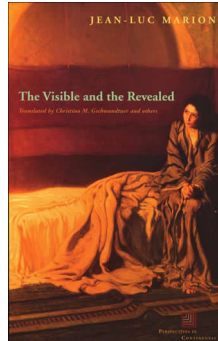


○ **REVIEW OF JEAN-LUC MARION, *THE VISIBLE AND THE REVEALED*. TRANS. BY CHRISTINA M. GSCHWANDTNER AND OTHERS**
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It does not bode well for Jean-Luc Marion's *The Visible and the Revealed* that it begins by questioning its own legitimacy: 'The publication of a new book is not always justifiable' (p. ix). Marion goes on to argue that the book is indeed justified; however, the reader, having been planted with the seed of doubt, may just find themselves disagreeing with him. The book is composed of a collection of essays, most of which deal with Marion's concept of the 'saturated phenomenon', the others dealing more broadly with what he naively insists on calling 'religion', by which he means only revealed Christianity. The essays are nicely unified by their engagement with the relationship between givenness, revelation, and the experience of saturated phenomena, which are 'neither objects nor beings' (p. xi). The essays are arranged chronologically, giving the reader a good feel for the slow evolution of the concept for which Marion is perhaps best known. The translations, credited to 'Christina M. Gschwandtner and others', do an admirable job of rendering Marion's sometimes tortuous prose into readable English.

The book opens with a brief but immensely helpful Preface in which Marion discusses each of the essays, at times simply dismissing earlier works as 'insufficient' or 'bluntly erroneous'. Marion situates the book as part of a larger academic project 'to take seriously the really central and decisive question of the relationship between the Revelation of Christ and philosophy in all its states' (pp. ix-x); although he is concerned primarily with phenomenology. The subtext of all of this is theological, apologetic, even defensive, and one cannot escape the feeling that Marion has made up his mind about this 'decisive question' from the very beginning:

[B]roadening phenomenality to include phenomena of revelation, by granting the *possibility* of phenomenalisating Revelation (according to its own modalities) might fulfil phenomenology as essentially as it would liberate the rights of theology. Finally, it might be possible that the refusal to want to see or even to

be able to see does not disqualify what one denies, but rather the one who denies it. Blindness does not call light into question. And voluntary blindness even less so (p. xii).

The first of these essays, 'The Possible and Revelation' dates back to 1988 (although it appears here for the first time in English translation) and here Marion first breaches the saturated phenomenon as part of his answer to a seemingly simple question: 'can "philosophy of religion" become a "phenomenology of religion?"' (p. 1). The next two essays, 'The Saturated Phenomenon', which continues his mediation on revelation as phenomenon, and 'Metaphysics and Phenomenology: A Relief for Theology', which questions the fundamental categories of philosophy, are related in that both are engaged in a 'search for a new philosophical paradigm for theology' (p. xiv). In the former, Marion presents the saturated phenomenon as an experience at the limits of experience: 'the saturated phenomenon cannot be aimed at ... the saturated phenomenon cannot be borne' (pp. 34–35). However, in the Preface, Marion openly disavows this early presentation of the saturated phenomenon and offers it only 'to ensure that it is *not* confused with the later version' that appears in the final essays in this volume (p. xiv). "Christian Philosophy": Hermeneutic or Heuristic?' is a direct address of the middle ground between philosophy and theology that Marion seeks to map out and occupy, a mapping that Marion looks back upon with obvious ambivalence.

His next essay, 1994's 'Sketch of a Phenomenological Concept of the Gift' explores the assertion that 'revelation only appears as a gift' (p. 80). Marion relies rather too heavily here on Derrida's work on the gift as an impossibility; nevertheless, he draws challenging, provocative conclusions regarding gifts, gift-giving, and agency: 'The instant power of givenness makes the gift determine *itself* as gift through the double consent of the giver and of the recipient, who are less often agents of the gift and are more often acted upon by givenness' (p. 94). Tying this into the Christian tradition, Marion, with admirable clarity (if with questionable logic), illustrates how the act of giving and givenness play out within Jesus' injunction to love one's enemies: 'I have reduced the gift to givenness in order to expose the fact that beyond all objective support and any economy of exchange, *the gift intrinsically gives itself from its self-giving ... [T]he gift, reduced to givenness, decides to give itself as an unsolvable debt given to an enemy*' (p. 100).

The next essay, 'What Cannot be Said: Apophasis and the Discourse of Love,' is at once dauntingly complex and utterly charming. With his detailed, intriguing exposition of what is meant when we say 'I love you,' Marion manages, for the first time in the volume, to connect on an emotional, personal level with any reader who has ever been in love. For Marion, 'I love you' must be understood as a perlocutionary act, an act that is intended to provoke 'the most radical question that one can perhaps ever ask' (p. 113): 'I reach the other and the other reaches me because 'I love you!' and 'Do you love me?'' continually provoke a (perlocutionary) effect in us, or to be more exact, incite each of us for and by the other' (p. 115). Even here Marion manages to address his larger concerns, describing 'the saturated and exceptional phenomenon that is the other in its eroticised flesh' (p. 117). His illuminating discussion of the Gospel accounts of Peter's duplicity further underlines the utility of the hermeneutic structure he outlines here, despite his unsupportable rejection of 'I love you' as either a locutionary or an illocutionary act. If the phrase does not communicate or perform meaning, how could it possibly generate any sort of response?

In 'The Banality of Saturation', which first appeared in 2004, Marion takes on his critics by explaining in painstaking detail how his saturated phenomenon describes something more banal than exceptional. His summary of the evolution of saturated phenomenon is helpful and remarkably clear:

What is at stake here is offering legitimacy to nonobjectifiable, even nonbeing phenomena: the event (which exceeds all quantity), the work of art (which exceeds all quality), the flesh (which exceeds all relation), and the face of the other (which exceeds all modality). Each of these excesses identifies a type of saturated phenomenon, which functions exactly like a paradox (p. 121).

Here Marion seems to turn his back on his earlier characterisation of saturated phenomena as experiences that 'bedazzle', as experiences of limit: 'Before the majority of phenomena, even the most simple (the majority of objects produced technically and reproduced industrially), opens the possibility of a doubled interpretation, which depends upon the demands of my ever-changing relation to them' (p. 126). The saturated phenomenon also becomes something intensely personal, in that it confronts and questions the deeply held truths of the person that it confronts – whom Marion tellingly labels as a 'witness'. For anyone intrigued by his earlier depictions of the saturated phenomenon, this penultimate essay is deeply troubling. The reader may be visited, as I was, by the uncomfortable feeling that Marion's earlier, far less direct evocations of the saturated phenomenon have less to do with the inherent difficulty of the concept and more to do with its ultimate emptiness. If we are forced to rely on the concept of saturated phenomenon 'each time that one must renounce thinking a phenomenon as an object if one wants to think it as it shows itself' (p. 127), then isn't *any* culturally-situated object or event potentially a saturated phenomenon? If everything can be a saturated phenomenon, how can the concept have any use as a descriptor or even as a philosophical conceit?

Marion's ultimate conclusions betray the whole of his project: 'Finally, on the basis of this complexity of saturations, the case of Revelation might possibly become thinkable. But it would no longer fall within phenomenology ... to decide about Revelation, which it could admit only formally. For that, one would have to call on theology' (p. 121). Marion, however, has known this from the beginning, it seems, with his consistent capitalisation of Revelation, his use of the theological term 'Christ' and baldly apologetic statements such as, 'religion attains its highest figure only when it becomes established by and as a revelation, where an authority that is transcendent to experience nevertheless manifests itself experientially' (p. 2). The final essay, 'Faith and Reason' (which, suggestively, does not appear in the French edition), ends the book on a downright hackneyed note: 'Christians, have no fear, be rational! And you, who do not believe in Christ, be reasonable, do not fear his great reason!' (p. 154). Given the challenging ideas that appear in many of these essays and given Marion's pretensions to both originality and boldness, one cannot help but be disappointed, even disheartened, by such a dull, pious, and utterly orthodox ending. What Marion seems to be saying here is nothing short of this: to do phenomenology properly, we must do Christian theology, but we must *call it phenomenology*.