

The Role of the Ego in Religious Experience

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Much of the study of continental philosophy, at least as discussed in Jean-Luc Marion's "The Saturated Phenomenon," "Experience and Language in Religious Discourse" by Paul Ricoeur, and Michel Henry's "Speech and Religion: The Word of God," is concerned with religious topics such as the importance of prayer, the validity of prayer, prayer language, the possibility of religious experience, the Scriptures as divine work, and God. Although these topics are frequently addressed both in and out of the continental tradition, here they stem from an even greater idea. God (or a higher being of some sort outside of us), prayer (communication with the higher being), and Scriptures (the word of that higher being) have meaning to us in relation to us. In his essay, though he specifically discusses the scriptures, Henry expresses the true purpose of his philosophical discussion: "[to push] phenomenology to its limit...to understand man's relation to God, to at least circumscribe what, as phenomenology, it can say about this relation."¹ This is what this paper will discuss. This paper will answer two questions. What does the Continental tradition of phenomenology, at least from these three authors, say about the ego and its relation to an other, higher being, namely God? What has been the ego's position in philosophy before, and what is it now? I will show that, though it may not have been the intended focus, these three essays argue that the ego plays a different role than what has been understood until now. In religious experience, the ego does not constitute but is constituted by a Higher Other. If this is true, then religious experience, contrary to what some philosophers have thought in the past, is most definitely possible.

According to Heidegger and other philosophers, and developed by Marion, for every experience there is an ego (*I*), an object of experience, and a horizon within which the experience takes place. The object "gives itself" to the ego as perceptions and the ego perceives the object. In other words, the ego receives and organizes the perceptions *a priori* under concepts in such a way that the ego knows or recognizes the object. This experience between an ego and an object is called a phenomenon. For example, there is a crayon in front of me. I see it: the crayon gives itself to me and I perceive it. It is orange, round, etc. What's more, I can turn to the person next to me and ask, "Do you see that crayon?" She will respond, "Yes I do." It is something that I can experience, and anyone else can as well. In common phenomena, everything truly experienced is objectifiable and thus the experience is reducible to the *I* or the ego. This means that the ego constitutes the experience.

Kant and Leibniz both, Marion explains in "The Saturated Phenomena," believed that all phenomena depend upon the ego. According to Marion, Kant says that something is possible only if it agrees with the formal conditions of experience, better known as the Kantian categories. Thus Marion deduces from Kant that a phenomenon is possible only if an ego can know it, in other words, only if it "grants itself to the finitude of the power of knowing and its requirements."² This is essentially what Leibniz meant when he said that the "Great Principle" is that nothing can happen unless the ego understands, or has a reason for its occurrence.

Philosophers in the past have also spoken of a "principles of all principles." In section two, Marion extrapolates this principle. Maybe, he explains, it is possible to surpass traditional phenomenality and establish the possibility of a self-grounded intuition as it gives itself to us, and only within the limits it is given. Unfortunately, we will see that, in an attempt to establish this infinite phenomenon, there are still two conditions or limits. Infinite things, by definition, must not have limits. Three specific traits correspond to the "principle of all principles."³

(1) Intuition is self-justified.

Intuition is self-justified, self-grounded, without a separate reason. It itself gives reason for the phenomenon; it gives it visibility and the right to that visibility. Unfortunately, Marion points out, the donating intuition does not authorize unconditioned appearance because phenomena, and intuition, are framed by two conditions that are not intuitive. These conditions are the other two traits of the “principle.”

(2) To be seen or experienced, a donating object must be inscribed within a horizon.

The second trait (and first condition) is the horizon. A donating object must be inscribed within a horizon in order to be seen. The notion of a horizon contradicts the idea of self-grounded intuition. Self-grounded intuition, being infinite, cannot take place in a finite horizon.

(3) Intuition is defined by how it is given to the ego.

The third trait (and second condition) is that intuition is defined by how it is given to the ego. An object is still only known as far as the ego can experience it.

The “principle of all principles” attempts to free phenomena from having to render a reason for its appearance, Marion says. Unfortunately, in this attempt to justify self-grounded phenomena, which would allow us religious experience, there is a contradiction. Something infinite, the self-grounded phenomenon, would be limited by two finite conditions: 1) a horizon and 2) a defined intuition, thus the experience is reduced to a finite ego. Within a horizon, everything is reducible to the *I*, and this something infinite is based on two finite traits. Thus true religious experience would still be impossible.

It is important to know that Marion is not saying we should eliminate the ego and the horizon. He does not want to do that. Eliminating the one who experiences the experience renders the examination meaningless and pointless to us. However, the idea the “principle of all principles” tries to establish is still good: it shows that a non-finite phenomenon is at least *possible*. If he can create a hypothetical model of saturated phenomena, he will have proved that religious experience, that is, relation between an ego and an infinite other, is very much a possibility. Showing the possibility of this model is very valuable, as Heidegger says, “Higher than actuality stands *possibility*.”⁴ Thus, Marion asks what *would* happen if an intuitive donation *could* be absolutely unconditioned and absolutely irreducible (not reducible to an *I*).

Marion asks more specifically if it is possible to think of a phenomenon such that it *surpasses* the horizon and leads *back* to the *I*, instead of being inscribed within a horizon, being reduced to an ego, or trying to eliminate the horizon and the *I* altogether. Marion assumes a phenomenon that surpasses horizon and leads back to, but is not reducible to, the *I*. He assumes a model opposite that which other philosophers have taken in the past. By doing this he can prove opposite conclusions as well. In other words, if he can prove this model possible (where the experience does not reduce to the *I*), the model of an infinite phenomenon capable of being experienced (a saturated phenomenon, under which religious experience falls), he will have proven that religious experience is possible. He then dedicates his essay to 1) push the limits of horizon and 2) redefine the *I*'s role in saturated phenomena. “In short,” he says, “we have to establish that an unconditioned and irreducible phenomenon...offers a true possibility and does not amount to “telling tales.”⁵

The second problem of finitude is the one with which we are especially concerned, because it addresses the position of the ego. Before the possibility of a saturated phenomenon, everything was reducible to the *I*. In response to the questions in section two, Marion hypothesizes a phenomenon which would “allow us to experience anew what possibility means — or gives.”⁶ A phenomenon that “allows us to

experience” has already adjusted the role of the *I*. Here the subject is not spoken of as the one that experiences but one that is “allowed to” experience, more as a witness. It is an indication that something else controls the situation. In saturated phenomena, there is “amazement.”⁷

The passion of amazement is so powerful to us “precisely because we know it (the object) only partially.”⁸ The ego is not able to produce a reason; the ego is not able to identify and objectify the other party in the experience. Phenomena that have this effect on the subject impose themselves on the subject; the subject is not in control. Amazement is experienced because there is an excess of intuition, such that the ego cannot fully comprehend it. Thus, the ego learns through saturated phenomenal experience that it (itself) is finite and that it is not the source or originator of the experience. “Finitude is experienced...more through excess than through lack,”⁹ meaning as the ego experiences something which is too great to be defined, the ego realizes that it is finite. “Confronted with the saturated phenomenon, the *I* cannot see it”;¹⁰ the *I* cannot look at the saturated phenomenon as it can look at a crayon or a clock. “The eye sees not so much another spectacle as its own naked impotence to constitute anything at all.”¹¹ A truly self-grounded giver (the object in the experience) gives intuition forever. The intuition is much more immense, the experience is much more intense. The ego becomes a witness, and is no longer the constituting entity of experience. The experience is lead back to the ego, but is not reducible to it. The ego is not the originator of the experience. If the phenomenon is not reducible to a finite ego, as this model shows, possibility opens for a non-finite phenomenon.

Thus, according to Marion’s model of a saturated phenomenon, in a saturated phenomenon, thus in a religious experience, and thus in the relation between man and God (or another non-finite being), man, the ego, does not constitute the experience. Rather, it becomes a “me,” an affected one rather than the affector. An “I” constitutes, whereas a “me” is the constituted.

In "Experience and Language in Religious Discourse," Paul Ricoeur states, “fundamental (religious) feelings and dispositions...are nowhere visible in their naked immediacy.”¹² This is similar to Marion’s foundation: common phenomena can be experienced by all, but religious experience and feelings (which are included in Marion’s saturated phenomena) are experienced only by the individual ego. Ricoeur recognizes that religious experience is often not available for others to see; rather it is a deeply personal experience.

According to Ricoeur, intentionality, or that which extends from the subject to the object in a horizon, is a “tributary of representation,” thus of objectification of the experienced givenness.¹³ The subject, by objectifying the experienced, claims mastery over the experience’s meaning. For example, I look at a crayon and it gives itself to me. It is within my horizon, and I receive the perceptions. They are organized *a priori* under a concept and I call the object “crayon.” Essentially, I determine the experience.

However, when the ego experiences religious feelings and dispositions “they [the religious feelings and dispositions] can transgress the sway of representation and, in this sense, mark the subject’s being overthrown from its ascendancy in the realm of meaning.”¹⁴ In other words, when an ego experiences something religious (which falls under the “saturated” phenomena that Marion describes), he finds himself moved from *master* (of meaning) to that of *mastered*. Ricoeur acknowledges that people feel religious feelings toward an “Other.”¹⁵ These religious feelings and their accompanying affections are expressed in what we call “prayer.” Prayer *actively* turns to the Other. The Other is the source of the religious feeling. Why, or better, *how* does the Other induce religious feeling and affection in a person? The Other, Ricoeur explains, is “the source of the call to which the prayer responds.”¹⁶

To understand prayer as a response to a call, we must understand the difference between a call/response and a question/response. In a question/response situation, the one asking the question and the one responding are on the same level of knowledge; it is assumed that they have a “*prior* field of common understanding.”¹⁷ For example, Bob and I are in an English class together; I ask him what a verb is and he tells me the answer. We have similar backgrounds of knowledge: we are both students and we are in the same English class. This is an example of question/response. Call/response, however, is different. It has very little, if anything, to do with question/response. The response in this instance is out of pure obedience to a call. Its motive is not to gain anything per se, but to obey and answer a call. It is, as Ricoeur so clearly defines it, a “specifically religious relation”¹⁸ and not an epistemological one. In this type of response the subject acknowledges the caller as superior to him (the subject); he recognizes the caller as the “Most High.”¹⁹ The feelings the subject feels toward the Other, Ricoeur grants, are religious “by virtue of the disproportion within the relation between the call and the response.”²⁰ In other words, religious feeling arises in a person because he recognizes that a superior being is calling to an inferior one, and that inferior being is him. This recognition invokes some degree of awe.

Thus, from Marion and Ricoeur, we see that religious experiences (saturated phenomena) are different from common phenomena in that 1) they cannot be reduced to the ego- in religious experience there is something superior to the subject and 2) they invoke religious feeling, encouraging the subject to respond to the call of a Higher Being. Like Marion, Ricoeur changes the standard placing of the ego. It is clear again that the ego does not constitute God, nor does it constitute its relation with God; rather the ego is the constituted.

In “Speech and Religion: The Word of God,” Michel Henry creates and addresses the question, “[H]ow is one to know that the Scriptures are the Word of God?”²¹ More specifically he questions, “Who, what word will tell us this?”²² Henry asks these questions to enable him and us to better understand man’s relation with God. The important aspects of this relation are seen through the examination of the Scriptures and the “Life” they contain.²³

The “Word of God,” says Henry, means the Scriptures. The Scriptures are really a text, like any other book written in language just as any other we might speak. We often refer to the Scriptures as “word” because that is what they are, books made of language or words. A word, he defines, is that which is sonorous and is addressed to another being. However, Henry makes a distinction: the “Word” of the Scriptures, at least in our minds, is largely different from that language we speak every day to each other. We are of the understanding that the Scriptures come from a divine source, not a mere human one. Thus, if we ever hope to understand the Scriptures we must first “perceive,” as Henry says, that this word is of “divine provenance.”²⁴ To assist us in understanding that the Scriptures are of divine provenance, the Gospels frequently reference the Old Testament Prophets. The Prophets, whose line of authority stems from God himself, speak as God, and the Gospels claim an authoritative position by referring to them. Henry observes that when a Prophet speaks to a people (like us) for God, in human language, the “two voices coincide” (the voice of the Lord and the voice of His representative). This is the “model for every conjunction between the Word of God and the human word.”²⁵

Obviously, those of a religious nature believe the Scriptures to be of more worth than any other book because of their source, *and* for their subject matter.²⁶ The Scriptures testify of Christ; they testify that He was and is the perfect example for the human race and they testify that He was and is the incarnated Son of God. As Henry says, the Scriptures are “organized around this divine Word [Christ]” and this is what, at least in our minds, validates the separation of the Scriptures from any secular text. For this reason, we might say that words on pages of Scripture are fundamentally superior to words on pages of any other book. Henry also observes that much of what we learn of Christ is found beyond his words,

and in his acts. These miraculous acts also indicate divinity. Yet His acts and his word are “borne by linguistic terms, moments, and parts of a language, of a speech, incapable of doing anything”²⁷ just as any other word. Although the Scriptures do differ from any other book in content (they speak of Christ and, what is more, they do so authoritatively), there appears to be no real difference: “[t]he Words of the Gospel...are still human words.”²⁸ Is this really such a problem? According to Henry, yes it is. If the Scriptures are of worldly, imperfect language, how are we to know that they are truly of a divine source? Furthermore, Henry asks, as cited above, who or what will tell us?

Here, Henry begins the important part of his discussion. He will show us the difference between the concept of the ego, which is the individual according to the word of the world and the concept of a “Son,” which is the Gospels’ way of referencing the ego.²⁹ Unlike Marion and Ricoeur, Henry is not necessarily changing the position of the ego. He merely shows that the first word is an inadequate way to refer to an ego and that the second, “Son,” is the absolutely correct and eternal way to do so. If the ego described as “Son” proves to be the correct idea, then the eternal nature of the self is established and possibilities are opened for the ego to have true religious experience.

The human word, or Word of the World, is based on language. When an ego confers a name on something, Henry says, that ego is “allow[ed] to have power over it” and “to manipulate it.”³⁰ In this sense, once again, we see that the ego constitutes the objects and the experience of them. Upon saying “table,” for instance, I give the “table” to be seen. I make it public. To speak of an object is to exteriorize it. But the object is already exterior. Thus one exteriorizes something which is exterior and “[p]lacing each thing in its own exteriority...empties them of their own reality.”³¹ I also can make “table” appear in its absence, and through the Word of the World, I both give and “withdraw” Being from the object. This is the “murder” caused by the Word of the World. Likewise, “saying ‘I’ is to say ‘I am not’”³² because as the ego speaks of itself, with human language, the same thing happens to him that happened to other objects whose names he gives and says. In other words, the Word of the World, the finite, the language, gives death and disappearing. It carries out “murder”³³ of the ego. And the ego is left lifeless, devoid of its ipseity.³⁴

The Word of the World causes death but the Word of Life causes the exact opposite: Life. While the Word of the World causes things to appear and disappear, the Word of Life is consistently referred to as “eternal.”³⁵ It is interesting to note that when the discussion turns from the Word of the World to the Word of Life, Henry begins to refer to the ego as “him,” whereas before the ego had been only an “it.” This is because God “gives birth”³⁶ to us and continues as a self-affecting Self, to create Sons, who are eternally receiving Life from Life itself. “It is our condition as Sons that makes us believe what we believe, namely, that we are Sons; and it is for this reason alone that Faith can befall us.”³⁷ As both Ricoeur and Marion wrote, it is God that constitutes us and our relation with him allows for religious experience, affection, and Faith. This birth and Life-receiving never end. And our life, the ego’s life, is dependent upon this Self or Life, which is higher than us. The ego, us, is once again far from being that which constitutes. Rather, we are constituted by this source of Life, and by this life-giving relation that exists between them.

Marion supposed a model that would allow religious experience to be possible. In this model, the experience would not be constituted by the ego, rather the ego would be constituted, and in a powerfully, amazing way. Ricoeur showed that prayer, a religious experience of religious affections, also changes the position of the ego. When it responds to the call of a superior, it assumes a position of inferiority and, as the responder, does not constitute the experience. Rather, the ego is constituted. Henry explained that the Word of God is a Word of Life, and whereas according to traditional thought the ego

is a temporal ego, the Word of Life gives the ego Life and makes it an eternal Son and Self. The ego is, again, constituted and not constituting.

Thus, Marion, Ricoeur, and Henry from different approaches come to the same conclusion, and the same to which other philosophers seeking truth come. Whether we refer to the relation between God and man as call/response or bedazzlement, or to the ego as Son of Life or any other title, the conclusion is the same. In religious experience, the ego is not that which constitutes. It is the constituted. One must conclude, after analyzing these three essays that the ego, as a subject, is subject to something. The relation between man and God is an unequal one, where man, the ego, is constituted, called, and given Life by a higher being, namely God. We, the ego, do not constitute reality and experience; on the contrary we are constituted and must accept that in order to receive religious experience and Life.

Notes

1. Michel Henry, "Speech and Religion: The Word of God," trans. Jeffrey L. Kosky, in *Phenomenology and the "Theological Turn": The French Debate* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2000) 225.
2. Jean-Luc Marion, "The Saturated Phenomenon," trans. Thomas A. Carlson, in *Phenomenology and the "Theological Turn": The French Debate* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2000) 178.
3. Marion 180.
4. Heidegger, as quoted in Marion 182.
5. Marion 185.
6. Marion 184.
7. Marion 199.
8. Marion 199.
9. Marion 202.
10. Marion 210.
11. Marion 210.
12. Paul Ricoeur, "Experience and Language in Religious Discourse," trans. Jeffrey L. Kosky, in *Phenomenology and the "Theological Turn": The French Debate* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2000) 130.
13. Ricoeur 127.
14. Ricoeur 127.
15. Ricoeur 128.
16. Ricoeur 128.

17. Ricoeur 128.

18. Ricoeur 129.

19. Ricoeur 129.

20. Ricoeur 129.

21. Henry 218.

22. Henry 218.

23. Henry 222.

24. Henry 217.

25. Henry 241.

26. Although different religions deem different books as true Scripture, Henry's essay refers specifically to the Gospels of the New Testament in the Christian tradition, and their testimony of Jesus Christ. However, I think the content of this essay offers believers of any religion or sect an added measure of faith. Any believer may understand that her God, Higher Being, Other, or whatever name her god may have, is the source of her spiritual life.

27. Henry 218.

28. Henry 218.

29. Henry 222-227.

30. Henry 219.

31. Henry 221.

32. Henry 221.

33. Henry 221.

34. Henry 221.

35. Henry 223.

36. Henry 223.

37. Henry 227.