

Christian Dupont, *Phenomenology in French Philosophy: Early Encounters*, Springer, 2014, pp. 338, € 106.99, ISBN 9789400746404

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This book, published by Springer in 2014, is the penultimate volume in the distinguished *Phenomenologica* series. As the Author clearly states in his brief *Preface*, the book is basically – apart from a few little adjustments – his doctoral dissertation, presented at the University of Notre Dame in 1997.

The aim of this work is “to provide relevant and helpful background for understanding contemporary engagements of phenomenology and theology” (p.4) in the French setting. To this end, the Author seeks to answer the following questions: “How did Husserl and his followers become known in France? Why did the French become so interested in his thought in the first place? Why did the reception of Husserl’s thought proceed in philosophical and theological circles?” (p.4). The reasons prompting the Author to embark on this work lie in the fact that “the initial reception of phenomenology in France”, prior to 1940, “has never been closely analyzed, nor have the contributions of French religious thinkers to the interpretation of Husserl received adequate appreciation” (p.4).

In the first introductory chapter, the Author suggests working definitions for the terms “reception”, “phenomenology” and “religious thought” (pp.7-15). In the second chapter, he goes on to deal with the forerunners of phenomenology in French thinking. For this purpose, Dupont identifies three major currents in France at the end of the nineteenth century, namely positivism, idealism (paying particular attention to the works of Charles Renouvier and Léon Brunschvicg), and spiritualism (with a focus on the writings of Félix Ravaisson, Jules Lachelier and Émile Boutroux). He then compares “the general characteristics of each current to Husserl’s approach in order to suggest whether they might have contributed to the reception of his thought in France” (p.23). However, “despite the fact that certain similarities existed between phenomenology and the major currents in French philosophy at the end of the nineteenth century, none of the individual philosophers discussed [...] can be considered a direct precursor to the reception of phenomenology in France” (p.37). Indeed, to find such

precursors, we must look to the subsequent generation of French philosophers, and especially to the philosophies of Henri Bergson and Maurice Blondel, to whom the last part of the chapter is consequently dedicated.

As far as Bergson is concerned, the similarities with Husserl's phenomenology relate basically to the fact that "both Husserl and Bergson insist upon raising intuition to the level of a philosophical method. The method for both consists in the immediate apprehension of 'lived experiences' to employ Husserl's vocabulary, or 'duration' to use Bergson's" (p.48). According to Dupont, there are nevertheless some fundamental differences between the philosophies of Husserl and Bergson. For a start, "Husserl mapped scientific understanding onto mathematics and geometry, whereas for Bergson biology [...] represented the ideal science" (p.50). Moreover, "Bergson [...] differs from Husserl in his understanding of the range of intuition" (p.51), in his views on the constitution of objects and time, and in his comprehension of the nature of consciousness. Dupont then turns to the strong influences that Bergson's philosophy had on French religious thinkers of his time.

As for Blondel, the Author remarks that, "[t]he similarities between the critiques of positivist approaches to science mounted by Blondel and Husserl, as well as the parallels between their respective notions of intentionality, intuition, and intersubjectivity, support the hypothesis that Blondel functioned as a precursor to the French reception of phenomenology" (p.85). The effect of Blondel's thinking on French theologians was actually so strong that, like Dupont, we might even be led to wonder whether Blondel should "be regarded as a theologian or as a philosopher" (p.86). In actual fact, "Blondel was caught between philosophers and theologians. He wanted to be accepted by both; frequently however, both found his positions objectionable" (p.89).

In the third chapter, the Author distinguishes between four stages in the reception of phenomenology by French academic philosophy between 1910 and 1930, associating each stage with contemporaneous pairs of thinkers.

The first stage is personified by Léon Noël and Victor Delbos. The Belgian Thomist Léon Noël was the first to mention Husserl's work in a French-language publication, in an article written for the *Revue néo-scholastique de philosophie* in 1910. The following year, Victor Delbos, a historian of philosophy at

the Sorbonne, published a paper entitled *Husserl, sa critique du psychologisme et sa conception d'une logique pure* that, Dupont tells us, “attracted wide notice” (p.109) in the French academic world. “Both Noël and Delbos devote most of their attention to Husserl’s critique of psychologism” (p.107) and they “initiated interpretations of Husserl that would endure in France into the latter half of the 1920s” (p.109).

The second pair of philosophers discussed in this chapter are Lev Shestov and Jean Hering. It is important to remember that Hering’s study entitled *Phénoménologie et philosophie religieuse* (1926) was the first monograph on phenomenology to be published in the French language. Dupont speaks of the lively debate between Shestov and Hering on Husserl’s phenomenology and claims that it “marks a considerable advance over the earlier descriptions of Husserl offered by Noël and Delbos”, because Shestov and Hering “clearly identify Husserl as a phenomenologist and furthermore place him at the center of important contemporary philosophical controversies regarding the limits of reason and the future of metaphysics” (p.117). Dupont adds that they “were probably also responsible for the tendency to conflate Husserlian and Hegelian phenomenologies” (p.117).

The third stage in France’s reception of phenomenology is marked by a process of popularization and associated with the figures of Bernard Groethuysen and Georges Gurvitch. In 1926 Groethuysen wrote the first general introduction to Husserl’s phenomenology in French. His contribution lies in “a sympathetic interpretation of the philosophical renewal initiated by Husserl” (p.122). In addition, he “introduces some of the basic principles of the phenomenological method” and he announced “themes that would characterize future French receptions of phenomenology” (p.122). On the other hand, he “ignored or misconstrued some of the fundamental aspects of Husserl’s teachings” and “failed to discuss any of Husserl’s works besides the *Logos* essay” (p.122).

For his part, Gurvitch published a volume in 1930 containing four studies on Husserl, Scheler, Lask and Hartmann, and Heidegger, that Dupont addresses in detail. He claims that “Gurvitch offered a much clearer account of Husserl’s thought and the growth of the phenomenological movement in Germany than any of his predecessors in France” (p.127). It is with Groethuysen and Gurvitch, Dupont concludes, that “[f]or the

first time the educated French public was positioned to appreciate phenomenology as a philosophical movement in its own right, and not simply as a corrective criticism of psychologism and logicism” (p.137).

The fourth and last stage in the French philosophical reception of phenomenology is marked, as Dupont writes, “by the adoption and transformation of its essential themes” (p.139). As the principal figures in this stage, Dupont chooses Emmanuel Levinas and Jean-Paul Sartre. “[U]nlike their predecessors, who did not go much further than explaining Husserl’s principal teachings and offering limited criticism, Levinas and Sartre incorporated phenomenology in the development of their own philosophical frameworks” (p.151), as the Author’s explanation of the phenomenological debts of their thinking clearly indicates. Levinas’ translation (together with Gabrielle Peiffer) of the *Cartesian Meditations* was also “an important stimulus for additional creative appropriations of phenomenology in France” (p.158). But it was Sartre, more than Levinas, who transformed phenomenology into a new species of French philosophy. “Sartre actually assimilated Husserl’s theory of intentionality to his own essentially dualistic Cartesian theory of consciousness” (p.158).

Dupont then turns to the “sources of the reception of phenomenology among French religious thinkers” (p.162). He dedicates a fourth chapter to this reception process during the years elapsing between 1901 and 1929, and a fifth chapter to the period between 1926 and 1939.

In his fourth chapter, Dupont addresses the writings of Édouard Le Roy and Pierre Rousselot. He suggests that Le Roy may have “played the role of a precursor to the reception of phenomenology in French religious thought” (p.188). This is due to the influence of Bergson’s philosophy on his thinking and because his “attempts to show the contradictions inherent in negative solutions to the problem of God, and especially his dialectical phenomenology of the will, evidenced strong affiliations to the method of immanence advanced by Blondel” (p.188). On the other hand, the study of Aquinas, Blondel, and Maréchal by the neo-Thomist Pierre Rousselot, combined with his original syntheses of their main views, prepares “fellow neo-Thomist theologians for their eventual encounters with Husserlian phenomenology” (p.209). Indeed, Rousselot “managed to infuse an intellectualist perspective with some of

the prominent phenomenological characteristics that distinguished French spiritualism and pragmatism” (p.210).

Dupont’s fifth chapter focuses on the works of Jean Hering, Gaston Rabeau and Joseph Maréchal, also taking the neo-Thomist appraisals of phenomenology into consideration.

In his application of phenomenological methods and insights to religious philosophy, Hering reportedly attributes an “important role to the Augustinian and Platonic aspects of phenomenology [rather] than to its Aristotelian features” (p.231). Rabeau’s contribution can be divided into three phases, which culminate in an attempt “to introduce phenomenological perspectives into the framework of an Aristotelian theory of knowledge” (p.250).

The key feature of Maréchal’s work, on the other hand, lies in that it combines phenomenology and Thomism: Dupont says that his essay *Phénoménologie pure ou philosophie de l’action?* in 1930 “would remain the most sophisticated attempt by a Thomist thinker to bring his tradition into dialogue with phenomenology” (p.277). This trend in the reception of phenomenology in French religious thought reaches its climax in the first annual day of studies organized by the *Société thomiste* in 1932, on the topic of “Thomism and Contemporary German Phenomenology”, which Dupont discusses in detail in the final part of the chapter.

The last chapter summarizes the main features of the historical reconstruction presented in the volume and briefly surveys the subsequent history of how phenomenology was received in France, focusing especially on “the two principal phenomenological currents that have had an impact upon contemporary French religious thought, the hermeneutical style of phenomenology developed by Paul Ricoeur and the radical strain advanced by Jean-Luc Marion” (p.319).

Dupont’s book provides a fundamental and exhaustive contribution to the history of the French reception of phenomenology during the crucial, but often ignored years prior to 1939. On the other hand, the scale of its references and its rigid separation into two parts, one concerning French philosophy and the other French religious thought, mean that his study sometimes lacks theoretical depth in his description of the different philosophical and theological stances. Inexplicably, the book’s title makes no mention of the theological topic, despite the crucial part it plays in the book’s structure (possibly an even more important part than the strictly philosophical issue).

Perhaps each of these two parts deserved a separate, more in-depth analysis in two distinct volumes.