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Being Gifted as Negative Certainty

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Abstract: Existentialism centres reflection upon the bodily existence of the human person. Generally, however, theological anthropology has struggled to manage developments in biological and psychological sciences that have made clear the pluriformity of human embodiment. The work of the social sciences has also increased the visibility of minority, disadvantaged, or neglected persons. Theological anthropology must begin to conceive of an inclusive, non-static understanding of human nature that fully acknowledges the integrity and the diverse identities of the human subject. To riposte, this article utilises the interplay between phenomenology and theology in the work of the contemporary philosopher-theologian Jean-Luc Marion. Marion undeniably sees the root of the human in the concrete free person; he recognises an ever-receding, indefinable horizon towards which the incomprehensible existence of the subjective phenomenon is universally oriented. In this article I focus on how a combination of the theology of the subject and its existential orientation, realised through the freedom of incomprehensibility à la Marion, may provide a dynamic basis for understanding human nature at a time when subjective diversity is ever more asserted.

Keywords: Phenomenology; Marion; Heidegger; metaphysics; subjectivity; indefinability; idol; icon; gift

1 Introduction

The work of Jean-Luc Marion engages with patristic and mystical theology, phenomenology, and modern philosophy (including existentialism), utilising an apophatic nuance to make an attempt to go beyond the boundaries of causal metaphysics as onto-theo-logically constituted. This apophatic ‘tinge’ is deeply-rooted in the Christian theological tradition, and he declares negative theology to be the first serious rival of metaphysics.¹ Marion acknowledges that many Christian theologians as early as the Patristic Era (e.g., Hilary of Poitiers) have recognised a certain indefinability of the Divine. Through his focus on the *negative* and, more explicitly in his recent work, the negative forms of certainty, Marion realigns epistemology and ontology towards his idiomatic subject of the ‘gift’ of the ‘saturated phenomenon’. This article redeploys some of the resources to be found in Marion’s reading of Martin Heidegger, for the sake of underlying an alternative methodology for theological anthropology that is fitting for a contemporary world in which human beings are evermore becoming aware of the diversities of their embodiment.

It is difficult to avoid the reality that Marion’s theories—voiced often in indirectly theological language—have significant implications for contemporary doctrines of God, the Incarnation, and theological anthropology. This article tries to tease out the implications of Marion’s focus on the indefinable subjectivity of the phenomenon for theological anthropology, as in late-modernity the discipline contends with an ever more diverse humanity. It highlights the idolisation of the object, the insufficiency of metaphysics as onto-theo-logy, the subjectivity of the icon, the irregardability of the saturated phenomenon, and the negative

1 Marion, “In Excess”, 132.

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certainty of human personhood. It also points towards a broadened view of the discipline of metaphysics that goes beyond its historically narrow onto-theo-logical constitution. I will begin by picking up Marion's distinction between the 'idol' and the 'icon', to use as a preliminary illustration.

There is substantial disagreement about the *modus operandi* of philosophy post-metaphysics, or even post-post-metaphysics. This article does not attempt to settle these philosophical disputes, but to redeploy the resources uncovered in the process of Marion's reading of Heidegger for the sake of underlying an alternative methodology for theological anthropology. It does so for the sake of theological anthropology, in a way that is fitting for the contemporary world in which human beings are evermore becoming aware of the diversities of their embodiment. It highlights the idolisation of the object, the insufficiency of metaphysics as onto-theo-logy, the subjectivity of the icon, the irregardability of the saturated phenomenon, and the negative certainty of human personhood.

2 De-'facing' the idol

One of Marion's most persistent concerns is to distinguish between the idol and the icon definitively. Marion sees the idol as that which is given its supposedly 'holy' status by the viewer imposing a supreme notion of his or her own static conception upon an object. Thus Marion calls the idol an "invisible mirror" that "would not fix any gazeable object if the gaze by itself did not first freeze."² Here, at the start of his work *God Without Being*, he makes it clear that "the idol consigns the divine to the measure of a human gaze" and "represents nothing, but presents a certain low-water mark of the divine."³ Why, then, do I begin here? Well, Marion's understanding of the 'idol' offers an entry point to his philosophy and theology, and to the significance of his methodology.

There is a link between Marion's understanding of the object and his understanding of the idol. Marion describes the object as "a poor and conditional phenomenon, [...] one that has undergone a *diminutio capitis*—more precisely, a *diminutio phenomenalitatis*."⁴ This phenomenality of the object is explicated in a threefold manner: (1) the phenomenality of the object "occupies the entire phenomenal scene because it covers over, but without penetrating it entirely, or completely seizing hold of it"; (2) the diminution and impoverishment of the object "assures the object its chief privilege: certainty"; (3) the object is defined as "that which remains of the thing once it has been subjected to the requirements of certainty."⁵ What is more, this phenomenality of the object is realised within the gaze of the seer, which produces the existence of the object.

The production of the existence of the object within the gaze of the seer, the "submission of its phenomenality," is "the final step in the constitution of the object."⁶ Marion's point is to show that, in the object, "existence is limited to validating the essence, but adds nothing to it and, especially, never contests or surpasses it." Therefore, "there exists only that which was already thinkable and possible for me, and never a phenomenon that bursts forth from within itself. Nothing happens, and the existence of the object simply serves to name the ban on the event." In the object, then, nothing is regarded of what it *is in itself*, but only that which is imposed upon it in the gaze of the seer, and by the certainties of its existence within the boundaries of the causality of metaphysics.

As I have already used the term several times it is also worth clarifying the particular understanding of 'gaze' in the work of Marion. This is the word *regarder* in French, which Marion understands both in the sense of 'to guard or to keep' and 'to keep an eye on, to watch out of the corner of one's eye, to keep in sight'. Hence there is a sense of (self-)protection and imposition in this term for Marion. In his magnum opus, *Being Given: Towards a Phenomenology of Givenness*, he writes:

² Marion, "God Without Being", 12.

³ Ibid., 14.

⁴ Marion, "Negative Certainties", 162.

⁵ Ibid., 163.

⁶ Ibid., 173.

Gazing, *regarder*, is about being able to keep the visible thus seen under the control of the seer, exerting this control by guarding the visible in visibility, as much as possible without letting it have the imitative in appearing (or disappearing) by forbidding it any variation in intensity that would disturb its inscription in the concept, and especially by conserving it in permanent presence through postulating its identical reproducibility. To gaze at the phenomenon is therefore equivalent to not seeing it, but indeed to transforming it into an object visible according to an always poor or common phenomenality—visible within the limits of a concept, therefore at the initiative of the gaze, enduring as long as possible in permanence, in short, visible in conformity with objectness.⁷

So, to summarise this preliminary illustration: In the object, and especially in the idol, the gaze of the seer sees what it sees not on account of the pure phenomenality of that which is in view, but on account of the limitations of the low-water mark of phenomenality upon which one's gaze has imposed a static, pseudo-metaphysical essentiality that covers the phenomenal scene. The gaze thereby denies the actuality and the dynamism of subjective plurality, as it seeks to constrict and to control what is in view. In this failure to recognise pure phenomenality as true plurality and otherness—the self freely manifesting itself—the phenomenon is denied its own intrinsic dignity. To find the icon or the subjective (a genuine presence of the Other, you might say), as opposed to the idol or the objective, Marion contends that more is required than an imposition of meaning by a subject upon the objectified within the boundaries of traditional, causal metaphysics as onto-theo-logically constituted—objective meanings may *seem* absolute within themselves. In short, the object “proves itself to be always comprehensible only because, as object of experience, it submits itself by definition to the conditions of possibility of this very experience (ours).”⁸ The object passively allows the imposition of comprehension upon it.

On the contrary, a liberation from objectness is required, especially when the subject(s) in question is human persons, for Marion remarks that “knowledge of man by himself cannot be reduced to a simple empirical knowledge, since it involves man's freedom.”⁹ This is why Marion asserts that the knowledge of man is an “*aporia* of man for metaphysics, that is, for himself: he knows himself and defines himself only by his objects [or even, perhaps, by his idols], and never *as such*.” The freedom of the human person, or, to put it another way, the permanent impermanence of the non-static phenomenality of the human person, means that the human person is inexhaustible, indefinable, and unobjectifiable, even to itself. It is only in the subjective plurality of free self-manifestation that the dignity of human persons is realised. Marion therefore differentiates his own position from Cartesian (indeed Aristotelian) metaphysics. For example, Descartes writes in his *Rules for the Direction of the Mind* that “we should attend only to those *objects* of which our minds seem capable of having *certain* and indubitable cognition.”¹⁰ For Marion, to define the essence of the human person is, however, “an epistemic and directly metaphysical impossibility,”¹¹ as it is other to the causality between objects that delimits the boundaries of traditional epistemology and metaphysics. It is to the means of transcending these boundaries that I now turn.

3 Completing metaphysics

Jean-Luc Marion is learned in the classical, ‘Cartesian’ tradition of metaphysics. In *The Visible and the Revealed* Marion intentionally deconstructs the remnants of classical metaphysics in order that the doctrine of God might transcend its confinement within what he sees as outmoded philosophical limits.¹² Similarly, in the essay *The “End of Metaphysics” As a Possibility*, he engages with the works of Martin Heidegger, particularly those works in which Heidegger discusses the end of metaphysics with relation to the thought of Friedrich Nietzsche.¹³ Central to Marion's engagement with Heidegger is his adoption of the assertion

⁷ Marion, “Being Given”, 214.

⁸ Marion, “Negative Certainties”, 156.

⁹ Ibid., 13.

¹⁰ “The Philosophical Writings of Descartes”, I, 10 [2].

¹¹ Marion, “Negative Certainties”, 15.

¹² Marion, “The Visible”, 49–65.

¹³ Marion, “The ‘End of Metaphysics’”, 166–89. See, e.g., Heidegger, “Nietzsche”, IV, 199–250; Heidegger, “The End of Philosophy”, 92–96; and Heidegger, “The Word of Nietzsche”, 53–112.

that the conceptual framework of classical metaphysics as onto-theo-logy is exhaustible—it is not eternal.

For Heidegger the end of metaphysics, understood as the end of philosophy itself, does not mean a simple cessation of metaphysics, but rather a completion of metaphysics.¹⁴ The end of philosophy is a “place in which the whole of philosophy’s history is gathered in its uttermost possibility. End as completion means this gathering.”¹⁵ Marion makes the same point: “Metaphysics finds its end only in attaining its goal, thus, in accomplishing its finality.”¹⁶ For Heidegger, what the end of philosophy and the completion of metaphysics refer to is seen decisively in that even “Nietzsche’s acknowledgment of the being as the most elemental factor (as will to power) does not conduct him to the thought of Being as such.”¹⁷ Metaphysics, concerned as it is with the being of beings, cannot direct itself to the thought of Being Itself. This is because “Being cannot *be*. Were it to be, it would no longer remain being but would become a being, an entity.”¹⁸ I will now lay out some of the background to this philosophical realisation, and its consequences for theology.

In coming to understand beings-in-general, or Common Being, metaphysics exhausts its faculties, and so it cannot come to know Being Itself. The reason for this is that “what is peculiar to Being is not anything having the character of Being.”¹⁹ In his *Introduction to “What Is Metaphysics?”*, Heidegger elaborates on this somewhat paradoxical state of affairs: “Metaphysics, insofar as it always represents only beings as beings, does not recall Being itself. Philosophy does not gather itself upon its ground. It always leaves its ground — leaves it by means of metaphysics. And yet it never escapes its ground.”²⁰ As such metaphysics is unable to explain the ground of beings, or Being itself, because it does not have the requisite conceptual faculties. It tends towards the objective, rather than the subjective. Philosophy thereby becomes trapped in a flattened world of common being-in-existence. Heidegger therefore acknowledges that “the essential possibilities of metaphysics are exhausted,”²¹ because “with Nietzsche’s metaphysics, philosophy is completed. That means: It has gone through the sphere of prefigured possibilities.”²² Metaphysics as onto-theo-logy appears to have no original cards left to play in the game of philosophy. But is this the end of the usefulness of metaphysics for theology, or of philosophy in general?

For theology, Marion recognises that the end of metaphysics means that “God is dead” only if God (spoken of in the famous idiom of Nietzsche) is identified with a ‘god’ conceived and constrained within an onto-theo-logical, metaphysical framework as a first cause.²³ This is because of the reliance of metaphysics on the commonality of being in existence, which is grounded in universal Being. As such the god of metaphysics is a *prōtē arcē* (first ground), or *causa sui* (cause within itself), of beings. In *The End of Philosophy and the Task of Thinking*, Heidegger states: “Philosophy is metaphysics. Metaphysics thinks beings as a whole—the world, man, God—with respect to Being, with respect to the belonging together of beings in Being.”²⁴ Being, then, here capitalised, references the ultimate object or goal of philosophical metaphysics in the classical Cartesian tradition.

The whole of onto-theo-logical metaphysics is identified with Being Itself, and vice versa. Mirroring the language of Heidegger, Marion defines metaphysics as follows: “the system of philosophy from Suarez to Kant as a single science bearing at one and the same time on the universal common being and on being (or beings) par excellence.”²⁵ Couched in philosophical phraseology, the god of a causal, Cartesian metaphysics is unearthed in universal, common being because “Common Being grounds beings, even beings par

14 Heidegger, “The End of Philosophy and the Task of Thinking”, 432.

15 Ibid., 433.

16 See Marion, “The ‘End of Metaphysics’”, 167.

17 Heidegger, “Nietzsche”, iv, 199.

18 Heidegger, “Kant’s Thesis about Being”, 362.

19 Heidegger, “On Time and Being”, 10.

20 Heidegger, “Introduction to “What Is Metaphysics?””, 278.

21 Heidegger, “Nietzsche”, iv, 148.

22 Heidegger, “The End of Philosophy”, 95.

23 See Nietzsche, “Thus Spoke Zarathustra”, 69.

24 Heidegger, “The End of Philosophy and the Task of Thinking”, 432.

25 Marion, “The Visible”, 51. Heidegger also saw Francisco Suárez (1548–1617) as an important and influential figure in the development of metaphysics.

excellence; in return, the being par excellence, in the mode of causality, grounds common Being.”²⁶ But the main problem for theology in this is that “the ground ensures the legitimacy of metaphysics but not of itself.”²⁷ In short, this god is the first ground of the onto-theo-logical constitution of metaphysics, but Godself is groundless. God does not fit within the schema; Godself cannot be causally accounted for.

The other, equally problematic, side of the coin can be illustrated with further reference to Heidegger. The issue is the reciprocal grounding between common being and subjective forms of being (par excellence or not). In *The Onto-Theo-Logical Constitution of Metaphysics*, Heidegger writes that Being shows itself in the nature of the ground only when it is thought of as the first ground.²⁸ This means that “the Being of beings is represented [...] only as *causa sui*. This is the metaphysical concept of God.”²⁹ This god cannot be revealed otherwise. An onto-theo-logical god (as absolute ground, subject, or cause within itself) is thus a god trapped by its causal relation to existential, created forms of being. Being tethered to creation in this way contravenes Divine freedom.

There is a further issue for theology. The function of grounding beings in existence that the god performs within the onto-theo-logical constitution of metaphysics is contingent upon the framework itself. This god is logically necessary only insofar as it operates according to and within the limits of an onto-theo-logical concept of a first ground, as a cause within itself of being-in-existence. So, “if the figure of the ground no longer allows us to legitimate the concept of ‘metaphysics’ in general, it follows that the assimilation of God to the function of ultimate ground in particular becomes (or can become) illegitimate.”³⁰ If the metaphysical framework of causality collapses then so also does the onto-theo-logical conception of god as the first ground. The baby is then thrown out with the bathwater. The ease with which this onto-theo-logical concept of god can be disposed of should encourage theologians to question whether such a conception is actually relevant and useful for understanding the Christian God. In a similar way, Marion remarks that “it should not be possible for the divinity of God to be lacking. If it is lacking, if only imperceptibly, then God is already no longer at issue—but rather ‘God,’ who is stigmatized as an idol by these quotation marks.”³¹ The god of metaphysics is an idol; conceived solely as the first ground, an onto-theo-logical god lacks true Divinity. However, I consider that it is unnecessary to discard metaphysics in its entirety based on this insight.

According to what has just been said, the god of metaphysics, as an onto-theo-logically constituted first cause, is limited and contingent—descriptors which cannot characterise the Christian God. Moreover, if God is God, the Creator of Heaven and Earth, then it should not be so simple to remove God from the ontological picture. It follows that the “overcoming of onto-theo-logy becomes the condition for surpassing the naming of ‘God’ in philosophy as efficient ground.”³² Christian theology must complete and go beyond metaphysics to escape from suffering a philosophical death. However, Heidegger recognises that the way forward for philosophy—I would contend likewise for theology—is not to bury the ontological tradition as nullity, but rather to “stake out the positive possibilities of that tradition [...] within its limits.”³³ Joseph Rivera has made some progress recently on retrieving such positive possibilities. He argues that understanding metaphysics as onto-theo-logy is a “historically narrow definition” and that, by dropping the pretension of an absolutist view (which is unattainable), metaphysics can also represent a “a subjective horizon in which an inexhaustible search for the ground of experience may be conducted.”³⁴ In virtue of Jean-Luc Marion’s engagement with the work of Heidegger, two elements with positive theological potential emerge from overcoming the limitations of metaphysics as onto-theo-logy: (1) Being gives or gifts Itself; and (2)

²⁶ Marion, “The Visible”, 52.

²⁷ Ibid., 53.

²⁸ Heidegger, “Identity and Difference”, 59–60.

²⁹ Ibid., 60.

³⁰ Marion, “The Visible”, 54.

³¹ Ibid., 55.

³² Ibid.

³³ Heidegger, “Being and Time”, 44 [22].

³⁴ Rivera, “God and Metaphysics”, 840.

Being Itself withdraws from the phenomenal scene. Having outlaid the groundwork for them, it is now apt to discuss these elements specifically.

The first element of note from Marion's engagement with Heidegger in regard to completing metaphysics is that Being gives existence to beings. This is clear in Heidegger's *Letter on Humanism*, where he writes: "For the 'it' that here 'gives' is being itself. The 'gives' names the essence of being that is giving, granting its truth. The self-giving into the open, along with the open region itself, is being itself. [...] Being comes to destiny in that It, being, gives itself."³⁵ This helps to clarify a phrase found in *Being and Time* that is ambiguous in English translation: *gibt es*. Both of the standard English translations of *Being and Time* (one by Joan Stambaugh, the other by John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson) render this phrase as 'is there', but there is evidence, such as the quotation from the *Letter on Humanism*, that this could be rendered more literally as 'is given'.³⁶ I contend that this alternative gives the phrase more philosophical nuance in English. As translated by Macquarrie and Robinson, one key passage from *Being and Time* that includes this phrase reads: "Of course only as long as Dasein is (that is, only as long as an understanding of Being is ontically possible), 'is there' [*gibt es*] Being."³⁷ With or without nuancing the translation, it is clear from this passage in *Being and Time* that Heidegger understands that existence is given to beings by Being. However, this only makes sense if it is also possible to understand Being Itself.

In Heidegger's estimation, classical metaphysics (understood by him as onto-theo-logical) has failed to understand Being Itself, and its deficiency has also impaired the work of theology that relies on a philosophical scaffold. He writes that "*nowhere do we find such experiencing of Being itself*. Nowhere are we confronted by a thinking that thinks the truth of Being itself and therewith thinks truth itself as Being. [...] The history of Being begins, and indeed necessarily, *with the forgetting of Being*."³⁸ Heidegger thus makes use of his idiomatic analytic of 'Dasein' as a philosophical remedy to this lack of the truth of Being Itself; post-metaphysical Christian theology may make use of God. However, to highlight the recognition of this first element, that beings are given their being in such a way that metaphysics cannot contemplate Being Itself, is sufficient for now. The article must move on to consider the second element of Marion's engagement with Heidegger which is useful for theologically completing metaphysics, that Being Itself withdraws from the phenomenal scene.

The second element of note to Marion's engagement with Heidegger in regard to completing metaphysics is that Being always withdraws itself from the phenomenal scene. Heidegger writes:

Being is thought, but not the 'It gives' as such. The latter withdraws in favor of the *gift* which It gives. That gift is thought and conceptualized from then on exclusively as Being with regard to beings. A giving which gives only its gift, but in the giving holds itself back and withdraws. Such a giving we call sending.³⁹

But, for Heidegger, keeping back also belongs to giving as sending, so that "the denial of the present and the withholding of the present, play within the giving of what has been and what will be. What we have mentioned just now [...] shows something like a self-withdrawing, something we might call for short: withdrawal."⁴⁰ Even in giving as sending existence to beings, that which gives is simultaneously ungraspable and unconfined. That which gives Being is not limited or constricted to the world of beings. Marion picks up this language of withdrawal when he writes:

Properly speaking, being, which is not reducible to beings, is not, because it does not establish itself in presence, precisely because it establishes presence. It does not dwell, making itself available for its representation, but takes place unexpectedly and withdraws, like lightning, an event without substance or background.⁴¹

³⁵ Heidegger, "Letter on Humanism", 238–39. For the passage in German: Heidegger, "Über den Humanismus", 26.

³⁶ See Heidegger, "Sein und Zeit", 212 [§43]; Heidegger, "Being and Time: A Translation of Sein und Zeit", 196; and Heidegger, "Being and Time", 255. All subsequent references to *Being and Time* in English are to the Macquarrie and Robinson translation.

³⁷ Heidegger, "Being and Time", 255 [212].

³⁸ Heidegger, "The Word of Nietzsche", 108–09.

³⁹ Heidegger, "On Time and Being", 8.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 22.

⁴¹ Marion, "The 'End of Metaphysics'", 173–74.

The substance, or the reality, of that which gives is in itself not given. It is kept back. So Heidegger goes on to comment that “the sending in the destiny of Being has been characterized as a giving in which the sending source keeps itself back and, thus, withdraws from unconcealment.”⁴² What happens in this giving to beings is therefore the creation of an empty space, a space which is occupied by Being Itself though the space is unoccupied. It is the indecision of what gives.⁴³ At the end of his essay *The End of Philosophy and the Task of Thinking*, Heidegger leaves a question without answer: “Where does the clearing come from and how is it given? What speaks in the ‘There is / It gives?’”⁴⁴ This indecision of what gives means a clearing of the phenomenal scene, though the clearing does not bring to light fully that which gives to beings.⁴⁵

The clearing of the phenomenal scene is a necessary element of the completion of metaphysics. This is, despite the fact that it does not in itself reveal in givenness that which gives to beings, because “‘Being without regard to its being grounded in terms of beings,’ manages to come to us only through it – the clearing.”⁴⁶ This means that, for Marion, “any overcoming of metaphysics is beholden to the clearing of being as such.”⁴⁷ For the philosopher-theologian, this is a phenomenal space into which the gift of Godself, as the source of all beings, may enter in some form. Moreover, this “donation must not be thought starting from being, but rather being from donation; this means that the gift unfolds a rigor that is both prior and independent, according to the exigencies of charity.”⁴⁸ I have wandered a little from the preliminary, illustrative comparison with which I hoped to open an entryway into the significance of Jean-Luc Marion’s philosophical theology for theological anthropology. I hope, however, that I have outlined Marion’s understanding of objectness, the idol, and the limits of metaphysics as onto-theo-logy sufficiently to set up the contrast with the focus of the rest of the article, which concerns subjectivity, the icon, and the gifted givenness of the saturated phenomenon of counter-experience. To get underway, I now turn to the subjective phenomena: the icon; the person; the subject-in-general.

4 ‘Facing’ the icon

For Marion, the indefinability and incomprehensibility of the subjective phenomena is core to their existential reality. It is to this indefinability and incomprehensibility that I refer to in the title of this subsection, ‘Facing’ the Icon. Intentionally, this title contrasts with the earlier subsection entitled *De-‘Facing’ the Idol*. The point of this, though slightly tongue-in-cheek, is to stress the personality that lies beneath this somewhat abstract discussion of epistemology and metaphysics: when something truly points beyond itself to *itself*, when conceptuality is not imposed upon it or its bounds delimited by an other, it becomes an icon instead of an idol, a person instead of a thing, a subject instead of an object. Non-conceptuality is key to the subjective phenomenon, to God and to the person. Marion, in his book *Negative Certainties*, strongly emphasises this:

The vagueness of this term ‘subjective’ in its opposition to the objectness of the object actually suits rather well with what is being characterized when we use it: precisely the imprecision of that which does not reach the status of an object, its contingency, its mutability, its reluctance to be quantified—in a word, its incomprehensibility. By contrast, the object is defined precisely and allows for a stable comprehension.⁴⁹

A subjective phenomenon is therefore an unstable existence: it is to a certain extent invisible and unconfined within the limits of a concept; it does not conform with objectness as it cannot be withheld by another in permanence.⁵⁰ Marion holds this to be true of all phenomena: they happen ultimately on

⁴² Heidegger, “On Time and Being”, 22.

⁴³ See Marion, “The ‘End of Metaphysics’”, 177–79.

⁴⁴ Heidegger, “The End of Philosophy and the Task of Thinking”, 449.

⁴⁵ Marion, “The ‘End of Metaphysics’”, 175.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 176. Marion is quoting Heidegger, “On Time and Being”, 2.

⁴⁷ Marion, “The ‘End of Metaphysics’”, 179.

⁴⁸ Marion, “The End of the End”, 18.

⁴⁹ Marion, “Negative Certainties”, 156.

⁵⁰ Marion, “Being Given”, 214.

the basis of their *self*. Accordingly, he writes that “this is true precisely of the [...] idol, of my flesh, and of the face of the other, which appear on their own initiative, never on mine, [...] since I cannot always—in fact, can almost never—see them as stable, permanent, neutral, and public entities.”⁵¹ Thus, the subjective phenomenon is to be seen as unstable, impermanent, non-neutral, and non-public; it is dynamic instead of static, seen almost as if it were in passing, for it does not remain, it does not persist, and it does not perdure.⁵²

The indefinability, unconfirability, and incomprehensibility of the impermanent subjective phenomenon constitutes a dynamism that is entirely proper to it. For Marion, any subjective phenomenon gives itself *as* and *of* itself and, in doing so, points back, beyond the objective horizon of causal metaphysics as onto-theo-logically constituted. As such, when looking to understand the subjective, Marion is deliberately not looking for certainty:

A good number of instances of knowledge not only cannot reach certainty, but *must* not, since such a certainty would contradict what is to be known: this is the case each time that it is a question of knowing that which, as such, implies an essential determination. For example, the knowledge of the other, in the end, should never claim certainty, since every other implies the indetermination of his freedom, precisely without which he could no longer fill the role of my *other* other (and this is why we speak, wrongly but constantly, of an aporia of intersubjectivity, when, on the contrary, this is precisely the royal road to every access to the other than myself).⁵³

There is, in certainty concerning the other, an improper appropriation of the other that reduces the other to an object, rather than seeing them as another subject in their own right. This is because, in contrast to the object, the subjective phenomenon does not allow itself to be quantified according to parameters, which determine all the characteristics of its essence. Personhood is manifested individually, but it sublimates individualities. Neither is it possible to foresee the existence of the subjective phenomenon. Nor can the subjective phenomenon be produced, or (due to the permanent impermanence of its characteristics) be reproduced.⁵⁴

The subjective phenomenon is incomprehensible because it is unique, impermanent, and infinite in its manifestation; it is transcendent of the bonds of causality between objects in rational metaphysics. It is, and it *gives*, truly *in* and *of* itself. It is a unique being of truth-in-existence, to cannibalise Martin Heidegger’s *Letter on Humanism* (a letter to which Marion himself refers).⁵⁵ When the subjective phenomenon gives itself as *itself*, it could also be said that—veiling this in more daringly theological language—the unique face of the icon (or else a person as the *imago Dei*) reflects the face of God the Absolute Subject, and thereby the subjective phenomenon manifestly reveals itself truly as *itself* by pointing beyond itself—precisely to that which gives me to myself (God). Marion also references the remark of Hilary of Poitiers in *De Trinitate* that “God is invisible, ineffable, infinite. In speaking of Him, even speech is silent; the mind becomes weary in trying to fathom Him; the understanding is limited in comprehending Him.”⁵⁶ So the subjective phenomenon is the ungraspable, as God is in God’s self-revelation of the Absolute Subject. That is why Marion names the subject *l’adonné* or the gifted (or given over to). This bears particular significance because of its closeness within Marion’s conceptual scheme to the gift of the saturated phenomenon, which is the phenomenon *par excellence*, it is the finality of phenomenality. I shall turn to discussing the paradox of the saturated phenomenon in the next subsection of this article.

⁵¹ Marion, “Negative Certainties”, 202.

⁵² Ibid., 159.

⁵³ Ibid., 205–206.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 156.

⁵⁵ Heidegger, “Letter on Humanism”, 253–54. See Marion, “Negative Certainties”, 226, n. 75; and Marion, “The Visible”, 157, nn. 18, 19.

⁵⁶ Hilary, “The Trinity”, 40 [II.6]. See Marion, “In Excess”, 157–58.

5 Bedazzling saturation

Marion's concept of the saturated phenomenon is, in part, a gift that withdraws from unconcealment. This means that "the saturated phenomenon *cannot be aimed at*. This impossibility stems from its essentially unforeseeable character. To be sure, its giving intuition ensures it a quantity, but such that it cannot be foreseen."⁵⁷ In this sense the saturated phenomenon has some characteristics in common with other subjective phenomena, because it cannot be defined essentially according to its parameters and it is unforeseeable, nor can it be constrained by the gaze of the seer. Moreover, when the saturated phenomenon is revealed the seer is bedazzled as "perception crosses its tolerable maximum,"⁵⁸ for the gaze "cannot any longer sustain a light that bedazzles and burns."⁵⁹ The saturated phenomenon is thus identified by an overload of intuition, in contravention of empirical gazing or logical deduction, as might constitute a metaphysical conception of an object. Marion argues that the saturated phenomenon marks, by rendering visible to excess, "the paradoxically unmeasured dimensions of possible givenness—which nothing stops or conditions."⁶⁰ Accordingly, the saturated phenomenon is intolerable to behold and never beholden; the saturated phenomenon is incommensurable, it is unforeseeable, and it is unconditioned.⁶¹

Within the sphere of metaphysics, there is a similarity between the philosophical concept and the gaze. It is in how they relate (or do not relate) to the saturated phenomenon. Marion writes that "the idolatry of the concept is the same as that of the gaze: imagining oneself to have attained and to be capable of maintaining God under our gaze, like a thing of the world."⁶² The revelation of God in the revelation of the saturated phenomenon "consists first of all in cleaning the slate of this illusion and its blasphemy."⁶³ As such, all remnants of the gaze and of metaphysical concepts must be cleared from the human mind in order to appreciate the revelation of God as it is in the saturated phenomenon: an absolute mode of presence which saturates any and all horizons. Such a presence, without limit or horizon, alone suits the givenness without reserve of the saturated phenomenon, and so the saturated phenomenon cannot be presented, or present itself as an object. This is why it "occupies no space, fixes no attention, attracts no gaze."⁶⁴ It is in irregardability, through bedazzlement, that God shines by absence.

The possibility for intuition of the saturated phenomenon is boundless. The intuition that gives the absolute mode of presence in the givenness without reserve of the saturated phenomenon "is not limited by its possible concept," its excess "can neither be divided nor adequately put together again," and it "could not be measured in terms of its parts, since the saturating intuition surpasses limitlessly the sum of the parts by continually adding to them."⁶⁵ The saturated phenomenon is incommensurable and without parallel. It cannot be regarded as an object because it appears with "a multiple and indescribable excess that annuls all effort at constitution."⁶⁶ Neither can it be regarded conceptually because "intuition by definition passes beyond what meaning a hermeneutic of the concept can provide."⁶⁷ The saturated phenomenon is appreciated by means of a deeper-rooted natural intuition, beneath the artifices of the person as regarded or conceived within a metaphysical world.

The saturated phenomenon is unforeseeable. Its revelation is instantaneous, without precedent. It does not distinguish or add up a finite number of finite parts and so there is no kind of prior warning or indication that its revelation is about to happen. The observer is bedazzled by its appearance. As the saturated phenomenon is imposed in amazement and out of nowhere, its intuitive givenness is accomplished by the

⁵⁷ Marion, "Being Given", 199.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 206.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 203.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 221.

⁶¹ Ibid., 199–200, 211–12.

⁶² Marion, "In Excess", 150.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 63.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 200.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 213.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 217.

very fact that its possible parts are not counted up and not foreseen.⁶⁸ This also has consequences for the perception of the finite world: it becomes more acute “not so much because the given falls short before our gaze,” but rather because “this gaze can sometimes no longer measure the range of the given.”⁶⁹ The one who is doing the seeing is therefore more acutely aware of the limitations and causal links of the finite world that give the objects of empirical regard to the gaze of the seer. But the saturated phenomenon, which is neither “*visible* according to quantity nor bearable according to quality, [...] appears *absolute* according to relation, which means it evades any analogy of experience.” This also means that “finitude is disclosed more in the encounter with the saturated phenomenon than with the poor phenomenon,” because gazing “can sometimes no longer measure the range of the given.” This is part of the nature of its unforeseeability, along with its instantaneous revelation and the indistinguishability of any finite parts.

The unforeseeable givenness of the saturated phenomenon is the revelation of God in an absolute mode of presence, where one knows God simultaneously with not knowing. This is “not a matter of a kataphasis ill-disguised in an apophasis, but of a radical apophasis which, precisely as radical, opens—by means of a paradox that is to be taken into consideration—onto knowledge of another type.”⁷⁰ This type of knowledge of God can never be described as comprehension, because comprehension “suggests adequate knowledge as long as one is dealing with things of the world. But as soon as one tries to catch sight of God, the relation must be inverted—knowledge holds only if comprehension ceases.”⁷¹ Here, then we are pointed towards a way in which to know God in the revelation of the saturated phenomenon that is fundamentally different to any other way of knowing. It is “the insistent and unbearable excess of the intuition of God.”⁷² So perceiving God in the revelation of the saturated phenomenon is not an epistemic incident that happens on a continuum. It is not part of a spectrum on which other types of epistemic, empirical, or metaphysical understanding can also be compared, categorised, or quantified accordingly. It cannot be “reduced to the conditions of experience (objecthood), therefore to the I that sets them.”⁷³ So it cannot be produced or regarded by any *person* or any *thing*. Rather one becomes a witness to gracious givenness *par excellence*.⁷⁴

There is one other characteristic of the saturated phenomenon that is necessary to mention. The saturated phenomenon offers the “paradigm of the phenomenon finally without reserve.”⁷⁵ This means that the saturated phenomenon is the final possibility of phenomenality, “not only a possibility that surpasses actuality, but the possibility that surpasses the very conditions of possibility, the possibility of unconditioned possibility.” The saturated phenomenon is, in a sense, the teleological culmination of phenomenality. But what appearance does this phenomenon take? One thing is clear, it is not exceptional. It is the norm to which all other phenomena seem lacking, for “it alone appears truly as itself, of itself, and on the basis of itself, since it alone appears without the limits of a horizon or reduction to an I and constitutes itself, to the point of giving *itself* as a *self*.”⁷⁶ This is auto-manifestation. It accomplishes fully the most operative definition of the phenomenon. In relation to this, other phenomena are “defined and declined by defect or simplification.”⁷⁷ Yet, they are measured according to their imitation of the incommensurability of the prototype, the unconfinedness of the icon, and the givenness of the gift of the saturated phenomenon.

The language here is laden with a latent Christology and, by virtue of that, is a potential source for theological anthropology. If the person of Christ is understood as the absolute mode of presence (the givenness *par excellence* of the revelation of God in the saturated phenomenon), and Christ is also the fulfilment of human personhood, can it not also therefore be claimed that human personhood is a gift given by God, that a human person is, in a Christomorphic sense or dimension, also a saturated phenomenon?

⁶⁸ Ibid., 202.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 206.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 154.

⁷¹ Ibid., 155.

⁷² Ibid., 162.

⁷³ Ibid., 215.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 216–17.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 218.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 219.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

Marion would probably not go this far, and he does not offer an explicit theological anthropology, so to construct one is an exercise in speculation. However, he does ask: “What does the gift do, and how do we respond to it in receiving it?”⁷⁸ Marion seems to recognise that there is a tension between the concepts of the saturated phenomenon and the subjective (unsaturated) phenomenon discussed above. The two are not discrete. What, then, is the relation of a subjective phenomenon, a human person, and the gift of the saturated phenomenon, the Divine gift of Jesus Christ Incarnate?

If the ultimate revelation of God is to be found in the person of Jesus Christ, the absolute mode of presence of the givenness of the saturated phenomenon, then by virtue of the union of the two natures there is a relation between the human and the saturated phenomenon. There is a correlation between the mode of presence and that which appears. With regard to the appearance of the saturated phenomenon in itself and in our consciousness, Marion says that “givenness is equivalent in fact to the phenomenon itself.”⁷⁹ Absolute givenness is the Divine gift of the saturated phenomenon, equivalent to and auto-manifested in the human person Jesus Christ. If one therefore understands the person of Christ as the absolute presence of givenness, it can be argued that in the saturated phenomenon there is a correlation between that which is revealed and the Divine action of self-revelation. The saturated phenomenon appears both in itself and in our consciousness as human. As the absolute mode of presence of the givenness of the saturated phenomenon, the self-revealing, self-giving, and self-emptying Incarnate Word of God is correlated with the human Jesus Christ. There is a unique alignment between human perception and actuality.⁸⁰ A Trinitarian person is correlated with a created one, for the Son of God is consubstantial with the Divine and with the human.

Even if we delimit the saturated phenomenon as somehow constituting only the *divine* nature as it appears in Christ, the two are inconfusably inseparable. The two natures do not mingle, change, or divide but, by self-gift and auto-manifestation, retain their own particularity, united in one person and substance. This dual consubstantiality means that the two natures are not confused, but it is impossible to delineate any boundaries. As the non-Jesus human being—a definitive subjective phenomenon—is an imitation of the saturated phenomenon, they are an imitation of Christ, an imitation of the auto-manifestation of God in the givenness of the gift of the saturated phenomenon. The human person is clearly a subjective phenomenon according to the schema of Marion, but the characteristics of the saturated phenomenon also seem applicable teleologically through the eschatological fulfilment of the Christological likeness.⁸¹ As such, the phenomenology of being gifted leads us to understand the fulfilment of humanity in Jesus Christ, the absolute mode of presence of the givenness of the saturated phenomenon. The witness to the absolute mode of presence in the givenness of the saturated phenomenon revealed in the person of Jesus Christ is themselves irrefragable and irreducible.⁸²

6 Negative Certainty

Genuine certitude is slippery, and difficult to handle. It is often paradoxical, not least at the intersection of revelation, Christology, and theological anthropology. Marion asserts that “certitude sometimes constitutes an *obstacle* to the true knowledge of certain phenomena.”⁸³ Yet, this article has been attempting to illustrate that which it is impossible to illustrate: the outline of the subjective (and potentially saturated) phenomenon that is a human person. Due to the incertitude of such a phenomenon there cannot be an experience of it as an object.⁸⁴ I happily concede that the *subject* is impossible to define, and this is not a concession that

⁷⁸ Marion, “The End of the End”, 19–20.

⁷⁹ Marion, “In Excess”, 21.

⁸⁰ This insight holds definite potential for understanding the methodological relationship of theological anthropology and phenomenological philosophy, but it cannot be explored at any greater length within this article.

⁸¹ Ephesians 5.1; 1 John 3.2–3.

⁸² See Marion, “Being Given”, 217.

⁸³ Marion, “Negative Certainties”, 206.

⁸⁴ Marion, “Being Given”, 215.

Marion shrinks from either. He, like me, sees it as vital to preserving the inviolability of the human being. The same paradoxicality and indefinability is also true of the saturated phenomenon that is the gift of Jesus Christ Incarnate. Tertullian of Carthage's treatise *De Carni Christi* captures this succinctly: "The Son of God was crucified: I am not ashamed—because it is shameful. The Son of God died: it is immediately credible—because it is silly. He was buried, and rose again: it is certain—because it is impossible."⁸⁵ This is a negative certainty, a certainty which human beings do not possess and is not controlled within the onto-theo-logical sphere of metaphysics. It is unconfined, indefinable, and gratuitously given by the grace of God.

It is necessary not to define prescriptively the human subject. Such acts of definition "make it possible to put an end to certain human beings," and so the "impossibility of such a definition becomes the privilege of man as such—never able, and thus not even *obligated*, to allow himself to be defined."⁸⁶ This is a negative certainty in which one may find a common humanity, for "every being masks that of which it bears the mark: Being [*l'être*]."⁸⁷ This phenomenality is true to every subjective human person, by right and in the name of the dignity of humanity, and so those who abolish, abandon, or impose upon the humanity of others lose their own humanity, putting at risk "their own status as human beings and their ethical dignity as subjects with rights."⁸⁸ There may be another way through the epistemological impasse of negative certainty though: 'counter-experience'. In the language of Marion:

Counter-experience is not equivalent to a nonexperience, but to the experience of a phenomenon that is neither regardable, nor guarded according to objectness, one that therefore resists the conditions of objectification. Counter-experience offers the experience of what irreducibly contradicts the conditions for the experience of objects.⁸⁹

Human beings can intuit more than the objective. Human persons can self-reveal in occasional flashes their teleological fulfilment as saturated phenomena *in imitatio Christi*. Marion's concept of counter-experience points to the space in the middle of understanding the human, subjective phenomenon either essentially or as that which is becoming. This is the inter-porosity of human existence. Marion doesn't move in this direction; he is tied down with the essentiality of phenomena. Yet the essence of the phenomenon in itself as it is here and now in existence and the process of the phenomenon in teleological becoming may be held in tension, but they are not necessarily mutually exclusive. They are inconfusably and inextricably intertwined. The paradox of negative certainties remains, for, as Marion writes:

The paradox does not prohibit the knowledge of phenomena, but on the contrary defines the figure that phenomena must take in order to manifest themselves, when they contradict the conditions that finitude cannot not impose upon them. A way of thinking is measured precisely according to the paradoxes that it endures, and that it calls for.⁹⁰

Though the term used to denominate the ambiguities in the subjective phenomenon is '*negative certainties*' I consider that the term has rather a more positive, optimistic sense also. This is because simply the impossibility itself of answering a question about the subject, or defining it, "bears witness, for finite reason, to a negative certainty. And, since this negation itself depends on a prior certainty, it constitutes a *negative and real* broadening of the limits of knowledge."⁹¹ This is the process whereby the subjective phenomenon par excellence, the human person, may indefinitely broaden rationality, as "finitude will prove itself to be indefinite, or more precisely, positively infinite."⁹² This is certainly a paradox, and in the very last paragraph of *Negative Certainties* Marion quotes the *Philosophical Fragments* of Søren Kierkegaard:

⁸⁵ Tertullian's *Treatise on the Incarnation*, 19.

⁸⁶ Marion, "Negative Certainties", 37.

⁸⁷ Ibid., 124.

⁸⁸ Ibid., 91.

⁸⁹ Marion, "Being Given", 215.

⁹⁰ Marion, "Negative Certainties", 207.

⁹¹ Ibid., 206.

⁹² Ibid., 207.

One must not think ill of the paradox, for the paradox is the passion of thought, and the thinker without the paradox is like the lover without passion: a mediocre fellow. [...] This, then, is the ultimate paradox of thought: to want to discover something that thought itself cannot think.⁹³

The importance of the paradox to the schema of Marion is thus demonstrated. It is also important to a theological anthropology that wishes to respect the indefinable dignity and plurality of embodied human persons. Perhaps then, despite my attempts to illustrate that which cannot be illustrated, and to define that which cannot be defined, no other way of understanding the plurality of human persons is more paradoxical and yet more proper than this: self-revealing that diversity of subjectivity of which human thought itself cannot think. Moreover, on a phenomenological level, perhaps the paradox of human existence is that occupies a *via media* between two focuses in post-metaphysical phenomenology: the essentiality of phenomena and the phenomenon as becoming. In both cases the subjective phenomenon, the human person, presents itself paradoxically as a subject of indefinability, negative certainty, and counter-experience.

7 Conclusion

There is substantial disagreement about the *modus operandi* of philosophy post-metaphysics as onto-theo-logically constituted (even post-post-metaphysics). This article has not attempted to settle these philosophical disputes but to redeploy the resources uncovered in the process of Marion's reading of Heidegger as underlay for an alternative methodology in theological anthropology. It does so for the sake of theological anthropology, in a way that is fitting for the contemporary world in which human beings are evermore becoming aware of the diversities of their embodiment. It highlights the idolisation of the object, the insufficiency of metaphysics as onto-theo-logy, the subjectivity of the icon, the irregardability of the saturated phenomenon, and the negative certainty of human personhood.

This article concludes that, whether we see the human person as having more in common with the subjective phenomenon or the saturated one, the philosophical-theology of Jean-Luc Marion offers a fruitful framework upon which to build a theological anthropology. Always in the background lies his phenomenology of the gift, the givenness of the saturated phenomenon. Though Marion works within one phenomenological strand of the (at least) two that have emerged in the post-metaphysics-as-onto-theo-logy world, his phenomenological framework can aid the recognition of the necessarily paradoxical aspects of human existence, and thereby broaden the discipline of metaphysics. The idea of negative certainty helps to unpick the endless mystery of the human person, and it enables our acknowledgement of the incommensurable gift, the saturated phenomenon, the Absolute Paradox that is the Incarnation of Jesus Christ.

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⁹³ Kierkegaard, "Philosophical Fragments", 37.

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