

A Genealogy of Marion's Philosophy of Religion

Apparent Darkness

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Introduction

Jean-Luc Marion's dense and provocative writings have ignited both devotees and vehement critics. A member of l'Académie française, he has enlivened debates within and also between phenomenological and theological discourses.¹ As a historian of philosophy, he is admired as one of the leading interpreters of Descartes writing today.² Yet as a theologically oriented phenomenologist, he is often identified as the *bête noire* of the "new phenomenology."

Much scholarship on Marion has engaged in a debate over his ideological allegiances: theological versus phenomenological. I contend that this particular line of commentary occludes rather than illuminates Marion's intellectual enterprise. In particular, it distracts from a more critical analysis of the internal coherence of Marion's thought, an analysis that would parse the tension, not between philosophy and theology, but rather between two philosophical methods and the two (apophatic) theologies with which they intersect.

For this reason, in this study I intend to read Marion *cohesively* (at times distinguishing between the "theological" and the "phenomenological" without rendering them necessarily disjunctive), in order, precisely, to probe the *coherence* of his corpus. His entire philosophical enterprise is dominated by a positive and a negative motivation: positively, he seeks to return to all things (the "things themselves"); and negatively, he resists the objectification or idolatrous conceptualization of any thing. Holding the opposing forces of these motivations together produces the paradoxical juxtaposition of "givenness" and "saturation," the radical manifestation as well as the endless hiddenness of phenomena, the universality of a rigorous method and the contextuality of infinite interpretation. It is the way in which Marion holds these two elements together that yields such a fecund and original phenomenology. Nevertheless, these tensions may also usher in his undoing. My task is

to explore whether there is a point where the brilliant paradoxical balance can no longer be maintained and the various tensions dissolve into incoherence.

I propose a novel approach to examining Marion's philosophy, namely, the analysis of his use of patristic sources, specifically, the Greek Fathers. This analysis functions as an illuminating lens through which I evaluate the tension central to Marion's philosophical project in itself. In order to explain the approach of my argument, I first need to introduce certain basic themes in Marion's thought and survey trends in the reception of it.

Marion has written widely on topics ranging from aesthetics to late medieval and early modern history of philosophy, from biblical exegesis to the discourse of *eros*. As a result, his intellectual identity and disciplinary location is a contentious question. His thought is usually separated into distinct categories that follow a loose chronology. First, there is his research in the history of philosophy, which centers on Descartes: *Sur l'ontologie grise de Descartes. Science cartésienne et savoir aristotélien dans les 'Regulae'* (1975), *Sur la théologie blanche de Descartes. Analogie, création, des vérités éternelle et fondment* (1981), and *Sur le prisme métaphysique de Descartes. Constitution et limites de l'onto-théologie dans la pensée cartésienne* (1986). Secondly, there are his theological writings: *L'idole et la distance: cinq études* (1977), *Dieu sans l'être. Hors-texte* (1982), and *Prolégomènes à la charité* (1986). Thirdly, Marion's need to ground his ideas more phenomenologically in the face of many criticisms issued in a final category of writings: *Réduction et donation: Recherches sur Husserl, Heidegger et la phénoménologie* (1989); *Étant donné: Essai d'une phénoménologie de la donation* (1997); and *De surcroît: Études sur les phénomènes saturés* (2001). More recently, both *Le phénomènes érotiques: Six méditations* (2003) and *Au lieu de soi: L'approche de Saint Augustin* (2008) have shifted his entire discourse into the key signature of love.³

Despite the dominance of this model for mapping the periods and categories of Marion's thought, it remains unsatisfactory. First of all, it encourages a potentially pejorative meta-narrative on the progression of his thought. Marion is cast as a rigorous historian of early modern philosophy who subsequently experiments in conservative, confessional theology and who seeks, finally, to shore up his theological interests via the resources of phenomenology. This narrative allows for Marion's critics to separate his Cartesian research from the rest of his thought and

leave it, for the most part, respected but unexamined. At the same time, it enables an obsessive focus on the question of the relationship between Marion's phenomenology and his theology. Christina M. Gschwandtner has challenged both the lack of attention to the Cartesian writings and the excessive fixation with defining Marion either as a phenomenologist who has no business intruding into the theological domain or as a theologian who masquerades as a phenomenologist. Her detailed and thorough study of Marion persuasively argues that the roots of his ideas can be found within his work on Descartes.⁴

In agreement with Gschwandtner, I assume the basic *cohesiveness* of Marion's corpus to date. Behind his work on Descartes, his theological writings, and his meditations on *eros*, on givenness, and on saturation, there is one thinker who is motivated by the same set of questions and concerns. Part of the problem with the disjunctive approach is that the narrow focus on the question of Marion's theological versus his phenomenological identity distorts the analysis and interpretation. Marion is read according to one polarity or another. He is seen as too theological,⁵ not theological enough,⁶ or not theological in the right way.⁷ He is read, on the one hand, as having destroyed the "subject" and forbidden entrance to the role that interpretation plays,⁸ and, on the other, as remaining too "egological."⁹ He is too much of a hermeneut and not hermeneutical enough.¹⁰ How can these conflicting interpretations be drawn from one and the same thinker? I argue that reading Marion with only these polemics in view distracts readers from a different and more significant set of oppositional forces in his thought. In other words, these polemics draw attention away from the presence of real tension within his thought, a tension that makes possible the contradictory readings in the first place. In this study I read against the grain, paying little attention to making distinctions between phenomenological and theological arguments in order, precisely, to step back and look at how more fundamental tensions arise in Marion's work.

The oppositional forces emerge out of the twofold motivation of all of Marion's writing. First, following Husserlian phenomenology, there is a commitment to return to the "things themselves." (This return to the "things themselves" already implies an attempted correction of the Kantian emphasis on the "thing-in-itself," which, because of the epistemological gap between the *noumena* and *phenomena*, one can never actually reach.) Marion radicalizes this principle even further than Husserl by insisting that the return to the "things themselves" must be

construed as a return to *all* phenomena and a refusal to forbid, a priori, the appearance of any phenomenon.

The second overarching motivation propelling Marion's thought is the attempt to free those phenomena to which one returns from all constraints, especially from metaphysical constraints (e.g., the horizons of being—spatiality and temporality—and the horizon of the transcendental ego). In other words, Marion wants to secure the possibility of phenomena to “show themselves” freely and fully, without any subjective influence affecting that showing:

I have but one theme: if the phenomenon is defined as what *shows itself* in and from itself (Heidegger), instead of as what admits constitution (Husserl), this *self* can be attested only inasmuch as the phenomenon first *gives itself*. . . the thought that does not do justice to the given remains most of the time and first of all powerless to receive a number of phenomena for what they are—givens that show themselves. Also, it excludes from the field of manifestation not only many phenomena, but above all those most endowed with meaning and those that are most powerful. Only a phenomenology of givenness can return to the things themselves because, in order to return to them, it is necessary first to see them, therefore to see them as they come and, in the end, to bear their unpredictable landing.¹¹

Marion's concern is that if we *predetermine* the limits of what can and cannot appear as a phenomenon, restricting the field of possible phenomena to those things that can be objectified or adequately conceptualized, then we exclude those phenomena whose very significant impact on our lives often exceeds that which we can conceptually control or manage. These excessive phenomena “saturate” or overwhelm our cognitive capacities such that we cannot properly understand or define the phenomena. The two sides of Marion's philosophical project might be put together succinctly: Marion is, above all, a thinker of “givenness,” but also of the potentially “saturating” quality of givenness.

Tensions emerge from this twofold motivation.¹² On the one hand, we find that the attempt to justify the inclusion of all phenomena, even “excessive” phenomena once refused a place at the philosophical table, compels Marion to secure his phenomenological method as a “rigorous science” and claim the status of “first philosophy”¹³ for his phenomenology of givenness. This attempt to secure the foundations of his phenomenology arises in the face of criticisms that his thought “smuggles in” theological claims and “abandons” the strict neutrality of Husserl's

method. I contend that this aspect of Marion's thought is too quickly glossed over in much scholarship. Indeed, it could be suggested that an obsessive need to excavate and expel any signs of *theological dogmatism* in the corpus, while expected, given Marion's intellectual context within a post-1968 Paris, has nonetheless distracted readers from potential *philosophical dogmatisms*.

On the other hand, the strong anti-idolatry impulse in Marion compels him to guard against the cognitive containment of phenomena. In fact, Marion will argue boldly that this resistance comes from the phenomena themselves. Certain phenomena can never be adequately defined, but only endlessly interpreted. The resultant tension between these two impulses—to justify the inclusion of all phenomena in philosophical discourse and to refuse to constrain said phenomena by any single interpretation—has not been sufficiently explored. This tension underlies what is most creative and provocative in Marion's enterprise, but its final coherence must be tested.

Another reason that Marion is such an exciting yet difficult thinker to read is his intense engagement with a broad range of Western thought from Augustine and Aquinas to Kant, Husserl, and Derrida. One of the significant tasks of interpreting Marion has been an analysis of the various influences on him and the intellectual debates in which he is (or should be) engaged.¹⁴ Much work has already been accomplished in this realm. I have already referred to Gschwandtner's work on Marion and Descartes, but the work of Morrow and Alweiss also deserves mention.¹⁵ There was a loud outcry in response to Marion's treatment of Aquinas in *God Without Being*,¹⁶ a critique that Marion took seriously enough to modify his interpretation of Aquinas substantially.¹⁷ There have also been sustained critiques of his indebtedness to Husserl¹⁸ and to Heidegger¹⁹ as well as the relationship between Marion and Levinas,²⁰ and Marion and Derrida.²¹

Another formative source of Marion's thought during his years at university has gained less attention. Although it may have been outside of the lecture halls, Marion enjoyed a no less influential discipleship at the tail end of the movement within French Catholicism known as "*la nouvelle théologie*," a movement that (amongst other aims) sought to renew interest in the significance of the church fathers for the twentieth century (*ressourcement*). Marion studied privately with some of the central figures in this movement: Louis Bouyer, Jean Daniélou, Henri de Lubac, and Hans Urs von Balthasar.²² Marion's first publications reflect

this influence. In particular, Marion wrote many articles examining various doctrines central to Christianity as well as many exegeses of, and engagements with, the early Christian writers.²³ These articles are untranslated and are, for the most part, ignored in scholarship on Marion. However, in his early engagement with the church fathers, one already finds the concepts and the terminology of “givenness,” “saturation,” and “idolatry.” From this evidence, and from the fact that these fathers of the church continue to be a common reference throughout his corpus, one must assume a vital influence on his thought. And yet very little scholarship has been done thus far on Marion’s retrieval of patristic writings.²⁴ This study aims to begin to fill this void in a very specific way.

Rather than comprehensively chart each and every patristic influence and citation in Marion’s corpus, I engage his retrieval of two figures in particular: Gregory of Nyssa and Dionysius the Areopagite. These two thinkers are particularly helpful because they evidence the need for a more sophisticated classification of discourses than simply the “philosophical” or the “theological.” A comparison between these two theologians demonstrates that significant distinctions can be drawn even *within* the tradition of Christian *apophasis*. These distinctions trouble Marion’s even retrieval of the Fathers and, moreover, reverberate distinctly in different locations of Marion’s corpus.

Given Marion’s most recent work,²⁵ one might expect more weight to be given here to his retrieval of Augustine. While this work on Augustine will certainly be discussed, it is not the primary focus of this book for the following reasons. First, as I shall argue, Marion’s attention on Augustine represents something of a late turn in his thought in which he shifts his focus and emphasis decidedly from *apophasis* to *confession*, and from invisibility to beatitude. I will return to more evaluative remarks concerning this decision in later chapters—suffice it to say for now that I believe something of the creative friction within his thought is lost in the shift. More to the point, however, this book will not focus primarily on Marion’s recent Augustinian meditations because they do not fit within the primary analytic approach of my argument—an approach that hypothesizes that (paradoxically to be sure) an examination of Marion’s univocal retrieval of two Greek Fathers, who are much more proximate within the traditions of Christian *apophasis* than is Augustine, is particularly helpful at illuminating the tensions inherent in Marion’s phenomenological project as a whole (in a way that his retrieval of Augustine is not).

The following questions structure my study. First and most basically, I ask about the patristic citations throughout Marion's corpus. Whom does he cite, when, for what purpose, and in what way (chapter 1)? Secondly, I question the legitimacy of his univocal retrieval of the Eastern Fathers by comparing the apophatic visions of Gregory of Nyssa and Dionysius the Areopagite (chapter 2). I then examine Marion's methodological allegiances to see how they influence his reading of Dionysius (chapter 3). Fourthly, I explore the difficult question of the relation of the "pure givenness" to the "endless interpretation" of saturated phenomena in Marion and ask whether Gregory of Nyssa might be employed in such a way that some of the tension between these central elements in Marion's thought is eased (chapter 4). And finally, I evaluate the coherence and insightfulness of Marion's apophatic phenomenology and ask how Gregory might become a more explicit resource for Marion's thought (chapter 5).

Jettisoning the need to establish his phenomenology of givenness as "first philosophy" and the attendant methodological universality, I suggest that Marion can hold the remaining tensions in his thought together in a generative balance: the "pure givenness" of the saturated phenomenon is balanced by the *subsequently* endless interpretation of it. This balancing act is accomplished, however, only through my own extension of Marion's (thus far) limited use of Gregory. In this way, my study demonstrates the risk of contemporary retrievals of patristic thought (that one imports more than was bargained for) but also the rich potential of such a retrieval that offers a way of thinking outside of the particularly antimetaphysical paradigms regnant in Continental thought today.

A Note on Terminology

The characterization of Marion's phenomenology as "apophatic" requires some justification. For instance, why do I use "apophatic phenomenology" rather than "negative phenomenology"? One reason is that, having suggested the term "negative phenomenology" for himself in a published response to reviews of his work *Reduction and Givenness*,²⁶ Marion later finds it inappropriate "because the phenomena that I mentioned (boredom, the call, etc.) in fact have nothing negative about them . . . in this sense, it was an issue of the most positive of phenomenologies, and some prejudice is necessary not to recognise it as such."²⁷

Negativity is an insufficient descriptor of Marion's phenomenology primarily because Marion is interested in the excessive plenitude of intuition rather than its poverty. Thus, the inability to arrive at adequate concepts is driven by an *excess* rather than a *lack*.

Another reason is my own dissatisfaction with the limited resonances "negation" tends to have in contemporary discourse. As mentioned above, Marion's thought takes place within a movement in Continental philosophy that has been variously identified with a "turn to religion" or even a "theological turn." Frequently this "turn" has been aligned with a sort of "negative theology." This negative discourse, however, often merely connotes a linguistic or epistemological strategy employed in the face of lack or deficiency. The contemporary discourse also usually retrieves "negative theology" as a single undeviating tradition to either identify with or be distinguished from. Indeed, the dominant debate around negative theology has been in confrontation with the writings of Jacques Derrida. On the one side are those who seek to call Derrida a "negative theologian,"²⁸ and on the other, those who want to disavow any connection.²⁹ In any case, this debate circles endlessly around whether or not the linguistic strategy is negative *enough*. This frustration with the limitations of "negativity" in current philosophical discourse causes Marion to reject the use of the term "negative theology" in favor of "mystical theology" or "apophasis."³⁰ How, then, ought one decide between these terms?

I believe the term "mystical" is misleading for a couple of reasons. Marion correctly uses it only in a specific connection to the Dionysian corpus (whence the term originates) in order to denote a mode of discourse appropriate in theology, whereas I am looking for a term that encompasses the anti-idolatry orientation of Marion's work as a whole and not limited to his explicitly theological writing. Secondly, the term "mystical theology" is often elided with a discussion of the modern word *mysticism*, which carries with it the implication of individual union with or "experience" of the divine that cannot be applied unproblematically to any of the three main figures of this study.

This brings us to the term "apophatic." Lampe's *Patristic-Greek Lexicon* supplies two derivations for the Greek word *apophasis* (ἀποφάσις): it derives from ἀπόφνημι (to deny or negate) and from ἀποφαίνω (to decree or declare plainly).³¹ There is, in other words, an ambiguity embedded within the Greek word that moves one away from limiting its meaning to mere linguistic negation. As we have already seen, Marion's

use of the term implies more than mere negation. Similarly, in chapter 2 I demonstrate the way in which, for Dionysius and Gregory, a theory of *apophasis* brings with it a whole way of being, an existential condition, in the face of certain ontological conditions. One's particular understanding of *apophasis* is shaped by basic presuppositions about the world and one's place in it: a certain excess or plenitude dominates this vision to overwhelm the individual inside it. Assumptions regarding the constitution or formation of a particular selfhood arise from his or her response to this reality. By using the term "apophatic phenomenology" in connection to Marion, I refer, in the fullest manner possible, to both an ontology³² of plenitude and an anthropology of response.

I propose an analysis of Marion's phenomenology that I characterize as driven primarily by an anti-idolatry motivation. Idolatry here is not confined to religious idolatry but refers primarily to the constraining of any phenomenon within limits alien to the way it gives itself, or shows itself. Defining the phenomenon according to one's own subjective conceptual limitations is, for instance, idolatrous. In agreement with others such as Thomas Carlson, Merold Westphal, and Robyn Horner, I argue that Marion's entire corpus—the Cartesian studies, works on aesthetics, theological writings, as well as his "pure" phenomenological work—should be understood as an attempt to think outside of these idolatrous binds. Characterizing his thought as "apophatic" is a shorthand way of signifying his fundamentally critical stance toward the subjectivist hold on modern philosophy and his attempt to escape conceptual idolatries in both theology and phenomenology. Idolatry refuses to recognize excess or plenitude, but an appropriately apophatic stance begins in response to this excess.³³ This excessive apophatic dimension marks Marion's thought as one of the most interesting and sustainable responses to the critique of modernity and its concurrent return to pre-modern writings as a source of argument and inspiration at the "end of metaphysics."

A few other terms need clarification. The importance of locating Marion's thought at the "end of metaphysics," for instance, requires an explanation of what precisely has come to an "end." What is meant by the terms "metaphysics" or "metaphysical," which are slung around with such derogatory force in late-twentieth-century Continental philosophy? And why, exactly, is "onto-theology" such a bugbear?

These terms have a particular meaning within the Heideggerian context from which they arise. Heidegger's definition of metaphysics is

inherently negative or polemical: it is a way of philosophizing that Heidegger wants to “overcome.”³⁴ The fundamental problem with metaphysics “during its long history from Anaximander to Nietzsche” is a forgetting of the “ontological difference” resulting in the concealment of the “truth of Being.”³⁵ Metaphysics is characterized by this impotence to think Being as such (*esse*, *Sein*, *être*, to be), but only in terms of “beings,” namely, as *a* being (*ens*, *Seiende*, *étant*, entity).

“Metaphysics is onto-theology” when it asks the question of Being in terms of the Being of beings, rather than Being as such. Asking after the Being of beings is a twofold question: it asks about being in general (*ontology*), and at the same time it questions which of the particular beings is the highest (*theology*).

Metaphysics thinks of the Being of beings both in the ground-giving unity of what is most general, what is indifferently valued everywhere, and also in the unity of the all that accounts for the ground, that is, of the All-Highest. The Being of beings is thus thought of in advance as the grounding ground. Therefore all metaphysics is at bottom, and from the ground up, what grounds, what gives account of the ground, what is called to account by the ground, and finally what calls the ground to account.³⁶

This is problematic not least because of the reciprocal “groundings” of Being and beings: “Being grounds beings, and beings, as what *is* most of all, account for Being.”³⁷ Metaphysics is doomed to “end” because the definition that makes metaphysics intelligible also makes it impossible: something (Being) cannot be grounded by that which it, in turn, grounds (beings). The twofoldness of the question of Being, as well as its tenuousness, lies in its foundational reciprocity.

A concurrent effect of metaphysical thinking is the fact that “God” is inscribed within the metaphysical domain, that is, thought as “a being.” God establishes a causal foundation of all entities for which it is the reason. Thus God must assume the function, if not the name, of *causa sui*, the supreme founding entity because it founded itself.³⁸ The problem with the onto-theological deity is that “God” is determined “starting from and to the profit of that which metaphysics is capable, that which it can admit and support”;³⁹ such a God can only be, to use Marion’s terminology, an idol, a measure of what we can intend or aim at. Thus, “metaphysics infallibly leads, by way of blasphemy (proof), to the twilight of the idols (conceptual atheism).”⁴⁰

In Marion's own corpus metaphysics takes on an even more precise meaning. He adds two following characteristics. First, it determines the conditions for the possibility of phenomenality: the horizons of temporality and spatiality and the constituting function of the "I." Secondly, and relatedly, metaphysics upholds the subjective starting point of philosophy and privileges the question of Being.⁴¹ Bringing these various strands together, Robyn Horner provides the most concise and straightforward definition of the term *metaphysics* in Marion's thought: metaphysics is "a conception in terms of beings as presence, with a claim to some kind of absoluteness, on the foundation of a transcendental I, whose existence and certainty is guaranteed by a term posited beyond the conceptual system."⁴² Following Marion's own usage,⁴³ I use "metaphysics" or "metaphysical" intending this precise meaning. (As my argument unfolds, it will become clear just how alien such a notion of metaphysics would be to the patristic writers who are retrieved into this discussion.)

In contrast to this technical and narrow employment of the term *metaphysics*, I propose to use the term *ontology* quite broadly. Taking it in its most common sense signification, ontology simply points to what I will refer to in chapter 2 as "the world language inhabits," that is to say, a thinker's assumptions about the "subject" (however configured or called), her reality (world), and the relation between the two. It includes assumptions about the cause of that reality—a cause that may or may not be identified as divine—as well as implications regarding the origins and ends of the subject. In other words, I am intentionally using "ontology" and "ontological" in the broadest and least-technical, least-philosophical sense to signify the assumptions and the implications of a thinker's concepts vis-à-vis the world, or reality in its entirety. Such a broad usage permits me to consider, with due caution, the "ontology" of a thinker like Marion without suggesting that his philosophy remains within the horizon of Being, where "Being" suggests the unavoidable horizons of temporality and spatiality. I will argue that, despite his allergy to the "ontological" language of Being/being, even Marion cannot avoid implying certain ontological options—certain understandings of reality and one's place within it—over others.

One of the curious ironies in Marion's thought is that the patristic sources he retrieves into a contemporary conversation have no hesitation whatsoever in making ontological claims; they would not even understand the concern. Marion is not alone in this return to premodern

sources in an attempt to rebut a particular modern inheritance. Counter-intuitively, both metaphysics and ontology are common parlance in the sources being retrieved to surpass and “overcome” metaphysics and ontology. One might question the possibility of success with such a strategy. Denys Turner has stated the challenge accusingly:

A recycling today of the classical, late antique and medieval *vocabularies* of the apophatic but uprooted from their soil in a metaphysics, leaves that vocabulary suspended in a vacuum of *rhetorics*, a displaced, residually Christian semiotics, retaining the illusion of force from the metaphysics it has abandoned as no longer possible.⁴⁴

I intend to argue that Marion does not, finally, fall prey to this accusation. However, his avoidance of the charge is not neat. He avoids it by involving himself in that which he seeks to avoid, if not metaphysics in the narrow and technical post-Heideggerian sense, then at least ontology in its broadest sense. Indeed, the richness and depth with which Marion does retrieve these sources, beyond a simple transference of vocabulary, is precisely what makes his thought so fertile but also what renders it problematic. At the center of the “current apophatic rage”⁴⁵ in Continental philosophy, with its concurrent retrieval of early Christian writings, Jean-Luc Marion is both the most successful interpreter of apophaticism in the Greek Fathers and, ironically, the most dazzled within his own phenomenological project by a univocal use of them.