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# Adam Graves, "The Phenomenology of Revelation in Heidegger, Marion, and Ricoeur"

Darren E. Dahl

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**Graves, Adam.** *The Phenomenology of Revelation in Heidegger, Marion, and Ricoeur*. Rowman & Littlefield 2021. 222 pp. \$105.00 USD (Hardcover ISBN 9781793640574).

Within contemporary continental philosophy of religion, discussion about the phenomenology of revelation has been framed within the context of a hermeneutical critique. The gist of this critique—advanced initially by Richard Kearney and developed in the scholarly reception of Jean-Luc Marion’s work in English—is that a pure phenomenology of revelation neutralizes the content of revelatory texts, advances an account of phenomenality that precludes the work of interpretation, and posits a view of subjectivity in which the recipient of revelation is entirely passive. What is required instead, accordingly, is a robustly hermeneutic approach to revelation in which religious texts are understood within their historical milieu, the question of phenomenality is subordinated to questions of meaning addressed in reference to language and textuality, and the self is understood as the acting and interpreting participant in a constructed world. While much has been gained in this trajectory of interpretation, one wonders if it might be time to ask what this approach has overlooked, particularly considering the developing work of thinkers such as Emmanuel Falque, John Manoussakis, Emmanuel Housset, and Felix Ó Murchadha. In fact, it might be time to ask to what extent this hermeneutic critique has prevented a more rigorous study of the *phenomenology* of revelation. In other words, in what ways and to what extent has the default hermeneutic framework of this established trajectory precluded a deeper investigation of, for example, the work of Levinas, Henry, and Marion *as* works of phenomenology?

Adam Graves’ new book provokes this question. He indicates from the start that he intends to ‘offer a general framework for understanding the core problems and issues associated with the phenomenology of revelation’ (ix). Considering this intention, the question stated above becomes particularly pressing when we realize that the book takes its place squarely within the trajectory that I have just identified. Indeed, already in the preface, things begin to take a familiar shape. We learn that within the diversity of phenomenologies of religion there are two basic approaches to the phenomenology of revelation. One, which the author calls the radical approach, ‘seeks to disclose—either through a radicalization of the phenomenological reduction or a return to facticity, Being, etc.—a purely heterological experience of revelation, one that is not only *anterior* to objectivity and theoretical reflection but, crucially, *prior* to all forms of linguistic mediation as well’ (ix). The other, which the author calls the hermeneutical approach, ‘characterizes revelation in terms of an eruptive event that unfolds *in front of* concrete texts—texts which are themselves recognized as invariably situated within a particular historic-linguistic milieu’ (ix-x). Having established the options, the author asserts his claim on the side of hermeneutics: ‘My ultimate aim is [to] show that, unless supplemented by a genuine hermeneutic, the radical approach to revelation runs the risk of divesting revelation of its meaning and content, leaving us with a merely formal concept of revelation—a revelation *without* Revelation’ (10). Given the book’s placement within this established trajectory—a trajectory that might be due for its own critical intervention—the questions that face Graves’ book are: first, how will the analysis offered here advance a position that has been established for nearly a decade and, second, can a book placed so firmly in this



trajectory offer a general framework for understanding the phenomenology of revelation?

To begin with the first question, Graves' book does advance the trajectory of hermeneutic critique. First, he provides a novel interpretation of the problem underlying what he calls a radical approach to phenomenologies of revelation. Previously, scholars within this trajectory have noted that the religious content of these investigations is compromised by the phenomenologist's fear of being 'contaminated' by their theological sources. For Graves, however, this original fear of contamination rebounds upon the initial retrieval of the texts themselves, such that what is at stake is an earlier 'counter-contamination.' To put it otherwise, the problem is not so much that some thinkers formalize theological texts, and thus eliminate from them their theological content by drawing them into phenomenology, but that their initial choice and interpretation of these texts is already determined by the formalizing process they intend to carry out. In seeking to avoid contamination, Heidegger and Marion contaminate their sources with a set of formalizing presuppositions that align them to certain phenomenological assumptions. The second advance made by the book concerns its inclusion of Heidegger's work. Here Graves raises crucial questions about how to situate Heidegger in relation to a phenomenology of revelation. Finally, Graves' chapter on Ricoeur provides an important addition to the scholarly literature which has, until now, largely overlooked Ricoeur's participation in the discussion of religious phenomenality.

The success of the argument concerning counter-contamination will depend on the persuasiveness of Graves' readings of Heidegger and Marion. His reading of Heidegger is unexpected. In the usual strategy, Heidegger is claimed for the 'good guys' as the original thinker of a hermeneutics of facticity who inspired the philosophies of Gadamer and Ricoeur. For Graves, however, this is not the case. Here Heidegger is read as the first thinker of counter-contamination and, thus, the forerunner of what will become explicit in Marion. Methodologically, Graves' interpretation is heavily dependent on Derrida's reading of Heidegger's distinctions between the terms 'ontic/ontological' and 'revelation/revealability' and the development of these themes in the thought of Hent de Vries and Marlene Zarader. When he moves on to develop his own idea of counter-contamination, he relies on a reading of Heidegger's 1927/28 essay 'Phenomenology and Theology.' I suspect that careful readers of this essay will have questions about Graves' interpretation. According to him, not only does the essay show that Heidegger hollows out the theological content of Christian texts by formalizing their claims to place those claims in a phenomenological register, but that this 'hollowing out of Christian revelation occurs even before it is taken up into the existential analytic. In this case, Christian factual life experience is shown to be abstract and formal in and of itself' (53). Graves' attempt to show this from the essay strikes this reviewer as forced and suggests that a critique of Heidegger was read back into the essay. For example, despite Heidegger's own intricate description of *Christlichkeit* ('Phenomenology and Theology,' in *Pathmarks* (Cambridge University Press 1998), Graves claims that he provides no 'substantive account of its nature or contents' but only gives an 'ostensibly vague and indeterminate term' (57). Given that Heidegger's treatment of *Christlichkeit* actually points to the crucial sense of enactment that exempts the ontic content of Christian faith from objectifying thinking, it is doubly strange that Graves not only overlooks, but also characterizes the notion as

‘abstract’ and ‘formal.’ It seems that the only way to explain this and to see how this critique of Heidegger could work is if one had already decided what revelation is and that it is conveyed in a ‘determinate’ and ‘concrete’ content. While this may be the case, particularly if one holds to a theological-propositional notion of revelation, faulting Heidegger for not holding to it prejudices the matter against Heidegger.

Graves’ reading of Marion continues to reflect the interpretation that one finds among his hermeneutical detractors. For example, one finds here the familiar theme that his phenomenology is both dependent on, and a screen for, his theological project (106). We see this when, despite the extensive development of Marion’s phenomenological project, Graves ‘cannot help but wonder what, in the first instance, authorizes [Marion’s] further elaboration [of] the reduction’ (88) beyond the two instances articulated by Husserl and Heidegger. Now, where readers of Marion would point to the detailed historical analysis provided in *Reduction and Givenness* (Northwestern University Press 1998) and *Being Given* (Stanford University Press 2002)—not to mention the essays that have appeared in *Figures de phénoménologie* (VRIN 2012) and *The Reason of the Gift* (University of Virginia Press 2011)—Graves suggests, instead, that ‘Marion’s motivation for proposing a third form of the reduction cannot be fully understood outside of the broader quasi-theological project which he initiated’ in his earlier works (88). This claim is now as familiar as it is impervious to a reading of Marion’s texts. Moving deeper into the chapter, the familiar trajectory is further instantiated with Graves’ criticism of the pure call championed by Marion’s phenomenology and its production of a completely passive subject (§10, 112ff.). What is particularly worthy of scrutiny, however, is the way these familiar criticisms are employed to support a case that seems already to be decided against Marion. For example, looking forward to the analysis of subjectivity and the call in §10, Graves suggests that ‘[w]e will see that the only kind of Revelation capable of surviving the test of idolatry is one that is entirely abstracted from its positive, linguistic, and/or textual content under the aegis of a “pure” call.... Our hypothesis is that the methodological exigencies of [Marion’s] phenomenological analysis prevent him from examining “Revelation” in the fullness of its textual-linguistic dimensions’ (111). As this last sentence makes clear, Graves seems already to know what Revelation is—it is a collection of (authoritative?) documents that must be interpreted accordingly. Thus, the ‘abstract’ and ‘formal’ nature of Marion’s ‘radical’ phenomenology of revelation and, thus, his strategy of counter-contamination, seems to boil down to the fact that he does not advance an account of revelation that agrees with the fully formed hermeneutic one for which Graves has decided in advance.

When it comes to the chapter on Ricoeur, one feels that one has been anticipating its arguments from the beginning of the book. Indeed, the polemic disappears as the understanding of revelation that has inspired and determined the earlier critiques is unfolded with care and attention. And yet, one wonders if Graves’ critical eye has not been relaxed too soon. For example, is Ricoeur not also guilty of counter-contamination when he reduces in advance the category of revelation to the subset of a literary poetics aimed to provide a ‘world’ in which the reader discovers new subjective possibilities? Furthermore, coming back to the question of understanding the core problems and issues of a phenomenology of revelation, we would do well to think twice

about Graves' claim that 'Ricoeur's understanding of revelation implies an entirely different range of possibilities for phenomenological philosophy than is found in Marion' such that 'with the question of revelation, nothing less than the proper interpretation of the phenomenological heritage as a whole is at stake' (148).

When Graves later makes it clear that Ricoeur's understanding of revelation revolves around a theory of the 'text' and the subsequent conception of a literary 'world' (158-159)—arguing, in fact, that Ricoeur '[roots] his conception of revelation in a theory concerning the unique referential quality of literary texts' (159)—it is hard to imagine that such a regional account of revelation could offer a richer range of possibilities for phenomenological philosophy than that of Marion or Heidegger. Second, while Graves is surely correct to suggest that Ricoeur's 'hermeneutic phenomenology' proposes a choice regarding the proper interpretation of the phenomenological heritage, we must ask: where does such a choice lead? Has Ricoeur's work led back into phenomenology or away from it into an epistemology of the historical or social sciences?

To be more specific, in what sense does Ricoeur's account of revelation remain phenomenological, forcing the deepening of phenomenological categories rather than their abandonment? It is no doubt true that, if one decides in advance that 'revelation' refers primarily to a textual tradition understood in Protestant Christian terms as 'Scripture,' then Ricoeur's hermeneutic approach will be well-suited to understand revelation. However, if 'revelation' is not presumed to be understood this way but is instead taken up as a concept that points to a particular type of phenomenality on display in religious texts, practices, and works of art—a type of phenomenality irreducible to the kind advanced by Kant and adopted by Husserl and Heidegger—then Ricoeur's approach has less to offer. This seems to be borne out by contemporary phenomenology, where Ricoeur's work does not stand at the centre of questions being asked about religious phenomenality. In fact, in the work of Emmanuel Falque, for example, we see a move away from hermeneutic commitments to the 'text' that is inspired by a renewal of other, specifically phenomenological, questions. None of this is to say that Ricoeur's account of revelation should be ignored or that it does not offer some crucial phenomenological insights. The point, however, is that it cannot be given the role of judge and jury, by which the questions and answers are set in advance.

It should be clear by now how I would answer my second question concerning the book's ability to provide 'a general framework for understanding the core problems and issues associated with the phenomenology of revelation' (ix). Because the polemic has been set in advance, what we have here is less the articulation of a general framework and more that of a Ricoeurian framework by which two other positions are measured. It is appropriate that the book appears in a series dedicated to Ricoeur, for Graves' reading of him is strongest and no doubt offers an important contribution. The question remains, however, whether Graves has not enacted his own kind of counter-contamination of the work of Heidegger and Marion.

**Darren E. Dahl**, Briercrest College and Seminary