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APOLOGIA OR PHENOMENOLOGIA

ON JEAN-LUC MARION'S SIXTH CHAPTER OF *IN-EXCESS* (2001)
AND ON HIS THEORY IN GENERAL¹

BY

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GIVENNESS

The well-known French philosopher and catholic theologian Jean-Luc Marion, guided by what he says is a reading of Husserl's phenomenology, has suggested a novel way of treating our interaction with enigmatic phenomena. Rather than rejecting them, he claims that we should regard the way these phenomena are given to us as the most basic paradigm for experience in general. On this view, what we have to do is to *embrace the invisible* in order to learn about our general mode of interaction with everything in reality. He named this modality *givenness*, and while avoiding the technicalities of the controversy that swirls around his reinterpretation of the term, I may simply say that it is an old name for a new way of thinking². My rephrasing of William James' famous formulation does not intend to attribute here a new title in philosophy,

¹ More about the modality of givenness and the contemporary philosophical debates it has provoked, see my original conference at Van-Leer «Givenness and the Orthodox Jew – Aporias in Jean-Luc Marion's theory of Saturated Phenomena», to be published separately with a response by J.-L. Marion.

² The dispute begun with Dominique JANICAUD's book entitled *The theological Turn of the French Phenomenology* (1991), published in *Phenomenology and the "Theological Turn": The French Debate*, New York: Fordham University Press, 2000. In this English translation, Janicaud's text is followed by key articles of towering figures that took part in the debate, which is also enlighteningly described in an introduction by the translator Bernard G. Prusak. Derrida's critique is addressed separately in: "On the Gift: A Discussion between Jacques Derrida and Jean-Luc Marion", in Caputo and Scanlon, eds. *God, the Gift, and Postmodernism*, p. 54-78.

but it does seek to articulate a name underlining a manner for bringing together philosophy and theology³.

The principle that guides Marion's thought is that of *retreating to the given*. Looking behind the veil of the things that appear to the eye or the mind, we realize that an additional and more fundamental mode is there to shed light on their manifestation. And since whatever we enter in contact with has first to be given, we may focus on their *givenness* rather than on their *appearance*, thus exposing not only how the blind man can see, but how darkness as a whole may be illuminated with a beaming light. Philosophically, it loads the evidence against the universal law of Husserl's phenomenology by defying the idea that what we can encounter is necessarily what appears to us. Theologically, it shows that the discovery of the invisible and thus the unknown can still make sense even without, though not excluding, faith as support. In both cases, it solves an old epistemological problem by explaining how one can conceive the unconceivable with a single gesture that honors us in two different ways.

Put aside for a moment the question whether an approach bound to *givenness* is inwardly coherent and self-consistent when applied to the two distinct disciplines. In fact, with the proposal of this extended phenomenological modality, Marion made the positive contribution of replacing the first principle of appearance with a more fundamental and less restrictive one of givenness, so that a single criteria can serve every scenario. But then the debate about this move being properly phenomenological or properly theological quickly induced antagonism in both orders. As each order believes itself to be the defender of a certain truth, it is against Marion's audacity to revise a tradition that the voices were often raised. Upon such incomprehension that gave birth to virulent polemics since 1991, known as «the French debate», Marion goes on to insist that truth must be allowed to burst on its own terms and conditions. And in this respect what the intellect knows or is capable of knowing may sometimes overshadow the gushing reality as it is. When rigorously defining the conditions of possibility for experience, what we hope to find does not always concord with the requirement to remain unbiased and open to the advent. If truth depends on opening up to a completely unforeseeable set of events which crush upon our astonished view, then the journey cannot stop with the discovery of a new mode

³ William James used this formulation to qualify the American philosophical movement of Pragmatism in the title of his book, *Pragmatism – A new name for some old ways of thinking*, New York: Longman Green & Co, 1907.

permitting access to everything. In other words, it cannot end with the miraculous recipe of givenness as the ultimate way for encountering all phenomena.

On its own, Marion's promotion of the renewed mode of givenness constitutes an extraordinary but rather small "revolution" within the limited confinement of the phenomenological school of thought. To become a practice of the widest reach, he tells us that a complementary move of conversion is necessary. And so that after giving up vision we must abandon the need to always envision. If we tend to proceed methodologically as required in philosophy, we must now start from the «last», following the given reality instead of the celebrated first spot of the thinking I who seeks to fruitfully cipher and mentally anticipate everything⁴. Primacy is thus granted to *givenness* and more practically to the *given* in a manner that aspires to follow the flux of occurrences as they pass, instead of logically precede them. To those readers who identify here a religious mode of disruption, I can only nod my head in agreement since the economy adopted by the philosopher equals to that of Revelation. Surprise, disruption, unexpectancy, and profusion are the key-notes for the reversion of roles intending for a suspension of any presupposition. Not wanting to lock up reality in our inward world and exclude the mysterious part of life that simply does not *fit* our understanding is what motivates not falling prey to the pretension of knowing the world in advance. And indeed, the human mind may be partial. And indeed, the desire to avoid fallacy and blindness may require privileging the course of events and, more in particular, the *gift* of the given manifest knocking on our door. Clearly, Marion is trying to approach life as it happens – honoring what phenomenology calls "the things in themselves" – without the weary tool of our anticipatory assurance. And while staying loyal to descriptions of the way things actually occur, he introduces a well-rounded philosophical query that extends its knowledge to other sources. But then we still face with Marion the problem of magnitude: for in what sense does this religious-phenomenological pattern of revelation affords a sufficiently general basis for our multiple types of encounters in the world?⁵

⁴ MARION, *Being Given: Toward a Phenomenology of Givenness*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002, p. 61; see also in his book *In-Excess: Studies of Saturated Phenomena*, New York: Fordham University Press, 2002, p. 23-29.

⁵ The use of the term "Revelation" in Marion's work is complex and rich, having evolved and undergone many clarifications. It is at this point that the operative paradigm serves both the phenomenological and the theological credo he suggests. To answer the

INVERTED PERSPECTIVES

The dilemma is that of favoring the *a priori* versus the *a posteriori* and needless to say that Marion's gratification of the given *a posteriori*, rather than providing prior conditions for a picture of the universe, is especially demanding for the technologically foreseeing people we have become. We may think against his preferences of the yielding event as guide, of the bursting element carrying the torch for our interpretation of experience, that there is still the deep quality of our cognition to go beyond those singular moments and provide a general objective picture. We can object that we may still use the power of intuition to foresee or sense what is coming at us and determine how things are going to be. But despite the objections that are likely to be raised against his alleged finitude of our rationality, there is no tension in Marion's doctrine between believing in the power of cognition and defending the powerful event our dazzled mind may not objectify and consequently turn into a concept⁶. The finitude of the mind facing Revelation is not an obfusca-

difficulty of one term serving two profoundly distinct temperaments, it is important to refer to the author's own change in position:

In 1992 Marion writes: «let me repeat that by *revelation* we here intend a strictly phenomenological concept: an appearance that is purely of itself and starting from itself, that does not subject its possibility to any preliminary determination» (MARION, «The Saturated Phenomenon» in *Phenomenology and the "Theological Turn": The French Debate*, New York: Fordham University Press, 2000, p. 215).

Later on, in 1997, he speaks of revelation when referring to its religious (though not orthodox) character only as much as it incarnates the paradox of revealing without being revealed: «The phenomenon of revelation...is therefore defined as a phenomenon that concentrates in itself the four senses of the saturated phenomenon... I do not *here* have to judge its actual manifestation or ontic status, which remain the business proper to revealed theology. I therefore privilege the manifestation of Jesus Christ, as it is described in the New Testament (and in conformity with the paradigms of the theophanies of the Old), as an example of the phenomenon of revelation, I am nevertheless proceeding as a phenomenologist – describing a given phenomenological possibility – and as a philosopher – confronting the visible Christ with his possible conceptual role (as Spinoza, Kant, Hegel and Schelling dared to do), with an eye toward establishing it as paradigm.» See in *Being Given* §24, p. 234-245.

The numerous objections brought Marion to clarify his position, and thus in a discussion from 2001 he concludes: «My final position on that is that the four types of saturated phenomena mentioned above could all be recapitulated in the field of phenomenology of revelation. Nevertheless, if we are allowed to take revelation – a theological concept – as a phenomenological question, then, I think, it should be done to the degree that revelation can be described as the combination of the four types of saturated phenomena [the event, the idol, the flesh, the other-s.b.]. I refer here to the Judeo-Christian Revelation»; see «Hermeneutics of Revelation – Jean-Luc Marion and Richard Kearney », in *After God – Richard Kearney and the Religious Turn in Continental Philosophy*, New York: Fordham University Press, 2006, p. 320.

⁶ Elsewhere I have shown how, unlike his predecessors and in particular Emmanuel

tion but rather an illumination, telling us that we must listen to the advent and not reject its interruption. More important, the incapable mind in the face of the overwhelming given does not indicate a conflict between two opposing, independent stances but rather a complementary view of interaction. The two grounds I call "the mental" and "the eventual" underwrite together Marion's thesis by allowing us to understand how one ground supports the other when our watchful mind loses its precedence. In this respect, every limitation is a breakthrough.

This is on the account of the doctrine of givenness and the importance of experiencing the finitude of the thought. On the account of his methodology, one should not forget that all along, Marion's ultimate goal is to provide a rigorous theory based on a *universal principle*. And in this respect his penchant for the a posteriori reflects a loyalty to a reality true to itself, given authentically and without prejudices, rather than to a tendency that forms a patchwork of single moments loosely put together to make an intellectual claim. For the readers of his phenomenological trilogy (1989-2001), ended with *In-Excess*, there is thus something very appealing in the pretense to *include a larger range of bursting phenomena* under the unity of one well-defined mode, which touches upon the intelligible as well as the unintelligible. In a discussion from 2001 with Richard Kearney on the "Hermeneutics of Revelation", Marion explains his motivations:

«It is a weakness in philosophy always to stick to a narrow interpretation of a situation, which is unable to make sense out of large parts of experience and to say, "Well, you have no right to go beyond that limit". For me, it is the defeat of reason, of philosophy, when a philosopher says, "You have no right to make sense of that part of experience; this is meaningless, and should remain meaningless". It is an improvement in philosophy when a new field, which was taken to be meaningless, suddenly makes sense»⁷.

Touching both the unseen and the unseeable to make sense of them widens the thematized panorama of our lived experience. In his writings Marion is defending the invisible: this unknown, unrepresented and

Levinas, Marion does not suspend the activity of the mind in those moments of saturation or revelation but rather maintains its participation during the entire experience of bedazzlement. He does so by insisting on the finitude experienced at these circumstances, when we realize that we are incapable of objectifying, conceptualizing or even giving significance to the astonishing "thing" that reveals itself. For Hebrew readers, see my preface to my Hebrew translation of *In-Excess*, Tel-Aviv: Resling Publishing, 2007, p. 7-40.

⁷ « Hermeneutics of Revelation – Jean-Luc Marion and Richard Kearney », in *After God – Richard Kearney and the Religious Turn in Continental Philosophy*, New York: Fordham University Press, 2006, p. 335.

unconfigured that is still given to us while being, despite all, appreciated by our intuition. Meanwhile, his generalized quest requires not only admitting to the most universal and basic mode of connection, transpired by the principle of givenness. It also demands from us to step aside and accept that our initiatives may be put on hold by the unintended occurrences, causing us to lose our first place as active and dominating poles in favor of the otherness of the manifest. In other words, when we ask: is the revelation of the invisible God something for which we make ourselves available? Or is the sensed elevation at the gaze of an idol or the amazing painting something we prepare for? The answer would be categorically negative since the reversed phenomenological structure described by Marion takes away our mastery over ourselves as much as over these encounters. We are sublimed and our mind captivated in a manner that «not only suspends the phenomenon's subjection to the I» but also «inverts it»⁸. In the process, the otherness of the powerful manifest becomes first and the intelligible, still phenomenologically capable, I becomes second. From architects we become witnesses to a situation that we no longer control, during a disrupting event initially described by Emmanuel Levinas in his understanding of Ethics, and later taken in a broader view by Marion, to become the very foundation for his theory of the Saturated Phenomena and for his elaboration of the phenomenological inversion of roles.

To name the process, Marion borrows from Levinas the terms *counter-intentionality*, and later changes it into *counter-experience* or *anamorphism*⁹. This alteration not only marks a break with seeing the world from the point of view of the mind's most necessary law, intentionality (according to traditional position in phenomenology). But it also emphasizes the common sketch for being affected by what takes us by surprise. Such matters reflect on the power of the given's moments, objects or phenomena when revealing themselves to us: from the most banal to the outmost supreme, from the prosaic event of an academic conference turning out to be different than planned to the unpredictable Revelation of God¹⁰. And since the bare poles of the submerged subject

⁸ *Being Given* §22 p. 216.

⁹ *Being Given* §13 p. 118-131; §22 p. 215-216; §32, p. 230; *In-Excess*, p. 118; «The Saturated Phenomenon» in *Phenomenology and the "Theological Turn": The French Debate*, *ibid.*, p. 210.

¹⁰ The examples are of Marion: the first (the conference) refers to his discussion about the lecture hall in the second chapter of *In-Excess* dedicated to the *event* as a first type of saturated phenomenon and the second, *God's revelation*, reflects the Saturated Phenomenon par excellence in the sixth chapter. See *In-Excess*, p. 34-38, 158-162.

are then left without command, we come to realize that we must totally rethink the formal conditions for experience. Marion's new names for the process have come to mean that a change in perspective is required in order to penetrate these given phenomena. Demonstrating with the so-called anamorphic trick (perspective correction), we learn that a distorted shape may later be transformed into a clear one during the mental process of apprehension, though obviously not from an overly dominating stand that stipulates the rules of the "game" in advance. In lowering everything down to an object, in looking into objectifying reality in order to satisfy the analytic craving, we may find ourselves so preoccupied with seeing – and seeing in a certain way – that we overshadow the manifest at the risk of missing its true nature. We endanger falsifying the real deliverance of its happening. Aware of such self-inflicted blindness we then become cautious. So careful, that we remain carefully ready. But no matter how we succeed this stand-by, something always exceeds us. Let Marion then confront us with this idea of *excess*, taken in the title of his book, to redeem the classic insufficiency of intuition and finitude of the thought with a new cause for our failure to foresee and fully understand. We are not the ones to blame, as the impossibility to provide here objective knowledge is not the outcome of a deficient intuition portrayed on the «account of a lack»¹¹. But rather, Marion objects to Derrida, of imposed indigestible excess. At the same time, even if we may not know something *conceptually*, it does not mean that we do not know it at all since our access to the overwhelming ones is secured if we accept the imposed inversion of perspectives. All the study-cases of the saturating phenomena admit then to «the arrival of the occurrence according to its *fait accompli*, without reason or cause, but in imposing anamorphosis»¹². An *imposed* perspective that we may only verify indirectly, once the effect of their givenness has already taken place.

ELIJAH THE PROPHET AND MARION'S SATURATED PHENOMENA

This concept of anamorphosis brings us right back to questions of intention and deception. For even though believing in this new mode of givenness may expose us to what is held in store for us without prior warning, the discovery of such treasure is not at all bound to a willful act or to a mental intention that focuses on things in order to render

¹¹ *In-Excess*, p. 159.

¹² *In-Excess*, p. 38.

them intelligible. The philosophical realization of this new possibility may be rationalized, thought, analyzed and even publicly defended. Though the experience it uncovers is not necessarily the fruit of a human choice or prevision. In order to further clarify this, let me make the analogy with the story of Eliyahu the prophet. On these days, on the eve of the Jewish holidays, one is quick to sense the active energy of the ceremonial preparations for the arrival of the prophet during the Passover feast dinner. Children recite the songs with excitement, choose with their parents the chair set aside for his visit, and help polish his traditional silver goblet. Await and yearn come together in anticipation for the important guest. On the Seder night, and after the third cup of wine is drunk, the goblet of Elijah is filled and the front door of the house is opened to welcome the one who is said to precede the coming of the Messiah and is traditionally expected to visit each home. As one leaves the door open every year, in every Jewish household and for centuries of communal celebration, one convokes in fact a designated individual. Someone the tradition has named Eli-ya-hu Ha-na-vie, without actually knowing whether this proper name may truly bear the overwhelming significations it upholds so as to coincide with its nature. After years of intense evocation and attending, the desire to receive the visit of the prophet is entangled with hope and disbelief. And thus despite the unknown outcome, each secular or orthodox person maintaining this tradition makes his own idea of the ritual and the possibility of the prophet's coming. Each one forms his own view about Elijah, postulating his "phenomenon" when dressing it up with a concept that would later agree or disagree with the effective manifestation of the given one. To describe the situation in strict phenomenological terms (Husserl's), we would speak of a mental intention forming a picture that is later corrected or confirmed once the designated one has finally appeared. We would speak of a deception or of an approval according to its suitability to what the contemplating subject has previewed. But in Marion's revised phenomenological terms, what happens in these cases reposes on a completely different procedure. Here the classical phenomenological tendency is in fact contrasted and totally reversed. The question is then: what makes such cases so different from other common-law phenomena to deserve this charge?¹³ In some instances, as with the prophet in my

¹³ On the conditions of the common law phenomena, see «The Saturated Phenomenon» in *Phenomenology and the "Theological Turn": The French Debate*, *ibid.*, p. 214-215.

example, it is the unique experience of their lived event, in others it is their invisibility, or yet their ineffability.

Over all, «they differ by not resembling one another; they differ especially by delaying (or accelerating) their arisings. Rather than of arrivals, we must therefore speak of the unpredictable landings of phenomena, according to discontinuous rhythms, in fits and starts, unexpectedly, by surprise, detached each from the other, in bursts, aleatory. They make us wait, desire them, before seeing them. [...] Our initiative is limited to remaining ready to receive the shock of their anamorphosis, ready to take a beating from its unpredictable landing»¹⁴.

The effect of the arrival alone surpasses all talk of conformity or corrigibility as the occurrence of this phenomenon only takes form *starting from itself*. It is a revelation! And insomuch, it is absolutely free from satisfying any requisite. There is nothing improbable here, and yet what yields in these circumstances is abrupt and uncontainable. Its free and overwhelming motion blocks the purely contemplative path, pointing out that «what is given in revelation is precisely what surpasses any expectation»¹⁵. The phenomenological deception then caused when these invisible and impalpable phenomena are revealed, does not come from an impossible corroboration with the expected. As the expectation is in fact exceeded and thus not taken into account, the «disappointment» comes instead, on Marion's view, from experiencing something that we cannot comprehend¹⁶. Elijah enters the Passover holidays charged with layers of biblical, Talmudic, halakhic, and epic significations for his return to Earth does not only symbolizes the Day of Judgment but mainly a promise we all bear within. Such promise no arrival would ever corroborate. Likewise, the rich scholastic Christian setting for the evocation of God in chapter six of *In-Excess*, portrays the infinite senses of this saturated phenomenon par excellence. The Revelation of God carries a heavy weight no overwhelmed mind may easily penetrate, let alone presume. In friction with the idea of excess in revelation, naming or conceptualizing the revealed would mean trying to fix it in vain¹⁷. Therefore any name, concept or theme is merely an attempt to refer to the Name of what in fact «calls us», bluffing our pretense to call upon him¹⁸. No name nor concept is more proper than the other, says Marion

¹⁴ See *Being Given* §14, p. 132.

¹⁵ « Hermeneutics of Revelation – Jean-Luc Marion and Richard Kearney », *ibid*, p. 321.

¹⁶ « Hermeneutics of Revelation – Jean-Luc Marion and Richard Kearney », p. 330.

¹⁷ See *In-Excess*, p. 160.

¹⁸ *In-Excess*, p. 162.

in conclusion to his book, reminding us that what we speak of is not a *Persona*, an essence or an object, but rather the *lived* God or prophet we encounter during a *lived act* outside the strict text. Both the philosophical and the theological responses we find here, presuppose the least of language and more immediately in responding to the situation in a pre-reflective gestural way that carries the trimmer of saturation with it. The mysteriousness, incomprehension and astonishment felt during these moments are all an outcome of a plethora neutralizing the authority of any intelligible discourse.

APOLOGIA OR PHENOMENOLOGIA

We do not speak of coming to believe by volition, and equally, we do not always speak of coming to realize by intention. The phenomenologist joins here the theologian when using the notion of revelation to propose a refreshed approach. The fact that in Marion's philosophy the two gestures belong together – going back to the given (1) and hence beginning from this last source (2), only makes this discovery a bitter pill to swallow. On the one hand, with the bare admission of this position, we regain access to the enigmatic that was considered out of reach for centuries of philosophical inquiry. On the other hand, this new common ground is engendered by a practice that is not necessarily voluntary. Marion's universal and revised phenomenological path calls us to return to the basics of the given though when the given is presented as irruption, we may not even freely presuppose the irruption itself.

In the broad sense, Marion's revised phenomenological approach shows how the description of an unexpected situation is not an exception to the rule but rather a trivial, a most common form of correspondence with whatever does not appear but still reveals itself in an unintended manner. Under the category of Saturated Phenomena, divided into five test-types that go from the a-theological (the event, the flesh) to the scarcely or intrinsically theological (the idol or painting, the icon and the Divine), we are confronted with a new way of thinking. The original thesis he defends might not satisfy the logical demand but it certainly awakens the active impulses of life by showing us how to listen to things as they occur.

On this final note, I would like to say one last word concerning the character of Marion's text as certain readers have said to regard it as an apologia. It may be understandable that these readers translate the numerous citations of Christian Apologetics in this sixth chapter as a

way to renew with the defense of faith against historical attacks, putting thus phenomenology at the service of religion. And very certainly, the author makes his own contribution to the Corpus by elaborating a procedure that can be understood both from liturgical and phenomenological perspectives. His knowledgeable theological exegesis in the chapter may be said to have a formative factor, and it clearly plays a demonstrative role in his philosophical debate with Jacques Derrida about the metaphysics of the presence and negative theology. Nevertheless, as I tried to show in this essay, the true defense Marion seems to undertake in his concluding argumentation is that of a new mode of access, which is essentially phenomenological in nature. The question runs into a still more general one as his conclusion is preceded by the examination of three other modalities that seem to define our relation to the enigmatic. And as I have discussed elsewhere at length, after arguing against negative theology and then against deconstruction as Derrida's comforting alternative, Marion goes on to present prayer as having a strictly, and thus restricting, pragmatic function¹⁹. All along the path of his presentation, the limitations of each way are indicated in order to make room for his phenomenological approach to religion. Like the trunk of a tree that upholds its branches, his claim of God as the saturated phenomenon par excellence reflects on other cases as he goes on to show what determines our contact with the incomprehensible and what are the two gestures — exposed here — that allow this contact to take place. In accepting to take this road, we learn how an intuitive dimension is kept (1), how the invisible is allowed to remain unseen (2), and how an extended a phenomenological practice (3) shows us the way to a mystical theology (4). Therefore «access to the divine phenomenality is not forbidden to us; in contrast, it is precisely when we become entirely open to it that we find ourselves forbidden from it»²⁰. This is the paradox Jean-Luc Marion has chosen to defend, and if I must go in for the more probable choice, I would say that it is an apologia of a new phenomenologia.

April 2008

¹⁹ For Hebrew readers, see my preface to my Hebrew translation of *In-Excess*, Tel-Aviv: Resling Publishing, 2007, p. 7-40, and more in particular about the sixth chapter p. 35-40.

²⁰ *In-Excess*, p. 162.

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