

Saturated Phenomena, the Icon, and Revelation: A Critique of Marion’s Account of Revelation and the “Redoubling” of Saturation

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With his notion of a saturated phenomenon, an experience that goes beyond the bounds of conceptual, categorical, and intentional limitations, Jean-Luc Marion has become an influential figure in contemporary phenomenology. In particular, Marion’s discussion of revelation as a saturated phenomenon has become a much discussed topic for philosophers of religion and theologians. It has provided a way to describe the possibility of revelation without conditions or restraints, allowing fully for God’s self-revelation. Most of the critiques against Marion’s account of revelation have rested on an objection to even considering its possibility within the realm of phenomenology. Far less work has critically evaluated Marion’s analysis of revelation on its own terms.

In this paper, I will argue that Marion’s distinction between the icon (the ethical or loving experience of the other) and revelation is untenable—he has not clearly distinguished between them. First, I will provide a detailed interpretation of Marion’s notion of saturated phenomena and their relation to Kant’s views in the first Critique, primarily Kant’s discussion of

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the categories of modality.¹ Then, I will sketch Marion's phenomenological description of the possibility of revelation. Finally, I will show that revelation, as Marion conceives it, cannot be distinguished from the icon. To establish this point, I will examine a number of Marion's attempts to distinguish them and show that none of these attempts succeeds. These two saturated phenomena appear almost indistinguishable in Marion's phenomenology, blurring the distinction between the experience (or counter-experience) of the human other and the divine Other. In conclusion, I will offer some brief thoughts on what this blurring might imply for any phenomenological approach to the possibility of revelation—perhaps it says more about God than it does about any failings of phenomenology.

The Saturated Phenomenon

Marion describes the saturated phenomenon by showing its relation to the Kantian categories of pure understanding. The categories, for Kant, are the most basic, *a priori* rules for organizing the sensory manifold. They structure and organize intuition, providing unity and determinacy to experience. The categories provide the transcendental ground for the possibility of objective experience and therefore they are a necessary condition for the possibility of objective knowledge (A127–29). Further, the categories themselves seem to be necessary for phenomenal objects at all, not simply for their cognition.² As Kant says, "An object, however, is that in the concept of which the manifold of a given intuition is united" (B137).³ Paul Guyer has noted that Kant is unclear whether the categories, in conjunction with intuition, are a sufficient condition

¹Marion regularly uses Kant to outline the saturated phenomenon, probably both because of Kant's enormous influence and because it suits Marion's purposes. However, the saturated phenomenon doesn't need to be tied to Kant in this way. In addition, Marion's outline of saturated phenomena (especially his discussion of revelation) relies on a much more detailed discussion of all of Kant's groupings of categories, but I will only briefly mention the other three groupings for considerations of length.

²This claim rests on Kant's important distinction between "objects," meaning objects of possible experience, and "things," i.e., the "things in themselves." I can imagine or talk loosely about things which are external and independent of my perception, things which are not subject to the unity and determinacy of the categories. But objects stem from the use of the categories, and as such they refer to *phenomena* rather than to *noumena*. Following his lead, I will use the term "object" to refer to things which require the unity and determinacy of the categories, i.e., phenomenal objects, not the "things in themselves."

³Unless otherwise noted, all English translations of Kant's *Critique* come from the Guyer and Wood translation.

for the possibility of objects or merely a necessary one (*Claims* 117). At the very least, we can say that without the categories, the unity and determinacy of an object would not be possible. As such, the categories are at least a necessary condition for the possibility of cognizing objects and possibly even for the existence of phenomenal objects themselves.

As Marion notes, in the saturated phenomenon, intuition passes beyond the transcendental categories or pure concepts of the understanding (*Being Given* 199). The saturated phenomenon overwhelms the categories, even going so far as to contradict them and the principles associated with them by saturating them with intuition. In other words, if we conceive of the categories as rules for organizing and structuring intuition, then the saturated phenomenon is an experience wherein those rules are either suspended, broken, or overcome. For the purposes of this paper, I will discuss the final grouping of categories—modality—and the rules associated with it. I will then outline Marion's notion of the icon, namely a saturated phenomenon which goes beyond the limitations of modality.⁴

According to Modality—Irregardable

The final grouping of categories which Marion discusses are the categories of modality—possibility or impossibility, actuality or non-existence, and necessity or contingency. In the *Doctrine of Elements*, Kant explains that these categories do not *determine* the object in perception, but they “rather express only the relation of such objects to the faculty of cognition” (A 219). In other words, the categories of modality only describe the conditions for understanding phenomena and for making judgments about possibility, actuality, and necessity (Höffe 104). As an extension of the categories of modality, Kant defines what he means by possibility, actuality, and necessity. A phenomenon is possible if it agrees with the formal conditions of experience, as regards both sensibility and the pure concepts of the understanding (B 266). A phenomenon is actual if it both accords with the formal conditions of experience and satisfies the material condition of experience. In other words, a phenomenon is actual if it is both possible and there is some sensation that gives evidence for its reality (Guyer, *Kant* 115). Finally, a

⁴My interpretation will largely draw from Marion's *Being Given: Toward a Phenomenology of Givenness* and a few other places. I recognize, however, that Marion has alternative descriptions of the saturated phenomenon elsewhere.

phenomenon is necessary if its empirical determinations, its appearance in experience, is intimately connected with the universal conditions of experience. Necessity, therefore, means that a phenomenon appears as an unavoidable consequence of the universal conditions of perception.

As Marion argues, the categories of modality serve as the fundamental epistemological operators which connect a phenomenon with the transcendental I (“Sketch” 118). Kant’s description of the possibility of a phenomenon (which is an essential part of its actuality and necessity) makes the phenomenon’s appearing depend entirely upon its accordance with the formal conditions of appearance. But these conditions of experience, the possibility of a phenomenon’s appearing, depend upon the perceiving subject. For, as Kant makes clear, the modal categories describe only the relation of an object to the faculty of cognition, that is, to the transcendental I. In other words, for Kant, the phenomenon cannot give *itself* by *itself* and entirely from *itself*. Rather, its manifestation depends upon its accordance with the conditions placed upon it by the transcendental ego. The phenomenon “lets itself be constituted (constructed, schematized, synthesized, etc.) by whoever precedes and foresees it” (*Being Given* 213). As result, the phenomenon lacks any “phenomenal autonomy,” since its very possibility depends upon the self who perceives it. It does not give itself, but rather is constituted by its agreement with the conditions of knowledge for the perceiving I.

For Kant, any phenomenon that does not “agree with” or appear in accordance with the formal conditions of experience would simply not appear. Without meeting such conditions, the phenomenon would literally be impossible. The phenomenon would be irregardable because of its impossibility, its inability to appear to the perceiving subject in accordance with the transcendental conditions of objective experience. Nonetheless, Marion argues, this “irregardability” or “impossibility” does not mean that nothing manifests itself. Rather, in the saturated phenomenon, the phenomenon imposes itself upon the subject without becoming an object. In other words, the saturated phenomenon is a manifestation of a phenomenon that does not accord with the formal conditions of experience, an experience of the impossible. It appears despite the fact that it does not agree with such conditions, that is, with the conditions for objective knowledge.

The phenomenon’s appearing, marked by overwhelming excess, disallows its constitution as an object. As such, it contradicts the subject’s conditions for experience and knowledge. The phenomenon is not “constituted” or “synthesized” by the I. Rather, it gives *itself* as invisible, unbearable, and absolute. The saturated phenomenon does not appear as an object, and thus it is irregardable, since it cannot be “looked at” or

intended. This does not suggest that somehow the phenomenon is not visible or that it cannot manifest itself, but rather that its appearing is unlike other phenomena, poor in intuition, which are constituted and synthesized by the perceiving subject. The saturated phenomenon is a non-objectifiable phenomenon, one whose appearance is made possible by its own overwhelming givenness, its excess. It cannot be regarded, while remaining visible.⁵

Marion concludes that “determining the saturated phenomenon as irregardable amounts to imagining the possibility that it imposes itself on sight with such an excess of intuition that it can no longer be reduced to the conditions of experience (objecthood), therefore to the I that sets them” (*Being Given* 215). The phenomenon’s irregardability challenges not only the formal conditions for appearing, but also the I who renders them. It appears contrary to the conditions for possible experience, but it does not slip into mere non-sense or impossibility. Rather, the saturated phenomenon is the experience of the impossible, a “counter-experience” of a non-object.

As this last analysis makes clear, the I who experiences the saturated phenomenon is challenged. In other words, the constituting subject becomes the constituted witness—the saturated phenomenon is imposed upon the “subject” rather than conditioned by it. In the saturated phenomenon, the nominative and transcendental “I” becomes the accusative and passive “me,” the one upon whom the manifestation is imposed. This last⁶ type of saturated phenomenon breaks the complacency and superiority of the ego, challenging it by appearing apart from, and in contradiction to, the subjective needs of the transcendental I. Marion entitles this last type of saturated phenomena “the icon,” and gives as examples the ethical demands of the other or the erotic relation with a beloved. These experiences challenge the autonomous and transcendental ego, subjecting the self to the needs and demands of another person.

⁵Marion explains that “to regard” or “to gaze” means something very different from simply “to see.” For Marion, “to gaze” means to hold the visible within the control of the seer, to keep it within conceptual and categorical limitations (“Sketch” 119). To gaze is to objectify. These limits and this objectness are precisely what is at stake in the saturated phenomenon.

⁶In other places, and probably even here in *Being Given*, Marion makes it clear that all saturated phenomena reverse the intentionality of an experience, making the perceiver into a constituted witness. See, for example, pages 42–44 in *The Visible and the Revealed*.

Revelation as a Saturated Phenomenon

From the outset, Marion makes clear the fact that he does not assume the actuality of revelation. Whether or not revelation actually occurs, he suggests, is beyond the scope of phenomenology (*Being Given* 235–36). Still, Marion does provide an account of how revelation might occur, in line with his notion of the saturated phenomenon. He tries to provide an account for the *possibility* of revelation, rather than a description of Revelation. For Marion, revelation would appear as the saturation of saturation. It is the phenomenon “that concentrates in itself the four senses of the saturated phenomenon” (236). In other words, revelation would appear saturated according to all four groupings of the categories—invisible according to quantity, unbearable according to quality, absolute according to relation, and irregardable according to modality. It is the saturated phenomenon *par excellence*, taken to the “maximum” of givenness in every respect.

In the experience of revelation, the overwhelming givenness undermines any possible attempts at naming or predication. In other words, language operates differently within revelation. This point stems from Marion’s earlier work in *God Without Being*, where he suggests that God cannot be predicated about or brought into the realm of being as a result of his utter transcendence. God cannot be truly spoken *about*. As is the case with other saturated phenomena, revelation overcomes, submerges, and exceeds “the measure of each and every concept” (*In Excess* 159). Thus, the language of objects ceases as a possibility. This is not to say that naming and predication are no longer operative in revelation, but only that it is no longer *my* naming or *my* predication. Instead, God’s revelation names *me*, it predicates about me, and it brings me *into* the divine name. In revelation, I no longer speak about God, but rather I speak *to* God and am inscribed within the horizon of God making language performative rather than merely descriptive (157).

As an example, Marion provides a phenomenological analysis of Christ in the New Testament, showing how Christ appears as each of the four types of saturated phenomena—unforeseeable event (quantity), idol (quality), flesh (relation), and icon (modality). Marion’s analysis of Christ has been criticized for a number of reasons: some, such as Janicaud, have objected that Marion’s consideration of revelation strays beyond the bounds of phenomenology and has subtly hijacked phenomenology for

theological reasons.⁷ Others, such as Shane Mackinlay, argue that Marion ignores relevant New Testament scholarship and instead just uses the Bible as a “proof-text” for his theory (186–87).

Instead of addressing these issues, I want to focus on a much more basic problem for Marion’s account of revelation: has he even provided an account of *divine* revelation, one which is distinct from other saturated phenomena? After all, in a very real sense, *every* saturated phenomenon is a manifestation of revelation, the appearing of a phenomenon which gives itself from itself. When Marion talks about revelation, in many cases he uses that term in the broad sense of that which gives itself apart from the transcendental conditions of the ego, not simply what we might call “divine revelation” or the specific revelation of God. We must ask, then, has Marion provided a unique way to talk about this latter possibility?

The Icon and Revelation—Blurring the Distinction

In *Being Given*, Marion describes the possibility of divine revelation as the “saturation of saturation,” an experience at the “maximum” of givenness. In this initial description, Marion describes this as a phenomenon which appears saturated in all four categorical respects. This distinguishes it from other types of phenomena: “it concentrates the four types of saturated phenomena ... by confounding them in it, it (revelation) saturates phenomenality to the second degree, by saturation of saturation” (*Being Given* 235). Here, Marion talks about revelation as a fifth and final possibility of phenomenality, one which concentrates all four other types of saturated phenomena and, by so doing, saturates to the second degree—a saturation of saturation. What marks revelation as revelation is that it achieves this second degree of saturatedness, one which other saturated phenomena do not. Most importantly, this second degree comes as a result of revelation concentrating all four types of saturated phenomena in one.

Although this initial account seems plausible, it doesn’t seem to provide a unique way to talk about revelation. For the icon, as Marion himself admits, has also “gathered within it the modes of saturation of the three other types (the historical event, the idol, and the flesh)” (*Being Given* 234). Given this, it seems as though the icon *also* appears saturated according to all four groupings, since it involves the three earlier types of saturated phenomena and is itself the fourth type. If true, then

⁷See, for example, part one of *Phenomenology and the “Theological Turn”*: *The French Debate*.

we could say that the icon also saturates phenomenality to the second degree. But if the icon also saturates to the second degree, then it seems to be no different than divine revelation except, perhaps, that now God appears as the icon (rather than a human other). Thus, by describing revelation as a phenomenon which appears saturated in all four respects, Marion has not successfully distinguished it from the icon.

Thus, how can we distinguish between the icon and revelation in terms of their phenomenal appearing? In a later part of *Being Given*, Marion gives a different account of the difference between revelation and the icon, relying upon a phenomenological analysis of Christ. As icon, Christ inverts the intentional gaze of the subject, constituting it as a witness rather than as a transcendental I. In other words, the ego cannot gaze at or regard Christ, but rather is gazed upon and regarded by him. This counter-gaze constitutes the self by making it a witness of Christ's appearing, rather than an essential condition of Christ's manifestation (As in the common phenomenon). The counter-gaze, therefore, reconstitutes the subject from a nominative "I" to an accusative "me," the gazed-upon. Christ, in his gaze, demands of me—my obligation or responsibility to my neighbor as myself.⁸ The excess of this gaze, of the demands it makes upon me, saturates its appearing. This analysis follows Marion's conception of the icon, but it doesn't yet provide any new distinction between the icon and revelation.

To establish this, Marion refers to the story of the young, rich man. The man comes before Christ and asks him how he can obtain eternal life. In response, Christ describes the commandments concerning the other—thou shalt not kill, steal, bear false witness, etc. This, Marion says, marks the first saturation of revelation. It is intuitive saturation, an overwhelming and reconstituting of the self by the demands of and for the other (the icon). In response to Christ's list of commandments, the young man indicates that he has observed them all since birth. Christ then tells the man, "If you wish to be perfect, go, sell your possessions, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me" (Matt 19:21). Marion describes Christ's second response as a redoubling of saturation, a saturation of saturation:

This last type of saturation implies its redoubling: one must not only respect the gaze of the poor (not objectify them, but recognize their originarity) and, doing that,

⁸Marion's discussion of the ethical role of the icon clearly reflects the influence of Emmanuel Levinas and his phenomenological accounts of the experience of the other.

come to stand before the irregardable gaze of Christ; one must also annul all possession and all originarity in order to “give [oneself] to the poor,” therefore to the first among them. Thus, when the young man decides to stay rich, he confesses to remaining stuck between two states of the paradox: intuitive saturation and saturation beyond itself, saturation to the second degree. (*Being Given* 241)

It isn't entirely clear how these two “levels of saturatedness” interact. Marion's description seems to suggest that the difference between an icon and revelation rests in some additional commandment or obligation, placed upon the witness, which redoubles the saturation of the icon. The distinction seems to rest on the difference between two obligations: (1) not to objectify the poor, to respect them, and by doing so to come before the gaze of Christ; and (2) to give oneself to the poor and to the first among them, namely, Christ.

We should recognize, however, that Marion's conception of the “saturation of saturation” has changed in the above passage. Earlier, Marion described revelation as “saturated to the second degree” because it concentrates all four types of saturated phenomena in one phenomenon. Here, the second degree of saturation stems from some additional commandment or obligation, not from the fact that Christ appears saturated in all four respects.⁹ In fact, Marion describes Christ as saturated in each of the four ways *prior* to this additional commandment which *then* provides us with the saturation of saturation. It seems, here, that the criterion for redoubled saturation has changed: initially it was that a phenomenon appears saturated in all four ways, now it goes beyond that; not only must a phenomenon appear saturated in all four respects, it must also provide some new demand. Perhaps Marion noticed the difficulties outlined above and tried to give an account of how revelation differs from the icon—it produces an additional obligation.

The question then becomes whether or not this new account of double saturation can sufficiently distinguish it from the icon. If not, then the previous difficulties remain: there seems to be no difference between the experience of the human other, such as the ethical obligation to the other, and the experience of the divine. As noted above, the two

⁹Marion may have this earlier distinction in mind when he gives this analysis, but he never brings it up when trying to showcase the distinction between the icon as a saturated phenomenon and revelation as the saturation of saturation, saturation to the second degree.

commandments which Marion describes are (1) not to objectify the poor, to respect their originarity, and by doing so to come before the gaze of Christ; and (2) to give oneself to the poor and to the first among them. The second obligation somehow saturates the experience to the second degree, distinguishing it from the icon.

But the first part of this additional obligation, to give oneself to the poor, doesn't seem to add anything new beyond the obligations stemming from the ethical encounter with the other (the icon). Though Marion doesn't explicitly discuss this, it's clear that he is influenced heavily by Emmanuel Levinas. For Levinas at least, the obligation to give oneself to the poor, whatever exactly that might mean, certainly comes in the ethical encounter with the other: "It is this affectation of presence by the Infinite—this affectivity—that takes shape as a subjection to the neighbor. This is a thinking thinking more than it thinks—Desire—a reference to the neighbor—a responsibility for the other" (70). The obligation to the other comes without measure; it goes far enough that the self becomes a hostage to and for the other. In the ethical encounter, I am called to completely give of myself to the poor and needy. Thus, while Marion might feel that Christ's call to give oneself over to the poor somehow differentiates it from the experience of the ethical experience of the other, he has not shown why this is so. In fact, following Levinas and some of Marion's own language, it seems that the icon does in fact call me in this way, without any explicit connection to revelation or the divine.

The second component faces similar problems. The second part of the obligation is to give oneself over to Christ. Here we find at least one distinction between the experience of the human other and the experience of God: the ethical demand not only entails giving oneself over to the other, but it also entails giving oneself to God himself. Yet even here, a similar command comes in the ethical encounter with the other: my obligation entails that I become subject to the other's needs and demands, I give myself over to their needs and responsibilities, letting myself be constituted by this call. Christ's call then presents essentially the same call of the human other differing only by virtue of what the "other" refers to.

Another possible way of understanding this "redoubling" of saturation comes from Marion's discussion of the horizon. For Marion, revelation completely saturates any and all horizons. In his discussion of the relation between the saturated phenomenon and the horizon in *Being Given*, Marion presents three possibilities of how the two interact: (1) the phenomenon completely saturates the horizon but without passing beyond it or spilling into multiple horizons; (2) the phenomenon

completely saturates the horizon and then spills into multiple horizons; and (3) the first and second cases are combined (*Being Given* 210–11). It is the manifestation of a phenomenon which saturates every possible horizon, in which no combination of horizons could “successfully tolerate the absoluteness of the phenomenon” (211). As a result of this excessive excess, this paradox of paradoxes, “the absolutely saturated phenomenon could find no place for its display” (211).

Apart from using the language of “redoubling,” Marion doesn’t explicitly link this third possibility with the phenomenon of revelation. He does, however, use obviously Christological language when describing it: “Having come among his own, his own do not recognize it” (211; cf. John 1:11). As such, we can assume that this third possibility of “redoubling” does in fact describe the phenomenon of revelation, and perhaps it can provide the distinction necessary to differentiate between the icon and revelation.

The question then becomes whether the icon also saturates the horizon(s) in this way. Answering this question is problematic because Marion doesn’t return to these three possible relations between the phenomenon and the horizon in his later works. In addition, in *Being Given* he never clearly states how these three possibilities line up with the four types of saturated phenomena he has described. His Christological language suggests that the third possibility coincides with revelation, but he never gives any indication of what relationship the icon has with the horizon. Furthermore, it isn’t entirely clear what it would mean for a phenomenon to saturate merely *one* horizon or to “spill over” into multiple horizons. It would make more sense to discuss *interpreting* a phenomenon in multiple horizons, but how these multiple horizons could relate to its appearing seems mysterious.

At the very least, then, Marion has not given us any reason to suppose that the icon somehow differs from revelation with respect to its horizontal possibilities. In fact, the icon might similarly “redouble” or saturate any and all horizons. If so, then we have, once again, encountered the same issue. How in fact can we differentiate between the experience of the human other and the experience of the divine?

This issue about differentiating between the encounter with the other and revelation seems to run throughout most of Marion’s work. For example, in the *Erotic Phenomenon*, Marion discusses the erotic relation with the other and provides phenomenological analyses of love, sexual intimacy, and the birth of children. Throughout the entire work, his discussion focuses on the intimate relationship between the lover and the beloved, and it is only in the last three paragraphs of the book that he applies this entire analysis to God. He then argues

that God does give himself as love, similar to the relationship with the human other. The only difference, he suggests, is that “when God loves (And indeed he never ceases to love), he simply loves infinitely better than do we ... [H]e loves us infinitely better than we love, and than we love him. God surpasses us as the best lover” (*Erotic Phenomenon* 222).

Here, Marion utilizes his analysis of loves and the erotic phenomenon to describe God as love, but the comparison doesn't provide much beyond what could simply apply to the human relationship. God loves as we love, only infinitely better; he loves us better than we can love another and better than we can love him. This doesn't do much to describe what precisely that means, just that somehow God is even farther beyond our comprehension than the human other, however we could flesh that out. But this alone doesn't say much about the phenomenon revelation, except that perhaps we can't really speak about it except in more “human” terms. While the experience of God may be more glorious, infinite, or incomprehensible than the experience of the other, this doesn't give us any concrete phenomenological distinctions between the two. Again it comes down to the fact that Marion has not provided a phenomenological way to differentiate between the experience of God and the experience of the human other, except that one is grander or more infinite than the other. Apart from that broad gloss, the phenomenological approaches both to revelation and to the icon seem essentially the same.

Revelation and the Human Other—Conclusion

After providing a close analysis and description of the saturated phenomenon, I have tried to show that Marion's distinction between the icon and revelation cannot stand up to scrutiny. I have looked at a number of places where Marion describes the difference between them, and I have argued that in each case either the revelation of God seems essentially the same as the icon or Marion has not provided us with any concrete distinction to separate them. While they may differ in their radicalness or alterity, the phenomenological descriptions of the two remain essentially the same. The experience of God is described along the same lines as the experience of the human other. As such, it seems as though Marion's account of revelation does not present us with a last and final possibility of phenomenality, just one more variation of the icon. Perhaps it takes the icon to the extreme, but Marion has simply not provided any unique way to discuss the possibility of revelation apart from the encounter with the other.

What might this suggest? On the one hand, we might conclude that a great deal of work still needs to be done to provide the appropriate phenomenological description of the possibility of revelation. Marion's account has only taken us only so far, but more needs to be done to properly separate revelation from the experience of the other. We might find some way to discuss revelation as a saturated phenomenon, perhaps by finding a new type of saturated phenomenon apart from the four which Marion outlines. On the other hand, we might also wonder whether such an account really needs to differ that much from phenomenological analyses of the encounter with the human other. Marion's work does not provide us with a way to distinguish the two, but that might tell us something much more fundamental about revelation. In other words, perhaps the inability to substantially differentiate between the icon and revelation says a lot more about God than it does the short-comings of phenomenology.

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