

François-David Sebbah, *L'Épreuve de la limite: Derrida, Henry, Levinas et la phénoménologie* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2001), vi+320 pages.

L'Épreuve de la limite, a revision of François-David Sebbah's 1998 doctoral thesis, examines the landscape of recent work in French phenomenology. Sebbah guides the reader through this landscape by identifying a common theme uniting the work of all the French phenomenologists under consideration (Henry, Levinas, Derrida, and Marion), namely, their fascination with what exceeds the limits of phenomenology. Sebbah's work is particularly noteworthy in that it does not simply summarize these recent contributions, but offers a critical assessment of their respective attempts to transgress the limits of phenomenology. Throughout its evaluation of those attempts, Sebbah's discussion remains focused, subtle, and highly original.

After providing a general introduction to his project in Part I ("Toward a Critique of Phenomenological Rationality"), Part II ("The Border of Time") addresses the question of the limits of phenomenology. Sebbah shows that the French phenomenologists under consideration share a common search for an excess beyond the limit of phenomenology, be it an excess of temporality (Henry and Levinas) or one of givenness (Marion and Derrida). Both Henry and Levinas identify this excess beyond phenomenology through a re-reading of the Husserlian account of temporality, one that focuses in particular on the Husserlian notion of the *Urimpression*. For Henry, the *Urimpression* offers resources for conceiving a dimension of temporality that is altogether different from the type of temporality constructed through intentional consciousness. The *Urimpression* would point to

the temporality of an absolute immanence in which life is affected solely by itself. Levinas's reading of the *Urimpression*, by contrast, uncovers the excess of an absolute transcendence. That is, whereas every mode of intentional consciousness would on Levinas's view remain internal to consciousness, the *Urimpression* would point toward the diachrony of an alterity that exceeds and precedes internal time consciousness. However, Sebbah suggests that it is not necessary to side in favor of either Henry's absolute immanence or Levinas's absolute transcendence, because these two notions can complement one another, as if they were two sides of the same coin.

Sebbah does however take sides in the debate between Marion and Derrida over the status of the gift. In agreement with Derrida, Sebbah argues that Marion falls prey to an absolutization of the gift. As a result, Marion's phenomenology of the gift becomes a thought in which nothing surprises, because everything is already given over to the absoluteness of the gift. Marion simply unfolds a rational hierarchy leading toward the absolute phenomenon of the gift. Although he acknowledges that the absolute gift exceeds the limits of phenomenological appearing, Sebbah rejects the way in which Marion transgresses the limits of phenomenology. Marion's work offers no resistance or challenge to the progress of a reason that marches beyond the limits of phenomenology toward the absolute gift. Without any test of the limit to be found there, Sebbah dismisses Marion's work in order to focus his attention solely on those thinkers who, on his view, test the limit while still holding onto the interior border of phenomenology. Given this decision, one might contend that it is highly problematic for Sebbah to assume that the work of Henry, Levinas, and Derrida ought to fit such a description, since these thinkers distance themselves from phenomenology and at least imply that they are no longer working within its

borders. Although it might be possible to accept Sebbah's decision, it simply lacks adequate justification here.

In Part III ("The Test of Subjectivity"), the question of the limit of phenomenology is connected to the question of the subject. In the test of the limit, it might be asked, is there not also a subject who is being tested? Here Sebbah observes that "excess gives rise to the self who endures it. Excess, primary in its own way, gives rise to the test that tests it; a test which as such is always first in and of itself" (171). In other words, the test of the limit, instead of leading to the dissolution of the subject, actually gives birth to the subject. For the phenomenologists under consideration the task is thus to articulate how the excess of the limit, as identified above, gives birth to a type of subjectivity that differs radically from the transcendental subject of traditional phenomenology. For Levinas, the excess of absolute transcendence shows that the subject is born from a diachronic time in which the alterity of the other precedes the subject and assigns it to itself. For Henry, by contrast, the excess of absolute immanence shows that the subject is not a product of its relation to the surrounding world but is born from the temporality of Life in which the self is affected by itself prior to any relation to the world. But can one speak of a Derridean subject? The most notable feature of Sebbah's discussion of subjectivity involves his attempt, in spite of Derrida's protestations, to piece together a Derridean account of the subject. The Derridean subject, as Sebbah suggests, is a "spectral subject" who can no longer be conceived solely in terms of life but also must be thought in terms of what exceeds life, namely, death. Death, though it exceeds the limits of the subject, signifies an excess which is at once beyond and within life. The spectral subject is haunted by a death that it cannot grasp but cannot release, either. Defined in terms of both its possibility and its impossibility in

relation to death, the spectral subject is, as Sebbah shows, a split subject, ineluctably separated from itself

Part IV (“Phenomenological Discourse and Subjectivation”) ties together the two previous threads—the excess of the limit and the test of subjectivity—and considers their implications for phenomenological discourse. If the test of the limit indeed marks the encounter with something exceeding phenomenology, how, one might ask, can it be expressed in phenomenological discourse? In a very innovative move, Sebbah suggests that the answer might lie in the notion of rhythm. He notes the prominent role ascribed to rhythm in Levinas’s essay on the painter Jean Atlan (“Jean Atlan et la tension de l’art,” in *Cahier de l’Herne: Emmanuel Levinas* [1991]: 509–510.). There Levinas focuses on the painter himself at work and suggests that it is the artist’s brush that is the locus of the creative tension of art. The tension of the brush, which creates by hesitating, pausing, and interrupting itself, serves as a model for how phenomenological discourse can express the test of the limit. Like Atlan’s brush, the rhythm of Levinas’s discourse in *Otherwise Than Being* creates a diachronic time through the discontinuity of its hesitations, pauses, and interruptions. Similarly, Henry is confronted with the challenge of explaining how Life, whose absolute immanence supposedly exceeds all appearing, can be expressed in phenomenological discourse. Sebbah notes that Henry, in his discussion of the artist August von Briesen (in *Le Nouveau Commerce* 61 [1985]), also employs the notion of rhythm to explain how phenomenological discourse can encounter the test of the limit. Von Briesen, who literally attempts to draw music, does not seek to represent music in space; instead his pencil produces a flash that separates itself from all spatiality. Similarly, Henry’s texts do not offer a representation of Life; instead their rhythm allows Life to burst into the text with a flash that breaks free from all textuality.

BOOK REVIEWS

Even though Sebbah's innovative discussion of the role of rhythm in phenomenological discourse is quite impressive, one cannot help but feel that it fails to arrive at its logical conclusion by including a discussion of its role in Derrida's work. Here, Sebbah might have chosen to examine Derrida's discussion of the French word *pas*, whose rich semantic reservoir contains the notions of a step, a pace, a passage, a bottom, a distance, and a negation, among other possible nuances. What, Sebbah might have asked, is the rhythm (*le pas*) of Derrida's work? What do all of Derrida's negations, side-steps, double-steps, and passages indicate about the work of phenomenology and/or deconstruction? Moreover, what do they indicate about the status of the Derridean subject who is born from the test of the limit? In this connection, it would have been beneficial for Sebbah to provide a further discussion of the implications of his study for contemporary phenomenology. That is, since the originality of this study lies in its suggestion that contemporary phenomenology, in order to test the limit, must adopt a set of literary and rhetorical strategies in order to accomplish its task; since, in short, Sebbah's study thus seems to imply that contemporary phenomenology, to some extent, must become art, a satisfactory discussion of the above-mentioned issues, while it would surely have been extraordinarily complex and intricate, would have made this a book that would deserve a place alongside the works of those figures who are examined by Sebbah. In spite of this omission, Sebbah's work is nevertheless a very impressive debut. This book will be extremely valuable to anyone interested in contemporary French philosophy.

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