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BOOK REVIEW

# I Think Therefore We Are

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## **Description :**

A review of Recommencer en Phénoménologie ("Starting over in Phenomenology") by Matthieu Villemot; Parole et Silence ,2007

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**The NIB**

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## A review of

*Recommencer en Phénoménologie*

("Starting over in Phenomenology")

by Matthieu Villemot; Parole et Silence, 2007

A version in French of this review:

[Parutions.com](http://Parutions.com).

From the beginning of the 20th century European humanism took the form of phenomenology, which can be seen as idealism's modern way of resisting analytical philosophy and the accompanying tendency to lower a positive, determined, naturalistic, ceiling over the world, with technological society &mdash; according to this view &mdash; being one of the results. Among phenomenology's accomplishments, as it struggles against what some of its proponents call the "thingification" of the world, can be counted a strong comeback staged by the Subject while avoiding the pitfall of relativism, as well as some open and useful philosophical debates between religious believers and non-believers, and, last but not least, the development of a critical and ethical outlook on the social sciences and their big questions.

Matthieu Villemot is a young and skilled phenomenologist who manages to write both clearly and deeply on difficult subjects. His aim in this book is to develop the notion of empathy and "inter-subjectivity" as an important form of solidarity and answer to the question: how should we act in the world? Suspecting that the beginning of the answer lies in the beginning-again which is the heart of the phenomenological method, Villemot chooses to accompany two philosophers as they go back to Descartes and start over: Husserl, considered the founder of phenomenology, and Michel Henry, probably the most outwardly confessional (Christian) of phenomenologists. Husserl first made the pilgrimage back to Descartes' famous cogito starting point in an attempt to re-found philosophy and by extension science on irrefutably solid ground. In his keenly-felt mission to link the conscious subject to the objective fact in some satisfactory way, he discovered to his dismay that retracing cartesian doubt back to that luminous point of consciousness was in fact an act to be repeated continually, each time achieving results a bit more precise. If not, the philosopher is condemned to repeat the cartesian fix-it solution: separating mind and body and making the cogito into a kind of mathematics-like first axiom. Amidst the ruins of his dream of once-for-all re-foundation of scientific knowing, Husserl comes to see the beginning point as the way itself, as the only way to avoid the naturalistic error.

Villemot uses his account of Husserl to establish how starting over in phenomenology can be useful for replacing I with We in the transcendental exercise. One result of this way of thinking is to undo the exclusion that is formatted into any statement about 'we', the exclusion of the unspoken 'they'. In a discovery likely to be of use in an era that reacts to diversity with desparate belonging, an individual consciousness works back to the starting point and finds not so much a community of I's but rather that I in itself it is community. In its act of reducing or interrupting the flux of lived phenomena in order to grasp "things" in their absolute or transcendental nature, the Subject discovers "Moi, l'Humanité". It is as if the starting-again I, willing to live with the inevitable imperfection in the correlation of things with perceptions of things, and refusing to resolve the conflict by retreating into either relativism or objectivism, discovers every other consciousness in that common space or tension. Villemot develops this aspect of phenomenology until he reaches the point where the I discovers "we" to be an essential part of itself. Through his insistence on this aspect

Villemot contributes to a more complex, paradox-rich elaboration of what it is to be and to act human. If the starting point is Descartes and his Cogito, Villemot's account frees the subject from the cartesian dualistic choice between solipsism (my consciousness is all that is) and a willed, empirical knowledge of the world (objectivized reality is all that is).

Michel Henry also wore a path back to the cogito, which more often than not led him to attack Descartes and his (in Henry's reading) terrible choice in favor of objective knowing. In examining Henry's approach to recommencement, Villemot finds the former's vigorous rejection of objectification and representation to go too far, ending in needless manicheism. Nonetheless it is Henry's commitment to applying the insights of phenomenology to the world around him that founds some of his best work, and makes his thought a valuable contribution to Villemot's project of developing an inclusive Subject for acting responsibly in a world where humanity and tolerance are endangered phenomena. One of Henry's principal contributions is the identification of barbarity with a refusal to accept life as a force "which continually runs into and resists the objective thing", or in other words life as a force which disrupts the continual slide towards a remote representation which is passive, camped on its certitudes, providing refuge in the "thingification" of life.

Inter-subjectivity is when "Moi, l'individu" is replaced by Moi, l'Humanité", and Villemot is right to place it at the center of the phenomenological project. From here it is a small ethical step to theological topics, of which phenomenology in general and the French version in particular are not afraid. Readers quickly understand that this book lies within the so-called Theological Turn of French Phenomenology (by Dominique Janicaud), and in fact Villemot makes a point of defending Michel Henry against charges of being a theologian and not a phenomenologist. Why bother with all this? Because the stakes are much greater than dry quarrels about arcane minutia; the inter-subjective We, if it opens phenomenology to theological-sounding discussions, also gives this branch of philosophy real teeth for investigating the sense of life and human nature, and for applying those findings to life-in-the-world. Furthermore, the intellectual rigor of the author is such that it ensures that the book's insights fall on the believer and the unbeliever alike.

An example of the thinness of the line separating philosophy and theology is Villemot's demonstration of the material emphasis practiced by those phenomenologists who are most affected by the Christian notion of incarnation, and the resulting—and paradoxical &mdash; effectiveness of their arguments against excessively materialist positions. Another can be found in the passage where the author debates with an imaginary Christian believer the definition of man, countering the latter's fideism with a definition of humankind based on Husserl's shortfall between the I of cogito and the objectification of the same I in the body. As for applications, Villemot has a happy tendency to troll through contemporary debate for illustrations of his theses, as in his attack on the dangerous certitudes of those who refuse to recommence in Cartesian doubt and who finish by blowing up the Tube in London or "profane the Coran and torture suspects at Guantanamo".

What's to be gained in following Villemot as far as one can? A non-confessional methodology (the quest for some universals) for critical and ethical analysis of our often terrifying hic et nunc. Built into this method is a manner of thinking which with its insistence on radical and perpetual starting over recalls the inverse but closely linked path taken by Plato (often cited by dissident philosophers in the Soviet bloc), the one that leads (also perpetually) back

down into the cavern of human life. "One must always practice the extreme vigilance Descartes urged upon his readers; there is no indefinite moral progress which would guarantee that the horrors of yesterday could never return".

Put more positively, life is too beautiful and transcendent to be reduced to the objective level. It is easy to see the usefulness of Villemot's work for the social sciences. An approach that does not waver from a strong construction of the Subject and of solidarity among subjects creates some space between the twin threats identified by the author: fundamentalists, who do not begin again because armed with immutable truth, and relativists, who are content to leave everyone in their corners. It could also prove useful to a European civilization that appears to be torn between the apolitical utility of the manager and a common sphere of citizens, choices, and values.

(c) Timothy Carlson