

Assumption Readings 2012

Bearing Witness to the Other: Testimony and Intersubjectivity

John Panteleimon Manoussakis
College of the Holy Cross and Australian Catholic University

I would like to speak on the ambiguity of the Greek term *martyrion* which signifies both witness, testimony, but also martyrdom. I am interested in focusing on St Paul's expression "the testimony of our conscience" (*τὸ μαρτύριον τῆς συνειδήσεως ἡμῶν*, 2 Cor. 1:12) and how this expression has come to mean not only the approbation of one's own conscience but also, in Patristic exegesis dating back to Origen, a hidden "martyrdom"—an experience of suffering and death that is open to the life on interiority and perhaps makes such an interiority possible.

Writing during the persecution of Maximinus (AD 235-238), Origen already recognizes two forms of martyrdom, one visible (*ἐν τῷ φανερῷ*), the other hidden (*ἐν τῷ κρυπτῷ*).¹ The latter is identified with the martyrdom that conscience undergoes not once but every day (alluding to the Psalmist's verse 43:23 [44:22] "Yet for your sake we face death all day long; we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered"). In what does this "martyrdom" of the conscience consist? According to Origen, it takes the form of a judgment (*κρίσις*). In reading the well-known passage from the *Letter to the Hebrews*:

For the word of God is alive and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart. (4:12)

Origen sees in that judgment of "the thought and attitudes of the heart" a self-judgment that would take its final and fullest form at the last judgment.² The last judgment, therefore, will take place in the form of a self-examination and self-condemnation within each one of us, inasmuch as each one of us will bear witness against the evil in us. Here the two senses of the word *martyrion*, that is the bearing of witness and of martyrdom, coincide inasmuch as he who bears witness and he against whom the witness is borne, and therefore has to undergo a certain suffering, is one and the same person. Thus, Origen refers to a division (*διαίρεσις*) that is followed by a separation (*χωρισμός*)³ and even a bifurcation (*διχτομήσις*)⁴ of oneself from oneself. This idea found in Origen receives a more systematic treatment in the Eight Letter of Pavel Florensky's *The Pillar and the Ground of the Truth*. I remind you that the Eight Letter bears the title "Gehenna" and discusses the last judgment which, for Florensky "is a separation, a cutting off, an isolating."⁵ Here we find again a terminology very similar to that of Origen's.

¹ *Exhortation to Martyrdom*, XXI.

² *Ibid.*, XXXVII.

³ *Ibid.*, X, 32.

⁴ *Ibid.*, XXXVII, 27.

⁵ *The Pillar and the Ground of the Truth*, p. 161.

Florensky elaborates further as to what such a separation means: “It is therefore clear” he writes, “that salvation postulates a separation between person and character. (...) a person’s evil will, manifested in the lusts and pride of the character, is separate from the person himself.”⁶ Florensky reads all the eschatological passages of the Gospel in this sense, that is, as describing “how the selfhood of the condemned man perceives the judgment, of his subjective experience of this judgment...”⁷ For Florensky too, what is to receive a final form at the end of times begins already “in this life”. “Such (though voluntary) *cutting of*, or *uprooting*, of the sinful part from the empirical person is necessary even in this life”...⁸

My aim is to examine how these two meanings, namely of “being a witness” and of “bearing witness to” a truth or an event, connect with each other and with the concept of conscience: the term *witness*, etymologically, originates from the verb to *wit*, that is, to know, in particular in the sense of sense perception, to see (from *videre*). Witnessing presupposes knowing and, indeed, a theoretic knowledge, a certain form of seeing; therefore a witness is always a witness of what is seen and of what has shown itself, that is, of a phenomenon. More specifically, witnessing is to wit (i.e., to *say*) the phenomena, that is, a *phenomenology*.

By allowing witness to be understood as phenomenology, that is as an articulation, a logos, of the phenomena, of what manifests and reveals itself, we have arrived to the second term that is taken as synonymous to witness, namely, that of testimony. To bear witness is to testify, but there can be no testimony that is not, at the same time, a *testimonial*: a narrative and a story that opens witness to interpretation and therefore to hermeneutics. The concept of a *Testament* collects together all these nuances. The New Testament, for example, is a *testimonial* (a narrative) that *testifies*, that is, it bears witness, to God’s self-revelation (the *phenomenon par excellence*). That there should be a plurality of stories in such witnessing (e.g., the *four Gospels*) is only necessary, if witness is to be understood as offering an interpretation. The testimonial character of testimony implies and necessitates an Other and even a Third. Returning, therefore, to our original observation of “the testimony of our conscience” and the interiority that it implied, I would like to raise the question whether the interiority of conscience already presupposes the opening to an Other—that is, whether intersubjectivity takes precedence over subjectivity.

Yet, it would seem that by all accounts it is the I or the Ego that enjoins a certain priority: after all, from what other vantage point the phenomenologist is to carry his analyses but from what is immediately given to himself, namely his own I? And is not this I to which all phenomena appeal and appear, appeal in order to appear? Finally, is not this I, the transcendent ego, which unifies and individuates my consciousnesses (*Erlebnisse*)? How can I reach to the Other if I do not begin from the I who I am, if I am not even that I?

⁶ Ibid., p. 156.

⁷ Ibid., p. 175.

⁸ Ibid., p. 174, emphasis in the original.

Hans Urs von Baltasar has such an I addressing God thus:

Finally, you yourself have created me to exist within a prison, the prison of this my ego. In it I live, move and have my being. And I love this ego “for no one hates his own flesh.” This space is familiar to me: my thought illumines it; my senses crowd it with the world’s concerns; my will expands it widely. In this monad the universe is irretrievably reflected. Only within this interior space can I know the world, or even you: everything must be measured according to its standards. Just as the eye can see only colors and the ear can hear only sounds, so, too, I can know anything whatever only in its relationship to myself. Even love is a law of this ego (...) No, I do not long to go outside of myself! What would be the good of an ecstasy of “coalescing” with nature or with a loved person, if I could no longer experience them? How could I make you a gift of my love or offer you my ego in love if I no longer have this ego, if I am dispossessed of myself?...This is my beloved dungeon: I yearn for no freedom!⁹

Yet, phenomenology has given a quite different answer—namely that the I that speaks so in passage above, the I that denounces its freedom, is itself nothing else but an invention of sheer, unlimited freedom. It was Jean-Paul Sartre who first declared the ego to be an essentially *artificial* and *superficial* invention of the consciousness itself:

Perhaps, in reality, the essential function of the ego is not so much theoretical as practical. We have noticed, indeed, that it does not bind up the unity of phenomena; that it is limited to reflecting an *ideal* unity, whereas the real and concrete unity has long been effected. But perhaps the essential role of the ego is to mask from consciousness its very spontaneity.¹⁰

The question we need to ask is: for what reason does the ego need to play this essential role of masking from consciousness its very spontaneity, that is, of hiding from consciousness what consciousness is, its very nature and essence? The answer is clear: consciousness cannot bear its own freedom, it cannot stand itself. It always seeks to escape itself, either by its engagement with the world (that’s the function that intentionality had played in the unreflected level, as Sartre notices, “[b]y intentionality consciousness transcends itself. It unifies itself *by escaping from itself*”¹¹) or by erecting the ego, in front of whose restrictive function consciousness can now cast itself, relieved from its own unlimitedness. Hence Sartre’s enigmatic remark: “[c]onsciousness is frightened by its own spontaneity because it senses this spontaneity as *beyond freedom*”¹² Yet, spontaneity is nothing by another word for freedom here. Thus we have arrived to this enigma: what does a freedom “*beyond freedom*” could mean?

⁹ Hans Urs von Baltasar, *Heart of the World*, translated by Erasmo S. Leiva (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1979), pp.140-1).

¹⁰ Jean-Paul Sartre, *The Transcendence of the Ego: An Existentialist Theory of Consciousness*, translated by Forrest Williams and Robert Kirkpatrick (New York: Hill and Wang, 1960), p. 100, emphasis in the original.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 38, my emphasis.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 100, emphasis in the original.

Beyond freedom indicates a freedom that cancels itself out by being precisely free—so free that is “restrained” by its very inability and impossibility of being un-free.¹³ A freedom needs limits and restrictions in order to be perceived or perceive itself as free; that means that freedom is only a freedom towards this or that (“freedom to...” or “freedom from...”). Without limits, freedom falls upon itself, it becomes its own monstrous “limit”—that is, the very lack of any limit. Thus, the ego “saves” freedom (from itself) by bringing it back to a place where there are restrictions and limitations and therefore, freedom can continue to be free (by being limited).

Consciousness’s anxiety on the face of its own spontaneity—what is elsewhere known as an existential vertigo or nausea) is underscored by the absence of the will. Sartre defines the will as “an object which constitutes itself for and by this spontaneity,”¹⁴ over which the will is powerless. “The will directs itself,” Sartre continues, “upon states, upon emotions, or upon things, but it never turns back upon consciousness.”¹⁵ Throwing myself off some heights (in the case of vertigo) is not an act of my will but precisely the recognition that my will *not* to fall is rendered inoperative by the sheer spontaneity of my consciousness—in other words the thought that “if I were to fall down at this moment nothing, *not even myself*, could prevent me from falling”.

Consciousness as an absolute seems to allow no room for a god—in fact, it assumes itself those attributes that theology traditional assigns to God. Thus, consciousness is a cause of itself;¹⁶ unlimited and thus infinite;¹⁷ its representations are eternal,¹⁸ and so on. There is, here, the repetition of the old philosophical blasphemy that identifies seeing and knowing, *theaomai* and *theoria*, and attributes both to God (*theos*) but also to the philosopher’s ability to know. Consciousness, like a small god, can indeed regard everything from the point of view of its inscrutable interiority without been seen.¹⁹ In spite of such god-like characteristics, we have witness—and this *is* the witness that consciousness brings against itself, the “testimony of our conscience”—a consciousness ready to cast itself in front of whomever will promise to free itself from itself, that is, from its freedom. Such is the promise fulfilled by the ego. Yet, as we have seen, the ego is only a superficial and artificial invention of the consciousness. What for a moment appeared as the promise of a saving god, now it becomes nothing more but a false idol. The ego is the golden calf that consciousness in a tellingly idolatrous moment erects for itself.

¹³ In Sartre’s own words: “I am condemned to be free. This means that no limits to my freedom can be found except freedom itself or, if you prefer, that we are not free to cease being free. To the extent that the for-itself wishes to hide its own nothingness from itself and to incorporate the in-itself as its true mode of being, it is trying also to hide its freedom from itself” (*Being and Nothingness*, Washington Square Press, 1956, p. 567). The terms “for-itself” and “in-itself” are equivalent to reflective and unreflective consciousness respectively.

¹⁴ *Transcendence of the Ego*, p. 99.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ “Nothing can act on consciousness, be it its cause of itself.” *Ibid.*, p. 82.

¹⁷ “Consciousness... can be limited only by itself.” *Ibid.*, p. 39.

¹⁸ See, *ibid.*, pp. 61-63 (the analysis of hatred, and every other state, as “a veritable passage to infinity” [p. 63]).

¹⁹ “...an interiority closed upon itself.” *Ibid.*, p. 84.

In the invention of the *ego*, consciousness implicitly recognizes itself as un-free in its unlimited freedom or unable to endure such a freedom. Its struggle and misery, its inevitable subsequent being-at-odds-with-itself comes precisely from knowing that it itself has no master and that it itself cannot completely fool itself in believing that it—namely, its ego, the I—is its own master.²⁰ At the end of this analysis, the *ego* emerges as the process and, at the same time, as the end-result of fooling oneself (self-deception) into believing to one's self-mastery or autonomy.

Thus, the ego is not so much a false god, or rather it is a false god only insofar as it is a false Other. For by the self-deception of its autonomy, consciousness hides its radically heteronomic structure, that is, it hides from itself or it forgets that what constitutes it, what gives it to itself is precisely a givenness anterior than any self-constitution. As Jean-Luc Marion writes “that which gives itself gives itself only to the one who gives himself over to the call and only in the pure form of a confirmation of the call, which is repeated because received.”²¹ Receptivity (of the call) is thus constitutive of a subject without subjectivity. It should be noted that the subject does not even exist prior to the call, for “giving himself over to the call” means, first and foremost, to “be given a self by the call.” The self that gives himself over to the call does not have even himself; in order, then, to give himself over to the call he has to be given that self. In fact, this is not about a sequence, logical or chronological: the self is not first given in order to be later given up, but rather the self is given as much and insofar as it is given up. For the self too, or rather the self above all, must be given.²²

²⁰ There are echoes of a Hegelian theme here: see the “unhappy consciousness” from the *Phenomenology of the Spirit*.

²¹ Jean-Luc Marion, *Reduction and Givenness*, translated by Thomas A. Carlson (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1998) p. 197-8.

²² It is in the structure of the heteronomy of givenness—where the self is given itself (its self) by him who calls it to being, that Paul Ricoeur's insight about phenomenology finds its validation. “The constitution of the Other” writes Ricoeur, “plays the same role in Husserl that the existence of God does in Descartes.” See, *Husserl: An Analysis of His Phenomenology*, translated by Edward G. Ballard and Lester E. Embree (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1967), p. 11.