**In the Self’s Place:**

**The Approach of Saint Augustine**

*In the Self’s Place: The Approach of Saint Augustine* presents Jean-Luc Marion’s rethinking of the modern notion of the self by way of an original reading of Saint Augustine through the lens of a phenomenology of givenness. Here he tests the hermeneutic validity of concepts forged in his previous works. His goal is to show that the *Confessiones* are inscribed within the *confessio*, that love is an underlying epistemic condition of truth, and that God’s call and our response to God are both gifts. Ultimately, Marion points us toward a conception of the self that is at once postmodern and very Augustinian.

KEYWORDS Marion, Augustine, continental philosophy, phenomenology, philosophy, theology, postmodern, self, saturated phenomenon, *Confessions*

Bruce Ellis Benson ([bruce.ellis.benson@wheaton.edu](mailto:bruce.ellis.benson@wheaton.edu)), Wheaton College, J. Alec Geno (alec.geno@my.wheaton.edu), Wheaton College

Marion, Jean-Luc. *In the Self's Place: The Approach of St. Augustine*. Translated by Jeffrey L. Kosky. Stanford University Press, 2012, 414 pp, $25.95 (pbk), ISBN 978-0-8047-6291-5.

Just the title of Jean-Luc Marion’s book *In the Self’s Place: The Approach of Saint Augustine* signals the complexity and ambiguity not simply of Marion’s theme but of the self in general. “*Au lieu de soi*” can mean “in the self’s place,” but it can also mean “instead of the self” or “in place of the self.” One can read this book as the culmination of Marion’s attempt to rethink the very notion of the self—as a way of “replacing” the modern notion of the self with one that is both postmodern and Augustinian. Indeed, Marion claims (xiv) that his work on Augustine is a vehicle for him to “test” the concepts of givenness, the saturated phenomenon, and the gifted that have been worked out in previous texts such as *Reduction and Givenness*, *Being Given*, and *The Erotic Phenomenon*. For those familiar with Marion, it will be clear that *In the Self’s Place* is in line with his earlier texts and continues their trajectory.

Yet these comments only get at the title of the book. The subtitle tells us that Marion is interested in Augustine’s “approach” to the self. The phrase “the approach of Saint Augustine” is ambiguous: it can mean how we approach Augustine or how Augustine approaches the notion of place (see translator’s comments, xx). Yet Marion is also making the claim that the self *simply is this approach*. We are what we love is a familiar theme in Augustine, but Marion uses this idea to rethink the contours of the self. In effect, it is a reading of Augustine contra not merely Descartes but also Kant, Henry, Heidegger, Levinas, and Ricoeur (285). The self is not an ego but “*l’adonné*” (which the translator, Jeffrey L. Koskey, whose translation is superb, renders as “the gifted”). As Marion puts it, “I become myself by receiving myself originarily from elsewhere—oneself not only by an other but coming from an other, oneself from elsewhere. In the self’s place is found elsewhere than the self, from where alone, as an other-self, more self than myself, the self can receive itself” (287). The self’s place is not its own.

So how does Marion get there? He opens *In the Self’s Place* by telling the reader that he is going to provide a phenomenological reading of Augustine in a “nonmetaphysical mode.” Such a claim is Heideggerian in origin but with a twist: Augustine, claims Marion, is “transphilosophical” and “transtheological” (8), which of course is exactly how Marion sees himself. Marion claims that the three traditional readings of Saint Augustine do not do justice to Augustine’s work. The historical fails to reach Augustine’s perspective, the philosophical neutralizes Augustine through methodological atheism and imposes a philosophical perspective that was never his, and the theological fails to understand that Augustine was not doing what moderns have named “theology.” As a result, Marion claims that Augustine’s *Confessions* speak not *of* God but rather *to God* (9). Ultimately, Marion employs a common phenomenological technique by insisting we must read Augustine from a negatively identifiable point of view, claiming that he preceded the horizons of metaphysics and Being. Thus, as a postmetaphysical hermeneutic, Marion’s phenomenology of givenness provides a more coherent and faithful reading of Augustine’s texts. Marion accomplishes this through application of the call and response, saturated phenomenon, erotic reduction, and the self’s relation to the other.

Marion’s organizing claim is that the *Confessions* are not inscribed within a horizon of metaphysics, being, theology, or philosophy, but rather within the *confessio*. The *confessio*, as both a confession of praise and sin, is a prime Augustinian concept to illustrate the nature of the call and response. When God calls me into existence, my first thought, my *prima cogitatio*, is a confession, for the self thinks insofar as it confesses as a created being. Praising God acknowledges that his call always precedes me and that I am not the origin and do not have control. More poignantly, God’s call is only audible in the re-saying of the response. In God’s call, I not only receive the gifts I’ve been given, but my very *self*. Thus, *confessio* describes *what* I am before God rather than what I say *to* God. Marion uses this call and response structure in his reading of the *confessio* to distance Augustine from Descartes’s cogito and the Cartesian *ego*. Marion asserts that Augustine saw access to Being in and through myself as exiling me outside myself, since I am always a question to myself. Ultimately, “the essence of man, which remains inaccessible to man, resides in the secret of God” (68). Descartes’s *ego* only experiences its own anonymity. The only evidence that the ego provides is that of *life* not *being*. It knows itself to be, but it does not provide a *self*.

The Cartesian *ego*, which endeavors to appropriate itself by itself,is characterized by control in knowledge, but in the call and response with God we forfeit this control. As a result, Marion applies the *saturated phenomenon* in his reading of Augustine’s account of truth. The mode of phenomenalization of truth is evidential excess of intuition which wounds because of the very inadequacy which Descartes claimed could constitute the self. Truth is, rather, qualified by the epistemic conditions of *love* and *hate*. Hatred of the truth arises more specifically from self-hatred and self-deception par-excellence, since facing the truth disconcerts me. Truth produces a verdict about myself, which exposes the undesirable within myself. Marion presents hatred of the truth as a procedural step towards love of the truth, because truth’s inescapability exposes the self’s traits. Even more, I can neither bear truth’s excess nor the weight of its judgment on myself. Contrary to Plato, knowing the truth, or the Good, does not result in doing the Good. One must *love* the Good (166). However, to love the truth one must love it more than even oneself because the prior hatred of the truth is not properly a *hatred*, but rather a substitution of love for something in the place of truth. As Marion writes, one cannot not love (109). But hatred of the truth does not realize that it is blindly self-defeating, for to love oneself more than truth, such that one willfully blinds oneself from the inescapability of the truth, is actually to hate oneself. Marion calls this the “self’s self-contradiction” (120). If truth reveals the *true* traits of the self, and they are undesirable or shameful to us, then we hate our true selves. We attempt to replace the truth of who we are with who we wish to be until we have lied so thoroughly that we truly believe in this idol of our selves. Thus the Cartesian *ego* proves helpless to define itself, and its visible effects are only those of self-deception. If it does not *receive* the love of truth, it will never *know* the truth.

Marion shows that as an epistemic condition, love *opens* the mind to truth in the saturated phenomenon (135). Pretending to know truth without loving it amounts to non-knowledge. Even more, if truth manifests itself as a saturated phenomenon insofar as it is loved, then it first belongs to the *flesh*, a radical opposition to a Gnostic or Cartesian account. Marion writes about the “ordeal of truth” and the stages one goes through when encountering it. In the first stage, one hates and kills the witnesses to truth because of the revelatory judgment on the self (115). At this point, the witness incarnates truth and is no longer distinguished from the proclamation itself. Marion shows that this proves truth is therefore epistemologically Christological and therefore theological. Thus the “Word became flesh,” (John 1:14) but the hatred of the truth by even Jesus’s own people resulted in his murder. Truth’s manifestation proves itself to be trinitarian, since according to this mode of phenomenalization, if God *is* love, then the Holy Spirit is required to comprehend the scriptures. Our love, which conditions our knowledge of truth, must then be a *gift.* This is precisely how love opens the mind to truth. God does not pour knowledge into us, but rather gives us a desire for Him. Ultimately, truth is not characterized by knowledge, but rather by this very desire. God provides both truth and the love of truth as a *gift*, echoing the call and response structure of creation. Marion brings us back to the very roots of philosophy, namely by showing that loved truth is the *beautiful* which is no longer derived from Being. Philosophy, or the love of wisdom, is properly the love of the truth as the beautiful. Therefore, philosophy is an erotic reduction, in which truth is known inasmuch as it is loved (143). I myself become beautiful through beauty itself, or loving God. I become like what I know and thus, what I love: the principle Augustinian notion.

If God is love and conditions our very knowledge of him and his word, then even our response to him, our *confessio*, is a gift. I only discover what I love by willing. I find myself not where I am (where I will), but rather where I love. Since the desire for beatitude, the desire for a happy life, inhabits me without my thought, Marion establishes this as a first principle. Preceding the self, this desire grounds the ego, but also reverses the traditional advance of the intentionality of the I, because God must give himself to be both willed and loved. We thus only will well with grace (188). Marion summarizes it well when he writes that “the resolution that defines and decides the *self* in me belongs to me without, however, coming from me; it comes from elsewhere” (189). The *place* of the self is outside of myself; the self is located in God. But, since I always already experience myself at a distance from God in his transcendence, I have no access to myself and I have no proper place. I do not *contain* God, but rather I always find myself heading towards there where I am in God (242-243). Thus, human beings are defined by an always-dynamic, never-fixed, likeness: an absence of static definition (258). Assuaging initial anxiety about this flux, Marion shows how this self-non-knowledge known only by God, manifested by the *confessio*, is a privilege because now no name can comprehend man as well as God. Man thus differs from every other being in the world by being no longer ontological, but *holy* (259). The answer, therefore, to the question of my place cannot be found through myself. I am, rather, more than myself, above the highest I can grasp, and found external to myself where I love. Marion’s account of the self in Augustine cannot be reduced to the self in Descartes, Kant, Henry, Heidegger, Levinas, or Ricoeur (285). Rather, the self’s relationship to the other is summarized by Marion; “I become myself by receiving myself originally from elsewhere-oneself not only by an other but coming from an other, oneself from elsewhere. In the self’s place is found elsewhere than the self” (287).

The conclusion that arises from the non-place of the self is that the *Confessions* is not properly an autobiography, but rather a *confessio*. This claim deconstructs the simplistic reduction of the *Confessions* as Augustine’s “memoirs.” The *Confessions*, rather than an account of the self, is more accurately an *act* that *constitutes* the self by pursuing the self in God. It is a seeking of God in the *confessio*. This is a never-ending process since one will never cease coming to the *self’s place* because one is what one loves. There where I seek God, I find myself all the more (312). Marion’s reading of Augustine shows how we become beautiful by pursuing the beautiful, not by attempting to possess or contain it only to realize our efforts were in vain. God as the sought-for always precedes the seeker, so the *confessio* is the act in which we grow in our love of God.

Yet, ultimately, one may ask whether the “place” that Marion has carved out for Augustine and *confessio* are really all that well insulated from metaphysics, Being, philosophy, theology--or anything else, for that matter. We could sketch such a question in a couple of different ways. First, Marion speaks of the possibility of the transphilosophical and the transtheological, but isn’t he (whether Augustine or Marion--take your pick) embedded in philosophy and theology like everyone else? What could such a “beyond” really look like? Here there is a tension between Marion’s claims of being transphilosophical and transtheological with his admission that hermeneutics is always at work. Marion’s reading of Augustine is intended as a hermeneutic lens, which, as a 21st century philosophical development, is inescapably embedded in the traditions of metaphysics, Being, philosophy, and theology. Marion would claim that the lens itself has been imposed on a text that actually precedes these traditions in order to transition the dialogue away from a horizon of modernity and into one of postmodernity. Readings of Augustine that Marion would consider reductionistic only perpetuate the stagnancy of modernity. The “beyond” is not something radically new but rather the present culmination or development of these traditions which Marion has relabeled and then validated with a reading of Augustine. In this sense, he affirms the postmodern-as-premodern sentiment, thereby granting it a nostalgic, utopian affectivity.

Of course, Marion also tries to skirt the complications of ontotheology by resorting to praise. Whereas predication is always linked to a *logos*, praise is somehow “beyond or otherwise than” metaphysics. As he puts it, “I speak *to* God without saying anything *about* God” (18). Praise predicates nothing of God. It goes beyond affirmation or denial. But doesn’t speaking to God require a speaking *about* God? After all, Augustine is—whatever else—a *Christian* theologian. Marion is certainly right that Augustine is in some sense “pre” or “trans” theological, for he is right at the beginning of the “theological project.” As such, he might well escape certain aspects of the ontotheological project. But the extent this is the case is, at the very least, open to debate.

Or, second, we could ask whether by way of phenomenology Marion is truly able to move beyond metaphysics. Key to his claim that such a move is possible is the insistence on the saturated phenomenon’s exceeding the grasp of intuition. But isn’t θαυμάζειν what got philosophy going in the first place? Philosophy arises historically precisely because the saturated phenomenon is not the exception but the norm. We philosophize because we realize that the world around us is complex—and it becomes even more so once we examine it closely. It is not incidental that Marion has increasingly opened the definition of saturated phenomena. Of course, one might turn this around: predication might not be quite as totalizing as Marion seems to suggest. In other words, the distinction between praise and predication is not quite so firm precisely because predication does not achieve complete “adequation”—a one-to-one correspondence—between the knower and the thing known (or, more formally articulated, the noesis and the noema).

Having watched Marion unfold Augustine’s *Confessions* with a phenomenological laser, it would be hard not to be impressed with the sheer brilliance of his performance. Clearly, Marion gets many things deeply right about the self and its constitution by desire. His central thesis that our sense of place is defined by the ascent of the ego toward that which it loves seems difficult to refute. As with any phenomenological argument, its validity is confirmed when we say “yes, it is truly like that.” With this admission, the positive results of Marion’s project are at least two-fold.

First, Marion’s application of phenomenology to Augustine’s texts certainly reveals the extent to which we have allowed our presuppositions about modern philosophy, theology, and even “autobiography” to significantly impact the way we read Augustine. Although mediation of especially ancient texts into the present is never perfect, Marion’s reading successfully deconstructs hermeneutical anachronisms and reductionistic categorization by aligning Augustine, an author that preceded metaphysics entirely, with the postmodern resistance to metaphysics represented by a phenomenology of givenness. This alignment takes place most clearly in Marion’s thorough treatment of Augustine and Descartes’ relationship (or, rather, lack thereof). Ultimately, we must say that Marion’s reading of Augustine by way of phenomenological description is both satisfying and undeniably faithful to the text while still remaining inescapably linked to Marion’s own intellectual ancestors. Heidegger, for example, represents the attempt to transcend the categories of metaphysics, ethics, and epistemology by way of a “return” to the original Greek meaning of philosophy, or “thinking.”

Second, we see more than just a hermeneutic “validation” of Marion’s concepts of the saturated phenomenon, givenness, idol, icon, erotic reduction, and the gift. This is the first text in which Marion weaves these concepts together in a philosophical narrative, demonstrating both their unity and interconnectedness. Even more importantly, Augustine’s writing, which is written in a comparably unembellished manner, serves as a perfect conduit for Marion’s more difficult ideas. Readers of Marion understand that his style is one of the more abstruse amongst contemporary philosophers, and *In the Self’s Place* is no different. However, the narrative Marion constructs which weaves Augustine’s thought with his own adds both clarity and support to the cogency of Marion’s philosophy.

*In the Self’s Place* leaves its readers with an overwhelming and enduring sense of awe and wonder. As a result, it perfectlyillustrates how philosophy at its best both arises out of and gives rise to wonder. Like the saturated phenomenon, *In the Self’s Place* encourages us to expand our horizon, but Marion does this by way of one of the most well-known thinkers in the past two millennia, showing us that we are always influenced by, and can always learn from, a past which we have at times ignored and at others enslaved.