in *The Gift of Death*) and Lacan made the focal point for his own method of what we might term *existential, structural psychoanalysis*. *Existenz*, for both Kierkegaard and Lacan, meant "becoming a subject," or *subjectification* as a relentless process. For Derrida, it has one more solemn requirement. It means becoming "responsible." According to Patočka, whom he follows here, this process and the experience of historicity in general, is "not a decidable object nor a totality that can be mastered, precisely because it is tied to responsibility, to faith, and to the gift. To responsibility in the experience of absolute decisions made outside of knowledge or given norms, made therefore through the very ordeal of the undecidable." (*The Gift of Death*, 5).

It is only in the face of death, often our own death but also the possibility of the death of another, that we learn responsibility. But this responsibility comes, as Derrida reminds us, as a "gift." Furthermore, it is a gift that also entails a sacrifice, as in the case of Abraham and Isaac, the prototype for what Derrida reading Patočka terms the "secret of European responsibility," a secret that frames the "crisis." This sacrifice, specifically a "blood" or "carnivorous" sacrifice is, as Derrida writes in *Force of Law*, "essential to the structure of subjectivity." (*Force of Law*, 247).

What does Derrida mean by this statement, which comes across merely as an incidental observation, but in certain respects contextualizes his own comprehensive view of religion, ethical commitment, and political theory? As Derrida argues, commenting on Kierkegaard, in his lengthy exposition of the meaning of Abraham's willingness to sacrifice Isaac, the secret of European responsibility—and thus the destiny of European philosophy *tout ensemble*—consists surprisingly in the Christian break with the Greek orgiastic mysteries, on which Platonism along with Western ontology as we know it is founded. Hence post-structuralism's celebrated "reversal of Platonism" (Nietzsche's *umgedrehter Platonismus*) has nothing to do ironically with a preference for the Dionysian over the Apollonian, but with the recognition of the reality of the *tout autre*, the "wholly other," in contrast to classical ontology. It is the riddle of intersubjectivity that even Husserl was unable to resolve through his transcendental method, an intersubjectivity that is much more than a series of incommensurable variations in the subjective experience of the presence of the object, but the experience of the subject as pure other, and vice versa. Thus in looking at Husserl, Derrida, who begins his career by charting a pathway through phenomenology but *beyond* phenomenology, the "crisis" of the European *Wissenschaften* amounts to the inability to account for the phenomenological "thing" (even as Heidegger understood it) except as the Lacanian *das Ding*, "the thing that is impossible for us to imagine."<sup>32</sup> In the Lacanian theory of the symbolic, which infuses the whole of post-structuralism like a barely perceptible but all-permeating mist, the thing as *alter-subject* is the *objet petit a*, the "object" of impossible desire, and therefore not an object at all.

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<sup>32</sup> Jacques Lacan, *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis 1959-60, The Seminar of Jacques Lacan*, Book VII, trans. Dennis Porter (New York: W.W. Norton, 1986), 125.

It is the gift, which can only come through the “blood sacrifice” requiring the radical “conversion” of the subject as percipient ego into the subject as that site of response when confronted by the summon and the claim of the *ganz andere*. As Derrida says, “the *mysterium tremendum* announces another way of giving death or of granting oneself death. This time the word ‘gift’ is uttered.” This other way of apprehending death, and of acceding to responsibility, comes from a gift received from the other, from the one, in absolute transcendence, sees me without my seeing, holds me in his hands while remaining inaccessible.<sup>33</sup> Later in the same work Derrida asks “on what condition is responsibility” is such a gift possible and quickly proceeds to answer: “On the condition that the Good no longer be a transcendental objective, a relationship between objective things, but the relation to the other, a response to the other.”<sup>34</sup> Here it is obvious Derrida has at last acceded also to Levinas’ dictum that it is not ontology, but “ethics,” that must be understood as “first philosophy.” But what makes the gift a true “gift” in this sense, as opposed to the mere *Gegebenheit* of phenomenology (which would include Marion’s “reduction to the given”), is that it calls into being a “structure of invisible interiority that is called, in Kierkegaard’s sense, *subjectivity*.”<sup>35</sup>

### III.

Derrida’s answer to Husserl’s “crisis,” therefore, comes down to the realization that the question of the self—the Cartesian question as the ontology of the *selfsame*—must be put “under erasure” once and for all, and that the “matter” (*Sache*) of the subject replace it in its entirety. The matter of the subject is really the ethical challenge of the “given” as “gift,” a *Gabe* without any possible transcendental synthesis, an *es gibt* that sets in motion what Derrida understands as a wholly new “economy” of decisive and responsible agency, an agency without any form of epistemology to underwrite it. Linguistically speaking, this economy of a gift without desire, without objectivity, results in a *reductio ad singularitatem*, a realization that nothing is ultimately thinkable without what I have called the “orthogonal relationship” between being and alterity, a relationship that is not planar as in predicative logic, but one that maps the seeming asymmetry between the event of *de-structured* subjectivity and the signifying demands of the infinite, which always interrupts our thought and confounds us at “right angles” to the trajectory of philosophical explanation and “scientific” discourse.

The genuine question of philosophy, therefore, is the question one commonly asks in the event of meeting and engagement: *Was gibt’s?* “what gives”? What gives is the other to whom we are infinitely responsible, as Kierkegaard, Levinas, and Derrida would all say, and who does not belong to an economy of *do ut des*, an economy of reciprocity and transaction, a non-economy and a *non-philosophy* (if we may cavalierly borrow François Laruelle’s expression) of what is

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<sup>33</sup> Jacques Derrida, *The Gift of Death*, trans. David Wills (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 40.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 50.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 109.

theologically called “grace” (*gratia*). The crisis of the European sciences—and of Continental philosophy—today is the refusal to accept this *donum gratiae* that has been offered by the post-structuralist revolution over the past four decades. It is the same “gift” that Nietzsche’s Zarathustra seeks to bring down from the mountain, only to realize that he is hardly understood except by his “animals.” Nietzsche understood Zarathustra’s gift as “untimely” (*unzeitgemäß*). But the “time” may have finally arrived.

Contra Marion, we must understand this “gift” not as givenness (*die Gegebenheit*) but as “force.” The problem of the given, as initially formulated by Kant and criticized as a “myth” by Wilfrid Sellars,<sup>36</sup> has in the twentieth and twenty-first century philosophical contexts been bandied about between phenomenologists and linguistic analysts as either the cipher for all cognition or as a kind of feint that averts our gaze from the intervention of the linguistic signifier. Derrida, citing the phenomenological legacy and Heidegger in particular, often has construed “givenness” in terms of the tensive manifestation of the unmanifest, the “thinking of the unthought,” the apparition of the “inapparent.” Thus there is no givenness without a strange kind of “gift” that bestows what is semiotically ordered and intelligible. Marion argues straightforwardly that the gift must be fully given to be a “given,” as does Derrida in truth, which is the roundabout implication of his crucial essay *Given Time*, where he insists that the “gift” cannot be inserted into the familiar economy of *do ut des*, but disables that very economy decisively.<sup>37</sup> Marion writes that “it is necessary that givenness characterize entirely...the phenomenon as *irrevocably* given. This means that the phenomenon finds in givenness not a mere entry into phenomenality, but the entire mode of this phenomenality.”<sup>38</sup> But what propels the entry? The stance of both linguistic analysis and post-structuralism is that there is no phenomenality without the act of signification that makes this phenomenality possible in the first place. In other words, it is the Heideggerian correlation of the “speaking of language” and the “being of Being” that conditions phenomenality in the first place. Marion is right to discount any kind of covert “hidden remainder” commensurate with what supposedly exceeds the moment of phenomenalization, a putative mystification for which Heidegger has been berated over the last few generations. In that respect, he simply administers the *coup de gras* to the critique first offered by Hegel, namely, that the uncognizable “thing in itself” is exactly that—uncognizable, and therefore inconsequential. *There can be no partial givenness.*

But, as we have seen, both Hegel and Derrida recognize that, just as in the old saying “a house is not a home,” so the giving is not necessarily the gift. Marion’s “reduction to givenness” avoids the question of “what gives,” and how do we enunciate the meaning this “whatness” (Aristotle’s original *tode ti*) in the production of a *signifying givenness* itself? “What gives” is the force behind the act of signification in which givenness is given. Phenomenology is incomplete and

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<sup>36</sup> See Wilfrid Sellars, *Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1967).

<sup>37</sup> See Jacques Derrida, *Given Time: 1. Counterfeit Money*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).

<sup>38</sup> Jean-Luc Marion, *Being Given: Toward a Phenomenology of Givenness*, trans. Jeffrey L. Kosky (Stanford CA: Stanford University Press, 2002), 120.

succumbs to a hidden totalitarian temptation if it ignores the “force” behind signification which makes givenness possible. We know that Husserl came up with a methodology known as “phenomenology” because he realized that a pure transcendental logic was impossible without the experience of givenness (generally understood). But from the onset he recognized that the experience of givenness cannot be necessarily considered pre-linguistic, nor semiotically virginal. In the first volume of his earlier work *Logical Investigations* Husserl wrote that “the objects which pure logic seems to examine are...given to it in grammatical clothing.”<sup>39</sup> Later in his “Origin of Geometry,” a passage on which Derrida eventually pounced, Husserl noted that linguistic constructions “give themselves in consciousness as reproductive transformations of an original meaning produced out of an original activity; that is, in themselves they refer to such a genesis.”<sup>40</sup> Such a genesis Derrida names as force, and it is ironic that Marion, Derrida’s student, sought to overlook this proto-Husserlian strategem of problematizing the given in this manner *tout ensemble*. Derrida indeed took up Husserl’s crisis as his own kind of challenge, and remade Continental philosophy in the process.

The historical filiation between phenomenology and deconstruction has not until very recently been explored in any serious-minded way.<sup>41</sup> But the two streams of Continental philosophy are ultimately inseparable in their (admittedly divergent) efforts to answer the fundamental question “what gives”? It is really the fundamental question behind the infamous *Seinsfrage*. Perhaps we can call it the *Gebensfrage*.

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<sup>39</sup> Edmund Husserl, *Logical Investigations*, vol. 1, trans. J.N. Findlay (New York: Routledge, 1970), 167

<sup>40</sup> *The Crisis of the European Sciences*, op. cit., 365.

<sup>41</sup> The exception of course is the work of Jason W. Alvis.