

# Being Given: Towards a Phenomenology of Givenness

By Jean-Luc Marion

Translated by Jeffrey L. Kosky; Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2002; 408 pp.; hb. \$ 70.00, pb. \$ 27.95; isbn: 0-804-73410-0/0-804-73411-9.

review by *Cynthia R. Nielsen*

(Published in *Ars Disputandi: The Online Journal for Philosophy of Religion*, Vol. 5 (2005), <http://www.ArsDisputandi.org>. ISSN 1566-5399).

[1] Being Given (BG) is the second book in Marion's trilogy and has as its primary focus the phenomenology of givenness. The first book, *Reduction and Givenness*, discusses the various possibilities opened by Husserl and Heidegger, as well as that which is still limited by their formulations. The final book in the series, *In Excess*, is devoted to a more detailed explication of what Marion introduces in BG as the 'saturated phenomenon.'

[2] In the section entitled, 'Preliminary Answers,' Marion makes explicit the dominant theme of his book, 'what shows itself first gives itself' (5). Beginning with this theme and developing creative variations, Marion culminates the work with the 'saturated phenomenon,' which becomes the paradigm for givenness.

[3] In book I, Marion introduces a counter-method as a response to the Husserlian call to the 'things in themselves.' As he deconstructs various past formulations, Marion wants to leave open the possibility of a phenomenon, which is not confined within intuition alone. Moving through lengthy discussions of both Heidegger and Husserl, Marion demonstrates that neither allowed givenness its full realization. For Husserl, the breakthrough of givenness is frozen due to an 'unquestioned paradigm of objectness' (32). Consequently, by restricting givenness to the object, Husserl does not advance his initial findings. Focusing next on Heidegger, Marion claims that givenness is abandoned 'by assigning beingness to the Ereignis' (38). Though it is legitimate to understand objectness and beingness as limited horizons against the background of givenness, Marion, from this point on, wants to define 'givenness in itself and on its own terms' (39).

[4] In section 4, Marion begins an analysis of givenness with his discussion of a painting. A painting is not merely an object, nor a being, nor a ready-at-hand. The only way to understand a painting is to say that it is given. In other words, Marion is looking to a characteristic that is more fundamental for understanding a painting. Drawing from an insight posited by Cezanne, Marion says that a painting 'accomplishes an act—it comes forward into visibility' (49). Thus, a painting has an 'effect' and effect is here understood in all its multiple meanings: 'as the shock that the visible provokes...as the emotion that invades the one gazing, [and] ... as the indescribable combination of the tones and the lines that irreducibly individualize the spectacle' (49). So in understanding a painting as a mere being, one misses the act, the coming forward—the dynamic aspect. Here Marion is framing a critique of Western metaphysics, viz., it has

frozen reality instead of understanding it as a dynamism. Thus, in his analysis of givenness, Marion is trying to re-capture the act of coming forward in visibility.

[5] In section 5, we encounter various objections raised against Marion. Here the question is asked as to whether nothing and death are given as well? Keeping with his theme, Marion answers that even death and nothingness are defined by givenness. Recalling Heidegger, Marion says, ‘nothing is given by means of the fundamental mood of anxiety’ (54). Neither can death escape givenness because it gives itself on its own. Thus, ‘death does not steal from givenness that which (or he who) could receive it; it inscribes it (or him or her) forever within the horizon of givenness’ (59). In Section 6, Marion again seeks to emphasize the dynamism in our experience that we tend to gloss over. Speaking of the ‘fold of givenness’ as articulating a process with a given, nonetheless the given cannot give the given as it gives itself (68). In other words, the givenness is not available in person—it is the self-hiding process that makes the giving available. In sum, we might say that givenness is not something in addition to the given, nor is it the cause of the given, rather ‘givenness is ... discerned at the very heart of the given’ (64).

[6] Book II is devoted to the question of gift, and Marion wants to approach it without falling into metaphysics. Thus, the question becomes, ‘Can we use existing categories in order to analyze the givenness?’ Here Marion is dialoguing with the Derridian critique of the gift which claims that the gift is impossible because it is self-nullifying, i.e., it deconstructs itself because when a gift is given, a reciprocity is necessitated and the givee feels indebted. On Derrida’s account as soon as something is recognized as gift, it can no longer be a gift—it falls into an economic trap. Marion agrees with Derrida’s deconstruction of the gift; however, he adds that Derrida has not understood the gift deeply enough because the reduced gift is the only kind of gift that escapes such a Derridian critique. In short, book II is devoted to a reduction of the gift—a triple bracketing of giver, givee, and gift.

[7] Another way of summarizing the thrust of book II is in terms of Marion’s metaphor of avoiding or breaking out of the ‘circle.’ Marion in various places critiques the ‘economic circle’ in which the gift is given from giver to givee and returns again to the giver. The circle means that instead of accepting the gift simply as a surprise or joy in itself, I absorb the gift into something that I can digest, something that I am expecting. So the circle stands for the inability to allow being challenged. Here we see Marion wanting to move beyond the circle of the constituting subject. We recall that in *God Without Being* (GWB), Marion makes a distinction between an approach to God that allows God be God (icon) or that of an idolatrous approach (idol). An idol is a representation of God that tries to communicate something about God; however in this idolatrous representation, God is not allowed to challenge one’s representation, but rather is captured in human categories. The idol is the same as the circle of the gift. In contradistinction to the idol, the icon is something that has its own initiative. In other words, one allows herself to be seen by God, in the light of God. In the contemplation of the icon, the subject is subjected to God’s gaze. These ideas help us to understand what Marion is doing in the present work, viz., Marion wants to formulate a phenomenological equivalent as to what he accomplished in GWB. Thus, in terms of the three-fold bracketing, not only does the gift become thinkable, but when the giver is reduced, a proper understanding of the gift emerges. For example, in giving to charity one doesn’t really know who the recipient is and this makes

the gift more properly a gift. In giving to charity, one gives to an anonymous givee. The triple bracketing then serves to answer the Derridian critique. That is, the gift is no longer understood in terms of giver, givee and a given, but rather in terms of giveability and acceptability—in terms of givenness.

[8] In book III, Marion introduces the essential characteristics of the given phenomenon, each of which describes how the event becomes accessible: anamorphosis, unpredictable landing, incident, event and *fait accompli*. What is significant about these features of the given is that because they are neither metaphysical nor causal, the given is not determined by any transcendental conditions. Though each of these characteristics could be discussed in detail, I have decided on three, the ‘unpredictable landing,’ the ‘incident,’ and the ‘event,’ because each provide examples of the ways in which Marion deconstructs foundational elements of the traditional metaphysical landscape.

[9] With his discussion of the ‘unpredictable landing,’ Marion deconstructs the traditional definition of contingency as the property of what is not necessary, and likewise suggests that metaphysical opposition between contingency and necessity becomes irrelevant in phenomenology. ‘In fact, it shows itself to be inadequate, indeed erroneous’ (131). In this section, Marion interacts with a well-known passage from Aristotle in order to show that Aristotle has to admit that the necessity of event x occurring (or not) remains inscribed within the horizon of possibility. In addition to deconstructing necessity, he also questions whether potentiality must be thought in a lesser way than actuality. Instead Marion says that something arrives to me in a way that I am not determining it, i.e., it contingently imposes itself on me.

[10] Turning to his discussion of the ‘incident,’ Marion deconstructs the traditional understanding of substance and accident. In the tradition, substance has always been given primacy. Marion, however, wants us to think of the incident in terms of accident. So again we encounter a challenge to traditional metaphysics with its static presence over dynamism. Substance has been understood as something stable, yet its accidents can of course change. Marion, however, subverts this idea and says that substance ‘shows itself only as accident of the accident—as second-order incident’ (158). This new privileging of accident over substance suits Marion’s project well as accident has the determinations of givenness much more than substance.

[11] Marion’s discussion of the ‘event’ likewise challenges the tradition of the primacy of cause over effect. Here Marion says that the traditional claim that the cause precedes the effect is mistaken; the effect should instead be given primacy. As Marion points out, even Aristotle would say that an effect is first for us, but in itself the cause is first. In our analysis of givenness we must accept that a phenomenon that gives itself gives itself as an effect that cannot be reduced to its causes—it contains more reality than its causes. To illustrate his point, Marion gives the example of World War I, viz., there have been numerous explanations offered concerning ‘the’ cause of this event. So instead of reducing the effect to the cause, we should allow the effect to be taken seriously—allow the given, to be given. In other words, Marion wants to emphasize that the event is something that resists the reduction to its causes.

[12] With the introduction and explication of these characteristics, we gain insight into Marion's notion of givenness, yet we also see the ways in which he challenges traditional metaphysics as to their privileging certain primacies. Here one might ask whether Marion's deconstruction of metaphysics is actually a destroying of metaphysics or whether his desire is more along the lines of subverting the primacy of traditional metaphysics because it prevents givenness from being seen. In other words, is Marion's aim here more or less to bring to our attention that traditionally construed, metaphysics explains givenness away, or does he have more in mind?

[13] In book IV, Marion continues his deconstruction but now focuses on the 'privilege of certainty' that metaphysics has given to what he calls 'poor phenomena,' i.e., phenomena poor in intuition and which 'claim only a formal intuition in mathematics or a categorical intuition in logic' (222). This abstract epistemological certainty is for Marion a radical phenomenological deficit. Instead of privileging such poor phenomena, Marion introduces his 'saturated phenomena' and accords it paradigmatic status. 'What metaphysics rules out as an exception (the saturated phenomenon), phenomenology here takes for its norm' (227).

[14] So having challenged the traditional concepts of the paradigmatic yet impoverished phenomena, Marion presents the *saturated phenomenon*—that which fills the expectation and goes beyond it. Marion builds this concept in contradistinction to Kant and analyzes the saturated phenomenon in terms of four categories (quantity, quality, modality, relation), purposing to show that the saturated phenomenon explodes each of these categories. In terms of quantity, the saturated phenomenon is unforeseeable because it cannot be understood as being constituted by means of previous experience. As to quality, the saturated phenomenon is unbearable, i.e., it has a super-abundance of quality. Thirdly, in terms of relation the saturated phenomenon is absolute, i.e., it is given as something that does not stand in relation to other phenomena but rather stands on its own. Lastly, with regard to modality, Marion wants to express the idea of the movement from the 'I' that constitutes the experience to the 'witness.' This leads to the reduction of the subject to a receptive position, in which the subject becomes the screen on which the saturated phenomenon appears.

[15] Next, Marion proceeds to discuss the four types of saturated phenomena: the event, the idol, the flesh and the icon. First, the saturated phenomenon as event or historical phenomenon saturates the category of quantity. Secondly, the saturated phenomenon as idol is manifest in its bedazzlement, thus saturating the Kantian category of quality. As Marion explains, the idol bedazzles the subject to such an extent that she must come back to it again and again. In other words, the idol offers a kind of visibility that overflows the capacity of the subject to take it in. Thirdly, the flesh negates the Kantian category of relation. Here Marion speaks of the immediacy of the flesh in terms of auto-affection. So whether in agony and suffering or love and desire, the flesh always auto-affects itself first in and by itself—'all arise from the flesh and its own immanence' (231). Fourthly, the saturated phenomenon as icon explodes the category of modality as it is irregardable and irreducible. Interestingly, Marion says that the icon gathers together certain characteristics of the previous three types of saturated phenomena in that 'it demands a summation of horizons and narrations,' 'it opens a teleology,' 'it begs to be seen and reseen,' 'it exercises an individuation over the gaze that confronts it,' and lastly 'it

accomplishes this individuation by affecting the I so originally that it loses its function as a transcendental pole,' thus bringing it close to auto-affection (233).

[16] Having discussed the various types of saturated phenomena, we arrive at the saturation of all saturations—the phenomenon of *revelation*. By concentrating the other four types of saturated phenomena in itself, the phenomenon of revelation takes saturation to its maximum. Here Marion is presenting the phenomenon of revelation as a 'mere possibility' without presupposing its actuality (235). Though as Marion points out, 'phenomenology cannot decide if a revelation can or should give itself,' yet in case it does, phenomenology (and it alone) can determine that 'such a phenomenon of revelation should assume the figure of the paradox of paradoxes' (235). Here Marion is attempting to remain within the strict phenomenological bounds, as he describes the phenomenon of revelation in its pure possibility and in the reduced immanence of givenness. Moreover, he makes explicit that in the present work he does not have to 'judge its actual manifestation or ontic status, which remain the business proper to revealed theology' (236). Of course, Marion does speak of Christ as the saturated phenomenon par excellence and goes on to speak about the various ways in which Christ explodes the Kantian categories. Though I shall not discuss each of these 'explosions' individually, I shall mention Marion's discussion of Christ in terms of modality. Here Christ appears as an irregardable and irreducible phenomenon because He transforms the 'I' into his witness (240–241).

[17] In book V, Marion discusses the subject (nominative) in terms of receiver (dative) or the 'gifted.' As Marion explains, the various aporias, which include the problem of non-individuation, solipsism, and the spontaneity of the 'I think,' are dissipated when the ego is replaced by a receiver. Thus, the receiver is a 'subject' yet 'one emancipated from all subjectivity because first free of all subjectness and through with all substrata' (261). In discussing the relationship between the 'call' and the 'gifted,' Marion says that the gifted is made by the call, the successor to the 'subject.' The call is then explained in terms of four characteristics of its own manifestation: summons, surprise, interlocution, and facticity. 'The result of this is the birth of the gifted, a subjectivity or subjectness entirely in conformity with givenness—one that is entirely received from what it receives, given by the given, given to the given' (270–271). Marion does acknowledge that there are some cases in which a given does not succeed in showing itself because something or someone could not or would not receive it; however he turns to instances in which the gifted fall short by either excess of the given or shortage (310). Thus, there are cases in which through either excess or lack, givenness is given over to abandon. 'Nevertheless, even abandoned, a gift remains perfectly given' (319). In closing, Marion states something reminiscent of GWB, viz., the Other is reached in his 'unsubstitutable particularity, where he shows himself like no other Other can. This individuation has a name: love' (324).

[18] Personally, I find Marion's desire to introduce a 'new subject' among the most intriguing aspects of his project. Instead of the modern, even idolatrous and all-controlling subject, Marion pursues a sub-ject, i.e., a subject who subjects himself and is thus constituted by the situation. Nonetheless, Marion does not want to do away with all modern assumptions, nor does he desire to return to a pre-critical realism. However, as with others of the postmodern tradition, he does find modernity lacking in significant ways. Thus, we encounter in Marion

both an embracing of and a moving beyond modern assumptions; however, one wonders whether this harmonization can be successfully sustained. In other words, is it the case that the modern 'I' is really de-centered or is the 'I' merely masked as a 'to whom' which from time to time reclaims the center? At any rate, this is an area that I would like to see developed further in Marion (either theologically or phenomenologically—perhaps he has done so in other works of which I am not aware). For example, Marion writes, 'nothing of what gives itself can show itself except to the gifted and through it—not by constitution, anticipatory resoluteness, or exposure to the Other, but by the will to see, originally derived from givenness itself' (307). This raises the question as to how Marion's account would address something like St. Paul's conversion in Acts 9? In the case of St. Paul, the subject appears to be completely overtaken (initially apart from his own 'will to see') and then having been reconstituted by the Other, he emerges as a sub-ject. Such questions notwithstanding, Marion has undoubtedly given us something beyond a strictly Kantian notion of subjectivity, which in and of itself is quite an accomplishment.