
THE PARABLE OF THE PRODIGAL SON AS INTERPRETED BY JEAN-LUC MARION

**Maxim Aleksandrovich Monin^{*}, Vera Albertovna Terekhova and
Elena Vladimirovna Ledeneva**

*I.M. Sechenov First Moscow State Medical University (Sechenov University),
Trubetskaya Str. 8-2, Moscow, 119991, Russia*

(Received 3 June 2020)

Abstract

This article looks at the two main theses of Jean-Luc Marion's theology. According to the first one, God cannot be viewed within the sphere of being as its element, being in its most transcendent sense, or even as being in general. The second thesis argues that the whole sphere of being is imbued with divine love and represents God's gift to man. From the theological perspective, Marion's theory is mainly based on the tradition of apophatic theology developed by Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, as well as the Epistles of Paul. From the philosophical and methodological perspectives, Marion's works rely on Edmund Husserl's phenomenology creatively revised by Marion, where he emphasizes the activity focused on the subject rather than the activity carried out by the subject and introduces the concepts of 'saturated phenomenon' and 'counter-experience'. Marion's interpretation of the evangelical parable of the prodigal son from his book 'God Without Being' has been chosen to illustrate the analysis of his theology. Although this interpretation does not take up much space in Marion's book and cannot accommodate all aspects of his theological projects, it appears that consideration of it can serve as a good illustration of the essential ideas of Marion's theology and provide an insight into its strengths and weaknesses.

Keywords: beings, Being, counter-experience, counter-concept, gift

1. Introduction - Theology versus Philosophy

In his theological project, Jean-Luc Marion puts forward two main theses: 1) God exists beyond the boundaries of being; 2) the whole sphere of givenness understood in its broadest sense is a gift from God. Viewed separately, these theses belong to different intellectual traditions and do not seem new to them. The first one does not only contain the essential idea of apophatic theology but also sets the main vector for the antimetaphysical movement of thought in the philosophy of the modern period. As for the second one, it represents one of the most general statements reflecting the religious experience of the followers of monotheistic religions. The originality of Marion's idea is that, first, while

^{*}E-mail: maxim.monin@bk.ru

radicalizing it to the extreme limit, he joins them conceptually. Second, he interprets one of these theses in a purely theological way by opposing it to the whole ‘antimetaphysical’ European philosophical tradition - from Descartes and Leibniz to Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Derrida. As for the second thesis, by contrast, he views it from the philosophical perspective, considering givenness/gift in terms of Husserl’s phenomenological principle ‘back to the things themselves’.

Marion presumes that the ‘metaphysical foundation’ is still preserved in the Western philosophical thought, and in this sense, his criticism of this philosophy looks as the continuation of philosophical self-criticism. However, the fact that instead of Philosophy criticizing Theology or Philosophy criticizing Philosophy, now Theology is criticizing Philosophy (in addition, accusing it of idolatry), gives Marion’s criticism a new previously unknown conceptual dimension. According to Marion, Philosophy has been and remains a way of taking possession of existence by means of thought, which restricts Philosophy, first, to the boundaries of secular culture and, second, to the boundaries of being, beyond which Philosophy cannot reach since comprehending thought cannot reach beyond these limits. The concept of being with its claim on omnitude, which includes the concept of God as well (Marion uses quotation marks when he mentions God (‘God’)), is defined by Marion as an idol (without quotation marks) and Philosophy, in its turn, is defined as idolatry. At the same time, the medieval Christian theology, which was close to the ancient philosophical thought and was attributed by the philosophy of the modern period to ‘metaphysics’, such as Theology developed by Saint Thomas Aquinas, is separated by Marion from idolatry since he sees it rather as Christian wondering about God using the language of Philosophy foreign to this theology.

Marion’s interpretations of the ideas suggested both by representatives of the theological tradition he relies on and followers of the philosophical tradition, with whom he mainly polemicizes, have been subject to many critical remarks, in particular, regarding Marion’s vision of the works by Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite [J. Zachhuber, *Jean-Luc Marion and the Tradition of Negative Theology*, https://www.academia.edu/3074278/Jean-Luc_Marion_and_the_Tradition_of_Negative_Theology] and Heidegger [1]. Essentially, the critics note that Marion, trying to fit theological and philosophical texts into his conceptual framework, allows their simplification, emphasizing the apophatic aspect of the theological thought developed by Dionysius (i.e. focused on cognition of God in isolation from any existence), while Dionysius described two ways of comprehending God, apophatic and cataphatic, as equally important. A similar reproach is addressed to Marion’s interpretations of Heidegger’s ideas. According to Marion, Heidegger argued that the concept of God belonged to being and was derivative of it. As a researcher who criticizes Marion wrote, Heidegger’s viewpoint on this issue is not so straightforward and can be described as more complex than that. For his part, Marion himself conceded that some of his interpretations can be called ‘violence’ towards the original texts,

adding, though, that is speaking of the effort necessary to force open a locked door [2].

Possibly, interpretational ‘violence’ can be justified, especially in those cases when interpretation tries to grasp the ‘spirit’ of a text or a tradition as a whole without always following them literally. This is how Marion’s interpretation of the ideas of Pseudo-Dionysius is viewed in the above-mentioned work, which criticizes the one-sidedness of Marion’s interpretations but justifies it using the argument that Marion grasped the ‘essence’ of Dionysius’s theory aimed against pagan ‘polytheism’ [https://www.academia.edu/3074278/Jean-Luc_Marion_and_the_Tradition_of_Negative_Theology, p. 19]. This also holds true for Marion’s evaluation of Heidegger’s philosophy and, probably, the whole philosophical tradition: has not Philosophy been reproached by many parties, including philosophers themselves, for persistently sticking to the boundaries of immanent avoiding to go beyond these limits to a principally different sphere [3]?

In other words, Marion’s interpretation of philosophical and theological traditions can be called both emphatically prejudiced and justifiably categorical - apparently, the final evaluation should depend not so much on the interpretations themselves as on the conceptual framework they are built in. As it has been noted above, the main idea expressed in this model is that one may talk of God (with a capital letter and without quotation marks) only as drastically different from Being, but not in the sense that God resides in nonbeing. Rather, the very dichotomy between being and nonbeing loses its sense with respect to God and becomes pointless. Marion solves the problem connected with the fact that the word ‘God’ bears certain meanings, i.e. technically represents a concept (and the concept claiming to grasp the essence of the object is equivalent to an ‘idol’ in Marion’s terminology), by using strikethrough font when using the word ‘God’ in its conceptual meaning. Thus, it turns into a counter-concept (Marion does not seem to use the term ‘counter-concept’ though). According to Marion, such otherness of God, which cannot be comprehended by speculative thought, can be understood only from the perspective of Christian experience.

2. Phenomenology of gift

How can it be done? To answer this question, instead of resorting to theological argumentation (which, for example, employs the argument that testimony of faith affirms itself regardless of external grounds), Marion uses the philosophical tools of phenomenology complemented by such concepts as ‘saturated phenomena’ and ‘counter-experience’. Explaining what he means, for example, in his polemics with Jacques Derrida, Marion does not at all focus on religious experience - instead, he uses examples from a wide range of real-life situations. As opposed to experience as such, characterized by an intentional direction (of attention and thought) from the subject to the object, counter-experience refers to what happens to the subject, i.e. it describes situations when the subject becomes an object. According to Marion, death, love, illness,

poverty, or joy are all typical examples of experience [4]. It should be noted that one does not organize them; rather, they intrude into one's life, often unexpectedly. As far as saturated phenomena are concerned, they are very similar to counter-experience [4] viewed from the 'phenomenological perspective'. In the examples above, the events involving man are always larger than can be subjectively perceived. Such phenomena always denote themselves and something else that cannot be perceived.

Marion often mentions encountering art as an example of the presence of saturated phenomena in everyday life. However, the most convincing example of this phenomenon, in Marion's opinion, is an icon, which, being visible, is not an 'object of seeing' but rather represents a gaze directed towards one, which can draw one's attention towards something invisible. Marion believes that *givenness* should be understood literally, i.e. as something that *has been given*, which means that the actual aspect of givenness goes beyond the limits of the directly perceived, in a sense turning each object into a saturated phenomenon. According to Marion, the thesis about God who does not exist but gives matter an opportunity to exist allows one to view the whole sphere of givenness from the perspective of gift.

The theory of an absent God who still manifests himself in the variety of his gifts has been criticized by some philosophers, including Jean-Luc Nancy, who wrote that within such an approach "monotheism dissolves into polyatheism" [5], which does not seem to consider the fact that Marion understands the whole sphere of given in a hierarchical way. Different phenomena can be classified according to their *saturation* (in his later works, Marion places saturated phenomena represented by an icon on top of the hierarchy of phenomenology; in terms of saturation, they are preceded by the event, the idol and the flesh) [6]. As far as we understand it, this hierarchy does not show levels of perfection. Rather, it should be understood by analogy with the conceptual hierarchy presented by Marion in his polemics with Jacques Derrida, where Marion said that *gift* lies at the heart of *givenness* and *revelation* lies at the heart of *gift*. In other words, in Marion's opinion, God does not at all dissolve in the variety of types of givenness since the sphere of givenness has a single centre of emanation.

Marion's phenomenological theory has been criticized (and justified) from the standpoint of phenomenology itself. The main point of dispute was the question of whether this theory could be attributed to classical phenomenology. An opinion has been put forth that Marion substituted what Husserl initially meant to be an atheistic science for Theology [7]. Janicaud also argued that Marion's phenomenology nearly lacks the concept of intentionality essential in Husserl's theory, as well as Husserl's concept of cognizing subject. In their turn, advocates of Marion's theory said that religious experience, as well as any other experience, could become the subject matter of phenomenological analysis, which is what Marion suggested [8]. As for 'the subject turning into an object', i.e. the subject exposed to external impact, this issue, according to many researchers, has been addressed in phenomenology, at least in works by Sartre

and Levinas. To be more precise, it is indicated in the topic of Other, his *face* (in Levinas's theory) and *look* (in Sartre's theory) [9, 10].

3. Phenomenology of gift - Marion versus Derrida

A few observations, also from the standpoint of 'classical phenomenology', were made by Jacques Derrida regarding Marion's theory in the above-mentioned polemics. According to Derrida, Husserl would have never agreed that givenness could be interpreted as gift or anything connected with it [4]. From Derrida's point of view, phenomenology of gift is extremely problematic since *gift* itself is problematic or even impossible, especially *pure gift* totally excluded from exchange relationships. Finally, speaking of gift in the religious sense, i.e. gift granted by God, Derrida wonders if there is something else apart from gift that makes gift possible. Perhaps, hinting at Marion's usage of the same word, Derrida calls it *khora* - if everything, including life itself, is understood as God's gift, then gift becomes 'everything', and this word loses any sense.

Answering Derrida's questions, Marion tries to show that, from his perspective, gift is connected with the sphere of existence in a very indirect way (by the sphere of existence he means what is gifted, by whom and to whom), in a certain sense reaching beyond its limits and making up (due to it) the essential foundation of all human experience. According to Marion, "if the gift is really unique, makes a real difference, cannot be repeated, then in such a case, the gift does not appear as something that could shift from one owner to another owner. Each genuine gift happens without any objective counterpart" [4, p. 63] and further, "in most of the cases, there is absolutely no giver at all. I am not interested in assigning to a given phenomenon. I am interested in saying that our deepest and most genuine experience of the phenomenon does not deal with any object that we could master, produce, or constitute." [4, p. 70]

However, on closer examination, it turns out that Marion's and Derrida's views on gift are not at all antagonistic. Marion seems to admit that if one is talking about a transfer of some property from one owner to another one, it can hardly be called 'a genuine fact of gift-giving' since one remains within the sphere of exchange, which makes gift impossible, as Derrida argued. However, Marion overcomes this difficulty by endowing gift with primary nature, which paradoxically creates objectivity of gift and, in a certain sense, both parties involved - the gift-giver and receiver. It must be noted though that examples from real life provided by Marion (inheritance, charity, sacrifice ('gift') of time, effort etc.) always lack the 'constituents' necessary for a genuine gift. For instance, he mentions gift without receiver: an act of charity without a particular receiver, but the gift-giver must be present here. Gift without a giver is also possible, e.g. if somebody receives inheritance from a relative they do not know personally, but, in any case, there is an heir, i.e. a receiver. Finally, gift can exist without a particular 'object' when what is sacrificed is effort, time, or life itself, but in this case both the gift-giver and receiver must be in place. The example

that best corresponds to Marion's understanding of gift comes from a different sphere.

4. The parable of the prodigal son - gift versus property

While all the above-mentioned examples provided by Marion as a phenomenologist appear to go round in a circle and do not fully correspond with the author's general definition of gift, the example Marion provides as a theologian in his book 'God Without Being' where he interprets the evangelical parable of the prodigal son (Luke 15.11-32) illustrates his vision much better. The word 'his' regarding Marion's vision is used here in a partial and, at this point, forcedly indefinite way since Marion does not try to be deliberately original in his exegetics, and his understanding of the evangelical parable as a story of the mercifulness of God's love, which does not differentiate between faithful and unfaithful believers, actually corresponds with its 'usual' interpretations. In tune with his initial thesis, Marion points out that God's love is the gift that does not have an 'objective' form but possesses creative power. By forgiving his strayed son, the father returns his sonship and even humanity back to him, which he had lost in his self-imposed exile. As Marion puts it, "the gift is not at all laid out according to Being/being, but Being/being is given according to the gift. The gift delivers Being/being." [11]

In this case, it can be argued that in this parable the father is in no sense absent, and, consequently, this example does not illustrate that a genuine gift is a gift without a giver. Marion answers this possible objection by saying that with regard to his both sons, the father is really absent in the sense that he does not belong to *their being*. The terminological aspect of Marion's interpretation of the evangelical parable is noteworthy. For Marion, this parable is of interest primarily because *only here* and nowhere else in the New Testament the Greek text contains a specific philosophical term 'essence' ('ousia' in Greek, 'substantia' in the Latin translation). For the first time, it appears in the speech of the younger son, "Father, give me the share of the property [tēs ousias] that will belong to me", and later it is repeated by the same character in the same meaning, but never used by the father, which Marion points out.

Several pages before Marion refers to the topic of the evangelical parable. He quotes a text containing the word 'ousia' - Aristotle's quotation from 'Metaphysics' used in the context of Marion's interpretation of the Epistles of Paul (the First Epistle to the Corinthians) where Marion focuses on the opposition between 'God's wisdom' and 'worldly wisdom' suggested by Saint Paul. Speaking of the latter, Marion wrote, as if following Paul's thought, 'this wisdom, according to the most Greek among the Greeks who love wisdom (therefore the philosophers), is presented as a goal "always sought, *aei zetoumenon*, and always missed, the question, what then is being, *ti to on*, or, which is the same, what then is ousia? / Aristotle, Metaphysics, VII, 1, 1028 b3/" [11, p. 91]. According to Marion, who reproduces Paul's discourse, all this "the love of wisdom (of the world) is distracted, because the sign that guides it, the

on, first and primarily, is distracted” [11, p. 91]. Although the word ‘ousia’ is used differently in Aristotle’s text and the speech of the younger son from the evangelical parable, Marion insists on their in-depth connection. One of the usages refers to the speculative and the other one - to the pragmatic aspects of the same semantic concept. Both cases refer to some kind of acquisition, in the form of knowledge or property.

Knowledge directed towards the essence of being and the desire to acquire property are both in the same semantic space. This is a space free from any direction or meaning, since, according to Marion, movement in this space is directed by the sign of essence - a false sign leading to increasing estrangement not only from the unknown but, most notably, from nonperceptible and unthinkable.

Marion argues that it was not sudden extravagance that led the younger son to spend everything he had been given by his father: “The reason for the concrete dissipation of ousia is found in a first and fundamental dissipation: the transformation of the ousia into liquid (money), which itself results from the abandonment of the paternal gift as place, meaning, and legitimacy of the enjoyment of the ousia” [11, p. 97]. In other words, according to Marion, the father’s gift is not ‘the share of property’ he gave to the younger son at his request but the role of a son and heir, which the younger son had originally. The demand for inheritance, on the contrary, interrupts the grace of the father’s gift he previously enjoyed. The son “asks to possess it, dispose of it, enjoy it without passing through the gift and the reception of the gift” [11, p. 97].

In Marion’s interpretation, the younger son’s sin was not what he did when he received the inheritance but his initial philosophical standpoint: if he can take possession of his share of property, he should do it. According to Marion, in this sense “the ousia of the prodigal son can resonate legitimately, to our ears at least, with the echo of the ousia of the philosophers” [11, p. 96]. Meanwhile, continues Marion, the younger son sticks to his fallacy. Having lost ‘his sonship and the very humanity’ together with the father’s gift, in the end, he returns to the father hoping that he can get a job at least as one of his father’s workers and does not understand that the father’s gift has not been damaged and can be fully restored. The elder son is under a similar misapprehension regarding his being. As Marion puts it, his jealousy of the father’s happiness with the return of the younger son ‘enlightens us’: the elder son “understands the paternal gift as little as does his younger brother” [11, p. 99]. If we continue Marion’s reflections, absence of the father in the evangelical parable should be understood in this very sense - his absence in relation to his sons and ‘from the sons perspective’, who think in terms of ‘ousia’ and do not accept their father’s gift. For his part, the father tries to overcome this absence. The final phrase of the parable starts with the following words, “Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours”. In Marion’s opinion, this way the father addresses both sons rather than only the elder one.

Apart from the fact that Marion's analysis of the parable of the prodigal son represents a methodologically good example of his 'door-forced-open exegesis', it also clarifies the relations in the framework 'beyond being - gift - being'. In fact, within being, understood as the sphere of phenomenologically given directly connected with possession, a 'genuine gift' is impossible. In Marion's theory, the genuineness of God's gift is provided by God's love, but within being the gift of love, as Sartre has shown in his phenomenology of *other*, always depends on external signs, which are always unreliable and, hence, excruciating, turning gift into punishment. Sartre addresses this issue in 'Being and Nothingness', in the chapter devoted to analysis of the gaze of the other looking at us (when other is present in the 'phenomenological sense', but his intentions remain unclear) and in 'phenomenology of love' (the loving person demands new confessions from their partner all the time but no words or 'empirical signs' of love ever satisfy them). Similarly, in the form of material assets, gift loses its genuine nature in the very act of gift-giving since it always suggests a reverse side represented by the receiver's debt to the giver. Here, Derrida is right in terms of his doubts regarding the possibility of phenomenology of 'pure gift'.

5. The time for gift and the gift of time

Marion's interpretation of the sphere of being as an idol and his vision of man only as a recipient of God's grace led to many critical comments [10, 12, 13]. However, that is not to say that this viewpoint cannot be derived from evangelical legacy. Suffice it to recall the Sermon on the Mount, "For the Gentiles seek after all these things; for your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things" (Matthew 6.32). However, 'these things', which Jesus called 'worries' (about clothes, food, and drink) and Heidegger described as 'cares', are opposed to the *cares about time* in the Gospels.

In the Gospel of John, time is often portrayed as 'coming', as time that is going to come or has already come [the time is coming - *ἔρχεται ὥρα*]. Some researchers [14] believe that the theory of invisible God, who becomes a part of the phenomenal sphere by way of Logos, is spiritually close to the Gospel of John. In their opinion, the very relationship between God and being in Marion's interpretation seems to reproduce the relationship between light and darkness in John's Gospel. At the same time, Marion's theory may 'lack' the temporal aspect found in the Gospel of John. How substantial is this lack? It appears that it is as large as its connection with the statement saying that man is a receiver of God's grace. Marion says that the difference between the idol and the icon in that the idol is not just visible - it is predominantly visible, so to speak, and it captures one's gaze, not allowing it to surpass the boundaries of the visible. The icon, on the contrary, "summons the gaze to surpass itself by never freezing on a visible, since the visible only presents itself here in view of the invisible" [11, p. 18]. However, as 'the visible remainder', which can never be brought to nought, the icon represents either the past - the events of sacred history (divine

Incarnation, in the broad sense) or the future - the prophecy of the Second Coming contained in the Holy Scriptures. As opposed to the idol, which 'totalizes' the present, the icon refers one to the past or the future, while existing in the present.

6. Conclusions

Like any form of exegesis, philosophy of history and Dasein analytics represent efforts aimed at the reflection on historical time in the sense of finding possible deviations from the 'right way'. These efforts, like any other efforts, are inevitably connected with an active orientation, and it can hardly be said that it is not cognitive. Thus, the preliminary conclusion, which also represents a question, is the following: *Is it correct to view the whole temporal problematic, which is a significant issue from the perspective of modern philosophy, as an obstacle to the contemplation of the invisible and incognizable?* Or, on the contrary, is it necessary to recognize *God's gift in temporality itself*, some kind of silent bell that calls for alertness and action?

Jean-Luc Marion's theology, which radically takes God beyond the boundaries of being, does not deliberately focus on the problem of time, which is understandable, because, according to the old theological tradition, time was usually measured against human existence, hence, it stayed within the boundaries of being. Saint Augustine said that only a madman could ask what God did before creating the Universe. Time itself with its concepts of 'before' and 'after' was created together with the universe. However, the same author discovers time not in celestial cycles but exclusively in one's *soul*, only due to which can one preserve the connection with *Him*. According to Saint Augustine, the soul with its memories and expectations *creates temporality* itself. Likewise, *gift also creates temporality in the same sense*. Gift can only exist *within a certain timeframe* and, in doing so, it does not lose the authenticity of the initial gift.

References

- [1] L. Hemming, *New Blackfriars*, **76(895)** (1995) 343-350.
- [2] J.-L. Marion, *The idol and distance: Five studies*, Fordham University Press, New York, 2001, 74.
- [3] G. Deleuze and F. Guattari, *What Is Philosophy?*, Columbia University Press, New York, 1996, 256.
- [4] J. Derrida and J.-L. Marion, *On the Gift: A Discussion between Jacques Derrida and Jean-Luc Marion*, in *God, the gift, and postmodernism*, J.D. Caputo & M.J. Scanlon (eds.), Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 1999, 54-78.
- [5] J.L. Nancy, *Of divine places, The Inoperative community*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1990, 113.
- [6] J.-L. Marion, *Being given: Toward a phenomenology of givenness*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, 2002, 10.

- [7] D. Janicaud, *The theological turn of French phenomenology*, in *Phenomenology and the 'theological turn': The French debate*, D. Janicaud, J.-L. Chretien, P. Ricoeur, M. Henry & J.-L. Marion (eds.), Fordham University Press, New York, 2000, 3-100.
- [8] M. Purcell, *Int. J. Philos. Relig.*, **68(1-3)** (2010) 121-138.
- [9] M. Westphal, *Int. J. Philos. Relig.*, **60(1/3)** (2006) 117-137.
- [10] J. Schrijvers, *Marion on Miracles. Of Insufficient Reason and a New Enlightenment*, in *Faith in the Enlightenment? The Critique of the Enlightenment Revisited*, L. Boeve, J. Schrijvers, W. Stoker & H.M. Vroom (eds.), Rodopi, Amsterdam, 2006, 292-308.
- [11] J.-L. Marion, *God Without Being: Hors-Texte*, 2nd edn., University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2012, 101.
- [12] J.D. Caputo, *Apostles of the Impossible. On God and the Gift in Derrida and Marion*, in *God, the Gift, and Postmodernism*, J.D. Caputo & M.J. Scanlon (eds.), Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 1999, 185-222.
- [13] D. Moss, *New Blackfriars*, **74(874)** (1993) 393-399.
- [14] B. Robinette, *Heythrop J.*, **48(1)** (2007) 86-108.