

The Myth of the Given? The Future of Phenomenology's Theological Turn

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ABSTRACT: The theological turn in phenomenology continues to generate cross-disciplinary discussion among philosophers and theologians concerning the scope and boundaries of counts as a “phenomenon.” This essay suggests that the very idea of the given, a term so important for Husserl, Heidegger, Henry and Marion, can be reassessed from the point of view of Wilifred Sellars’s discussion of the myth of the “immediate” given. Sometimes phenomenology is understood to involve the skill of unveiling immediate data that appear as “phenomena” to a conscious and wakeful ego. In conversation with Jean-Luc Marion’s volume *Givenness and Revelation*, I challenge the assumption that phenomena are immediate in their givenness. The final remarks concern the “how” of the givenness of theological data, and in particular, the phenomenon of the Trinity.

KEY WORDS: Jean-Luc Marion, mediated givens, Wilifred Sellars, positivism, the Trinity

I. TWO TYPES OF GIVENNESS

Modern philosophy, from its Cartesian inception up to the current “analytic versus continental” division, has sought to elucidate the field of evidence known as the “given.” Descartes anticipates the vexing problem of the given by indicating that it operates according to the logic of a basic disjunction between sensation and mind. “I remembered that the use of my sense had come first, while the use of my reason came only later,” and the sensations as such represent the “immediate objects of my sensory awareness.”¹ Descartes thinks, as common observation should teach us, that the immediacy of those sensations can often be “obscure and confused,”² and require the judicious activity of interpretation to inform and clarify them.

The given can with equal justice frame how Descartes prefers his readers to conceive of the concept of God. Analogous to the dichotomy between the mind's faculties and the world, Descartes's verdict here is that the given operates on the plane of theology according to the disjunction between the idol we make of God and the God who is self-given and who thus arbitrates theological reflection. In the *Meditations* the divine is said to be given to the mind, as an innate idea, one that is "not dependent on my thought" and which "determines" the mind's thinking in matters of divine things. The mind refrains from imposing its pre-conceived idea on God and instead welcomes the divine as a being who attests to the accomplishment of Revelation, in the measure to which God proposes and posits his own disclosure. Hence "the necessity" of the divine "thing itself" shapes the mind's formulation of God.³ The given, therefore, we may already see in Descartes, affects the mind at the most basic of levels, in both the disciplines of philosophy and theology. The experience of sense data (philosophy) and the experience of divine data (theology) foreshadow what modern philosophers call the "Myth of the Given."

And yet, the paradigm of immediacy only reflects what we may name one type of givenness. Interpretation of Descartes's foundationalism aside, I endeavour in the following paragraphs to indicate that the Myth of the Given, while beginning with Descartes and ending with twentieth-century positivism, opens up the prospect of a second type of givenness, one expressed in the work of phenomenologists. The logic of immediacy funds the Myth of the Given. But does revelation "reveal" a given that does not have to yield to the Cartesian temptation to secure knowledge on the basis of immediate or raw impressions? Can the given be expanded, to include another type of given? The "Myth of the Given" could be restated as the "Myth of a certain kind of Given."

The temptation of immediacy is tantamount to the temptation to which positivism or empiricism succumbs: that immediate experience, because it is thought to be a *fait accompli*, should function as a tribunal that passes judgments on empirical reflection exercised by the mind. Put otherwise, the logic of immediacy urges the following thesis, namely, that all experience may be verified and confirmed only by referring our analysis of how we speak about the world back to the neutral (unprejudiced) "facts" or "givens" of sense data.⁴ The myth is immediacy as such. Naïve and misguided are the philosophies that purport to unearth occurrences of immediacy that should serve as tribunals of our statements about reality.

The second type of givenness, i.e., that the subject appropriates the given according to the logic of mediation, reconfigures the framework of empirical sense data no less than it does the framework of divine Revelation. Divine Revelation, as a form of the given, invokes God as a mystery mediated in a community of interpretation, keeping at bay any suggestion that Revelation consists of an im-

mediate sense impression of God. While the devout heart may experience the divine, such an encounter is not immediate, and therefore, does not adjudicate (as if it were a tribunal) between competing interpretations of the divine. The last section, part III, intends to explain that divine revelation arises within the confines of a form of life, inducted under the constraint of a holism of experience. Because it belongs to a vocabulary that participates in a larger cultural and linguistic grammatical repertoire of interpretations of the world, Revelation delivers data that take shape principally in sacred texts and creeds entrusted from one generation to the next. Phenomenology can make this kind of theological “given” explicit as a form of *mediated* givenness, just as intentionality shapes empirical data as mediated givens.

The future of phenomenology's theological turn, I wish to suggest, lies in its continued commitment to givenness of this *mediated* kind. Phenomenology demands strict and meticulous attention be paid to how a thing or an object may be given, whereby the “how [*Wie*]” of the object's givenness determines the mode of “delivery,” the manner of givenness as such.⁵ Another way to frame the question of the “how” of phenomenalization is to recall the rallying cry of Husserl's system, that “we must go back to the things themselves [*Wir wollen auf die 'Sachen selbst' zurückgehen!*]”⁶ Husserl famously indicated the singlemindedness of the phenomenologist in this regard when he declared later, in *Ideas I*, that such attention to the thing itself means that “we are the genuine positivists.”⁷ Such a sweeping mission statement about the phenomenologist's task tells us that empiricism and positivism have forgotten the key to experience: that the subjective experience of a phenomenon counts as the experience of the “thing itself.”

Phenomenology, in other words, cultivates a mindful attitude that liberates the philosopher from the prejudices of empiricism, in order to illuminate the subjective ground of givenness as the true ground of the phenomenon. As Michel Henry observes, “the insufficiency of positivism stems from the fact that it does not take into account the positivity which it constantly presupposes in describing phenomena.”⁸ This shift from the objective to the subjective throws into light phenomenology's chief task, namely, to reveal the “how” of experience in the following way: The “thing itself” is lived through at the very point in which it is given. More exactly, lived experience operates according to a single subjective mechanism, named by Husserl as intentionality. Basic sense data are taken up at once by the intentional stance of the subject-pole. Intentional reflection bears the responsibility of constitution, not just of discrete bits of data, but of the world as such. A “genuine theory of knowledge” must remain within the boundaries of the “tablet of consciousness” who consists not of a mere passive writing tablet in which psychic data come and go, but of an active agent whose living consciousness shapes the world. Husserl insists that we must not forget the tablet itself is conscious of itself as a tablet as much as it is conscious of the

world as horizon.⁹ For the experience of the thing itself “has to do exclusively with systematic clarification of the knowledge performance, a clarification in which this must become thoroughly understandable as an intentional performance. Precisely thereby every sort of existent itself, real or ideal, becomes understandable as a ‘product’ of transcendental subjectivity, a product constituted in just that performance.”¹⁰ Phenomenology is therefore a positivism not of empiricism, but of the performance of intentionality. A renewed focus on the subjective structure of intentionality enables phenomenology to lift the given out of the empirical prejudice of sense-impression immediacy, without at the same time eliminating the given as a reality that truly gives data to the conscious mind.

Theology provides data analogous to sense data. Theology names its data divine Revelation, a mode of manifestation in which God’s self-disclosure obtains in texts, creeds, ritual and prayer. How it is experienced is a theme phenomenology can in principal explore according to the logic of intentionality, whereby texts and rituals (handed down to the community of faith) are appropriated only in faith by the individual. Innovative analyses of this theological style of phenomenology are on display in the work of Jean-Luc Marion, Michel Henry, Jean-Yves Lacoste, and others. Before we enter theological terrain, it is imperative that the Myth of the Given be analysed in more detail from a phenomenological point of view.

II. THE MYTH OF THE GIVEN AND PHENOMENOLOGY

The question of the given, traced back to Descartes, comes down to us today in a calculated critique of empiricism. Analytic philosophers take as their point of reference for this critique Wilfred Sellars’s vocabulary (that he coined) of the Myth of the Given, and continental philosophers look to Husserl’s persistent opposition to psychologism.¹¹ We shall return to phenomenology, and to Jean-Luc Marion in particular, who has distinguished himself as the phenomenologist who has thematized the manifestation of the given with a rigor unmatched in the continental tradition. Thinkers in the analytic tradition, from Sellars, up through the work of Donald Davidson and John McDowell, carry out a critical re-appropriation of empiricism in light of pragmatism. I do not have space to go into the rich debate that has unfolded among those who write in this philosophical idiom. I can pause to note that the parallels with phenomenology’s thesis concerning the necessary relationship between givenness and the intentional structure of lived experience are striking. The mythological features of the given reveal the point at which two modern philosophical traditions converge, without complete overlap (Anglo-pragmatism and phenomenology); future research would entail a fuller consideration of the substantive issues involved in this area of overlap.¹² Bridging the philosophical divide remains a valuable pursuit, but it is a topic for another day. Here I only point out the important fact that the Myth of the Given

consists of a critique of sense-impression immediacy. Sellars suggests that sense data may be understood as a legitimate, if always mediated, source of knowledge of the world around us.

The principal problem, for Sellars, lay in empiricism's transcendental aspirations. They aim to reduce philosophy to the narrow study of language's direct reference to the world.¹³ This, in turn, sets up a linear relation to an empirical referent, as if language functioned like the "mirror of nature." Framed according to the paradigm of empiricism, language and linguistic concepts need only to "hook onto" the bits of sense data, already there present or given to the mind. The culmination of Sellars's corrective to this form of the given arrives midway through his essay "Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind," a seminal text wherein he proclaims that there are not and never were pure, unfiltered givens available to guide and shape philosophical reflection. Crude realism can obtain only at the level of naïve presumption. Why? Even a base-line impression like the color of red invokes a whole cultural vocabulary that necessarily contributes to the constitution of the meaning of redness. Sellars writes that positivism is mistaken because it suffers from the inability to

recognize that even such 'simple' concepts as those of colours are the fruit of a long process of publicly reinforced responses to public objects (including verbal performances) in public situations[;] we may well be puzzled as to how even if there are such things as impressions or sensations, we could come to know that there are, and to know what sort of thing they are. *For we now recognize that instead of coming to have a concept of something because we have noticed that sort of thing, to have the ability to notice a sort of thing is already to have the concept of that sort of thing, and cannot account for it.*¹⁴

The mythology of the given assumes a mythic dichotomy: on the one hand, the immediate sense data passively received, and, on the other, the cognitive receptacle that cumulatively builds up an experience out of the raw material of discrete sense data. Such is the false map of the mind-world dualism drawn by empiricism. As Donald Davidson observes, the best way to overcome this dichotomous map is to construct a new framework of experience, in which "intersubjectivity is the root of objectivity."¹⁵ Decades before Sellars (and his heirs like Davidson), phenomenology produced a finely-grained vocabulary that continues to nourish a critical attitude about the state of the given. A phenomenon is given and makes its impact, not according to the naivete of empiricism, but by means of the given's interrelationship with the subject's lifeworld.

The diversity of phenomenologies notwithstanding,¹⁶ the focus on the given remains a consistently explored item in writings of many of the movement's greatest exponents. Obviously, how the given is conceived and interpreted, how it is "situated" in the order of concepts that constitute the system of any one phenomenologist, remains a question of intense academic debate. Jean-Luc Marion

has devoted several texts (rooted in Husserl, Heidegger and Henry) to the task at hand. The phenomenological articulation of the gift, the conceptual scaffolding by which it is made intelligible, and its degrees of manifestation by which it appears, each of these components of the gift are addressed by Marion so as to bring into focus what is at stake. Is the “given” or the “phenomenon” immediate or is it mediated in a larger context of experience? The answer is not so obvious upon a cursory reading of Marion’s central thesis.

The opening pages of Marion’s *Étant donné* alert us to his central claim: “To show implies letting appearances appear in such a way that they accomplish their own apparition, so as to be received exactly as they give themselves. To show, to let appear, and to accomplish apparition do not imply any privilege of vision.”¹⁷ Does Marion already on the first page succumb to the Myth of the Given? Marion’s sustained treatment of the given launched with this salvo develops what are chiefly Husserlian insights. This should strike philosophers as an odd and unexpected point of departure. Husserl’s “Cartesian ego” reflects not a passive recipient who has abandoned vision, but a transcendental subject who constitutes the world by way of the power of intentional consciousness. Marion, as we shall see, does not abandon, but rather alters, vision itself.

There is not space to rehearse in descriptive detail the tortuous logic of Marion’s analysis of the gift. He advances, no doubt, perhaps one of the great founding principles of phenomenology, the notion of “so much reduction, so much givenness.”¹⁸ The particular thesis with which I am occupied in Marion’s work, and which I shall sketch only too briefly, is the question of the “how” of givenness as such: is the phenomenon successfully a phenomenon only once it is mediated through lived experience, or is it capable of appearing to me with the brute force of immediacy? Marion marshals evidence in favour of immediacy initially, as I shall highlight; however, the phenomenon appears only by passing not unscathed through the “screen” of the subject. Ultimately, for Marion, the screen that I am consists of a cultural lifeworld that makes the phenomenon intelligible, granting to it form and shape. Marion therefore makes a much-needed subjective turn at various points in his thematic analysis of the gift. By Marion’s own lights, the phenomenon unfolds not wholly from itself but is rather constituted in the performance of *anamorphosis*, the self’s intentional agency exercised on behalf of the phenomenon’s mode of disclosure. Indeed *anamorphosis* “opens” the field of manifestation for a phenomenon to count as a phenomenon at all, even the saturated phenomenon.

To show this, let us revisit the problem of sense data. Marion interprets the given here, understood as an object before us, as a phenomenon that must give itself, from itself. How does it make its impact felt, how does it come ashore and make its landing on me? Marion insists that a phenomenon, once freed of dogma of empiricism, will impose itself on me in a particular way. Think of a lectern,

from which Marion may deliver a lecture on this very topic in the classroom (a visual aid he borrows from Heidegger). The lectern may appear to be a simple a box constructed out of particle board. It may be used as a stepping stool. Perhaps it could be a box that contains fruit or carries shoes inside. And yet, it is given as a square phenomenon laid on top of a table. It holds the paper on which the lecturing material is written. It also serves as a balancing device, for the lecturer grips the box with tense hands as the classroom is addressed. Is it obvious that the wooden box appears as a lectern? Before the university existed, a medieval peasant from long ago would see it as an odd contraption that looks like nothing more than a wooden box.

But I “see” it as a lectern in my present context. How is this possible? It arises in my field of experience as a phenomenon in a manner of forceful givenness, what Marion calls a *fait accompli*. The lectern imposes itself on me as a lectern, with violence, so that I suffer its impact, but it does not rob me of my agency. For Marion, if I am an undergraduate student, it is possible that I may well see the lectern as kindling wood to burn in tonight’s bonfire. If I am a scientist, I may well reduce the lectern to its molecular basis, and recast it according to the vision of empiricism. That is not doing the phenomenon justice, however. It is a form of “devivfying” the phenomenon, which is an act by which I strip it of its lifeworld.¹⁹ But if I am to permit the phenomenon to give itself, as it is given from within the fold of its own givenness, then I shall see it as it is in its natural environment, as a lectern. Initially, it accomplishes itself therein as a fact, a *factum* in the sense that as a phenomenon it is to be taken simply as it shows itself. It arrives in this manner not *by* me, but at my expense. “It is a fact made on my account; by it, I am made.” As the screen, the site of manifestation, I am the surface on which the *fait accompli* accomplishes its work, as it forces itself on me, as it weighs in on me. Its landing, if I let it, transforms me from a passive spectator into an engaged actor, or better “a critical patient into whom the fact has crashed in being visibly accomplished.” I of necessity occupy neither the ego-less terrain of pure passivity nor the calculus of a transcendental ego. I “let myself be made” by the imposition of the *fait accompli*. The event, whereby I experience the phenomenon, whereby I shepherd its movement from invisibility to visibility, marks the middle voice. I am neither spectator nor author. *Je me suis fait* as the French say.²⁰

The lectern gives itself to me, and yet, it occupies my attention by demanding a response from me. I am called to receive it, just as it gives itself. More precisely, I am called into a particular intentional stance, a mode of interpretation governed by the lectern. The object appeals to me, it sanctions me to see it as a particular manifestation of a lectern. I may be within my rights to see it as a slab of wood, or even of as a collection of molecules. I may see it as a footstool, but the self-disclosure of the lectern challenges the hermeneutical liberties I may take.

Anamorphosis elucidates the phenomenological skill involved in the logic of mediation of the lectern. I am the screen on which the phenomenon makes its violent (and sometimes) unpredictable landing. The phenomenon, the lectern, ascends into manifestation only through me. My vision, even in Marion's work, brings to light the phenomenon as it gives itself. The "process of becoming a phenomenon" authorizes the subjective ground to operate as a basic transcendental condition for the possibility of all phenomenality. I have suggested only implicitly that Marion's scheme of the given designates an evasion of immediacy by way of the logic of hermeneutics. The interlacing, so to speak, of the subject and the given whose force is imposed on me designates that the given has its terminus in the subject, whom Marion names appropriately the gifted or *l'adonné*. The intentional stance the subject must take up in this context, if the gift is to show itself by giving itself, is called *anamorphosis*. The lectern, to return to our example, beckons me, it evokes in me a response in proportion to its givenness, namely, that I align my vision with the angle at which the lectern appears to me as a lectern.

Marion will acknowledge that phenomenology's decision to privilege the *fait accompli* resonates with a key thesis of empiricism: *the recourse to the facts*.²¹ The phenomenon "accedes to its visibility only by way of a givenness."²² Is Marion vulnerable to the naivety attached to the Myth of the Given? Not at all. The lectern gives itself, and this fact appears to us straightaway, as soon as we encounter the lectern. For Marion, the axis of the given sets the terms of engagement. This suggests that I struggle to receive the given just as it is given because I am not a passive spectator. I see, I engage, and I interpret the lectern as it is given to me when I enter the classroom. I glance at it from the side, and it initially has no recognizable form beyond a few pieces of wood glued together in the shape of a box. I direct my vision to the proper angle, in order to line up with the axis of givenness. The lectern demands that I submit to its position in the larger world of the classroom. In this way, I can recognize it once I enter its jurisdiction. To do this, I must change my point of view. I must walk from the entry point and walk over to the middle of the classroom. I move, in real space (other examples may require I move in conceptual space), to the front of the room and recast my gaze over the wooden box. I see it now, for the first time, as a lectern with a microphone attached to it, located firmly on top of a table. In this vision, the phenomenon appears, "when my gaze has satisfied the demands of the perspective." Just as I see writing on the street (in yellow paint it says yield) only once I stand in front of it at some distance (not to the side). No phenomenon, even a lectern, or writing on a street, is "neutral" and "passive." Rather, the ego responds to the call of the given, because it accomplishes itself by affecting me, indeed, by changing me. It can modify my field of vision, if I let it.²³ I clearly have the capacity to exercise my agency and thereby adjust my vision. I am an engaged actor on the stage in which

I encounter phenomena. I change my vision on that stage in order to give myself over to the object's manner of appearing, so it may count as a phenomenon for me.

Without subjective agency, how else does one make sense of Marion's radical claim that the ego, now declined in the form of the gifted, has "nothing less than the charge of opening or closing the entire flux of phenomenality?" The subject, the ground on which a phenomenon makes its manifestation, is the "gatekeeper" for the ascent into visibility "of all that gives itself."²⁴ If I decide to remain blind to the lectern, then I am free to do so, but I may also resituate my gaze according to the demands of the object. The object given to me is accompanied by a host of demands, what we have called a lifeworld or public context. It awakens in me, then, not a single object among others that I imagine I see in a manifold of empirical objects. It instead illuminates a vocabulary of cultural assumptions, a whole lifeworld. I am given, when I see the lectern, a "surrounding world."²⁵ Sellars calls this, as noted above, a public object defined in the vocabulary of publicness, or what Davidson calls intersubjectivity. Herein lies the logic proper to the gift: I receive data, a "given," as a world laden with interpretive conditions that permit manifestation to arise between the subject and the object—I am neither spectator nor author, but engaged actor who is but one part of a larger surrounding, public world. How may this paradigm of the Given (now demythologized) yield theological fruit?

III. THE HERMENEUTIC IMPERATIVE: THE PHENOMENOLOGY OF THE TRINITY

I have suggested that The Myth of the Given need not eradicate the very idea of givenness as such from philosophical analysis. Marion's rigorous defence of the priority of the phenomenon as that which gives itself in itself from itself alone stands as an exemplary treatment of the "given" as non-mythical. Recall Marion's claim: data of whatever kind appear to me in not in isolation, but in the context of a public world. The public context (i.e., lifeworld) in which I encounter the sense impression determines how I receive and thereby how I experience a sense datum as a phenomenon. Does this structure of the given also apply to theological data, the *positum* of Revelation? Phenomenologists writing under the persuasion of divine Revelation offer innovative resources for thinking about a theological optics in just this way. How are divine data, that is, Revelation, mediated to me?

While the eucharist or prayer are obvious candidates for phenomenological analysis, since they evoke a cultic scene accompanied by sense data,²⁶ there has been a surge of interest in the phenomenon of the Trinity.²⁷ Among the many kinds and forms of theological "data" given over the course of a two-millennia long tradition, the Trinity obviously does not break in upon me as a particular sensation (e.g., bread and wine in the eucharist) I receive among other sensations.

How is God disclosed or manifest in Triune form? And how is such a given made intelligible with phenomenological analysis?

The Trinity, in other words, is no obvious choice for those interested in pursuing theological objects of experience from a phenomenological vantage point. Karl Rahner's influential analysis of the Trinity punctuates the lack of pastoral purchase the doctrine historically wields, so much so that the Trinity could be eliminated from the Christian lexicon and its absence would affect neither an individual's faith nor a parish's sense of community. Christians are so thoroughly "monotheistic" that to bear witness to God as tri-personal would occasion little to no reconfiguration of an individual's confession of faith.²⁸

Hence the Trinity appears in the church to be a curiously abstract doctrine. The trend, a few decades ago, was to address this problem by adapting the Trinity to the social interactions between humans. The resolution of the crisis of Trinitarian theology found in the "social doctrine of the Trinity," then, offers a practical application of the Trinity; recast in light of the social reality of the human condition, the Trinity functions as a model of social integration that can teach us how to relate to each other in love, just as the social community of the Father and Son exchange the gift of love in the Spirit they share.²⁹ And yet, the Trinity so understood remains at the level of model or symbol, not a phenomenon I encounter, as manifest before me. How does, in contrast, a phenomenological analysis of the Trinity get off the ground?

I do not deny that the Trinity, like the Incarnation, is an article of faith. I do deny that it is constitutive of the data God "gives" or discloses to his people. The Trinity is data given to the faithful, that once received, can make its impact as a phenomenon. How it becomes a phenomenon and what type of phenomenon it can be is the urgent twofold question now before us. Marion's analysis of the Trinity's "logic of manifestation" charts one possible way. Recall our analysis above of Marion's principle of *anamorphosis*. We now turn to his problematic application of it, as a way of seeing, to the Trinity.

Marion suggests that the "gifted," to whom the Trinity is given, may rotate the direction of its vision so that the gaze can "line up" properly on the axis of the Trinity (that is the movement of *anamorphosis*): the invisible is made manifest in the visible, insofar as the Father illuminates the Son, who is the visible Icon of the invisible Father. The Spirit, the third person, illustrates that special power that enables the gifted to receive and recognize the Trinity as a phenomenon in just this way. The iconic model of this logic of manifestation, for Marion, suggests that God's revelation can only be experienced as a saturated phenomenon. The Spirit's work in the iconic model consummates in "complete anamorphosis... or the arrangement wherein the gaze of man would be placed at the exact site required by the icon itself for it to be recognized in full manifestation."³⁰ The model is itself Trinitarian, whereby the worshipper appropriates in faith the person of

Jesus as a Son, with whom the Father is one, a recognition made possible by the Spirit. Hence the "Spirit positions the human gaze at the exact place and point of view where the visible face of Christ (Jesus *as* Son) can at once, with a sudden and perfect precision, be uncovered as the very axis where the gaze of the Father on the Son and that of the Son at the Father pass."³¹

Marion, moreover, argues that I can appropriate the Trinity according to the particular person's mode of manifestation. The Spirit confers on the gaze an "optical power" to see in the visible face of Jesus the invisible depth of the Father. But the Spirit remains invisible because it makes possible the iconic vision, just as I cannot see the eyes through which I see the world. The Spirit recedes into the background of the stage of visibility, a place where only the Son appears. He is the lone iconic reference point of the Trinity. The Father, who is "one with the Son," does not properly speaking appear. It is the Son alone who is the sole "phenomenon in and for all the Trinity... the body of Christ made visible, the only place of manifestation for the entire Trinity."³² The iconic model of phenomenality reduces the manifestation of the Trinity to the visible manifestation of the Son. And yet, the question remains: how is the Son experienced as a phenomenon? Jesus Christ does not stand before us as a person in flesh and blood. The turn toward scripture, where the story of Jesus is revealed, or the sacrament of the Eucharist where he is liturgically revealed, are two obvious objects Marion incorporates as objects that can display the phenomenon of the Trinity (Marion relies on scripture and Basil of Caesarea and St. Augustine). But are they not objects that mediate my experience of the Trinity? I will address this question in the final remarks.

The Spirit must serve to "convert" my vision (Marion's phrase), so that I undergo a gestalt shift: I can now see the love of the Father in the visible face of the son on the Cross. Our point of view changes, through faith, so that a space is opened in us where God can be received within "the limits of our finitude and egocentrism."³³ My finite limits expand. We behold Christ, in the form of a Resurrection body, the saturating impact of Christ's manifestation.³⁴ The Trinity, framed according to saturation, remains unforeseeable, and most of all, is a phenomenon that eludes the rank of object. It overwhelms me in that its manifestation is excessive when compared to my intentional stance of faith. I cannot anticipate God in Triune form, because its phenomenality eludes my capability to constitute it.

It is important to make explicit what is implicit in Marion's drama. Christ, who is the iconic center of the Trinity, consists of finely-grained theological doctrine worked out over centuries of early church debates. The Trinity and Incarnation are doctrines that assist the Christian believer in framing and apprehending God. Marion appears to leap over the long intellectual debate that surrounded both doctrines, debates that must be said inform and shape faith, rather than overwhelm it.

Trinity and Faith: What Kind of Phenomenon?

The Trinity does not occur as a “given” independent of the cultural language with which Christianity has provided the believer to appropriate the phenomenon within the economy of mediation. Even a saturated phenomenon must be received and thus “recognized” as a particular kind of gift only according to conditions outlined in advance.³⁵ The Trinity, understood in Marion’s framework, does not succumb to the myth of immediacy. But Marion fails to thematise what the mediated phenomenon of the Trinity consists of as *an experience*. As an engaged actor within the lifeworld of Christianity, Marion does not appeal to the liturgical setting of the Trinity that phenomenology can illuminate with precision.

The future of phenomenology’s theological turn resides in the recent trend to use phenomenology as a tool for explication of dogma bound up with a particular faith tradition. Continental philosophy of religion, as John Caputo worries, is dead if it remains concerned wholly with the definition of a universal Ur-“religion without religion” that avoids the thick description of content given by a particular tradition and confession.³⁶ Phenomenology, as Heidegger notes, does not in principle concern itself with content at all. It is up to the faith tradition, what he calls a “positive science” (whether it be Islam, Hinduism or Christianity) to provide data for phenomenological analysis.³⁷ Phenomenology can, therefore, help Christian theology say what it wants to say with clarity and conviction.

Marion’s analysis attempts to achieve just this kind of confessional phenomenology. I have no problem with this task. However, it appears Marion pays insufficient attention to the fact that the Trinity is a Christian dogma, sedimented over by centuries of debate, and is thus given or “posited” as a doctrine that emerged out of a particular lifeworld. Phenomenology, as a method, can emphasize the logic of mediation in any context, and so, mediation is the logic by which the Trinity is given to me. Against Marion, The Trinity is a phenomenon that is handed down in scripture and tradition. Hence the Trinity cannot be discovered or “encountered” under the auspices of saturating experience, as if I were surprised and caught off guard by its manifestation, as if it could land on me antecedent to the doctrinal content I receive about it. The Trinity may be a counter-intuitive and inexhaustible mystery, but as a phenomenon, the Trinity must be received in a way that is in keeping with the “how” of all doctrine, a lifeworld learned in scripture, prayer and liturgy.

Let us return to the analysis of the lectern in order to illustrate the way in which the Trinity may give itself as a lifeworld. The lectern is a phenomenon that imposes its logic on me, to which I am called to conform and bear witness to, as the one who is gifted by its visible presence as a box of wood. I am never capable of remaining a passive spectator, but I do not craft the lectern in my own image as if I were its author. It is a public phenomenon, mediated to me by the world in which it appears and the selfsame world from which I narrate my life. By analogy,

the Trinity operates on this mediated plane of experience. But it is not an object among other objects like a lectern. It is not a discrete object of sense data that I can pick out from a series of objects that are flowing in my stream of consciousness. Rather the Trinity, twice removed from immediacy, is redoubled in its mediated form of manifestation, appearing as a mediated phenomenon. It appears to me only in the intellectual tradition of Christianity, as a liturgical idea and a doctrine (formed over centuries).

The “how” of experience gains its intelligibility once the “how” of the given involves not just the phenomenon itself, but also the lifeworld carried in its public mode of manifestation. The “optical power” of the Holy Spirit belongs to the lifeworld illuminated by the same Spirit, namely the Christian tradition and the body of Christ in the form of the Church. The Trinity is seen or recognized as a “given” only to those who are initiated into the particular lifeworld of the phenomenon under analysis. The lectern may mean nothing to the toddler, except that it appears to her as a heavy wooden box. Once initiated into the lifeworld of higher education and university life, the lectern will become or will be “given” as a phenomenon ready to hand, as a crucial piece of furniture used by the professor. The attitude of the subject, if initiated into the relevant lifeworld, determines the mode of disclosure of the phenomenon under investigation. The same hermeneutic imperative applies in the arena of theological revelation.

Aquinas indicates that the Trinity is not perceivable in or available to nature. Natural reason, therefore, cannot achieve on its own strength the knowledge of the Trinity. I may know, via general revelation, and by the ordinary use of my faculties of reason, that God exists. But Aquinas remains emphatic that other doctrines appear to us only with the aid of divine grace, in the form of special Revelation, such as the Bible and sacraments. The Trinity is classified as this kind of special Revelation, available only to the intentional aim of faith. As Aquinas observes, it is “for the manifestation of faith” that God as Trinity is knowable by way of “similitude” and “dissimilitude” with created things.³⁸ To attempt to prove the Trinity with use of reason would injure the dignity of faith itself, since its purpose is to celebrate the mystery of the invisible.³⁹ The aid of special Revelation, appropriated in faith, makes visible the phenomenon of the Trinity only in a mediated fashion. Aquinas, to continue with his analysis of the knowability of the Trinity, argues that the divine essence transcends our powers of apprehension. The divine essence, “considered in itself,” cannot be known by the powers of our intellect, even when those powers are assisted by special revelation. Marion certainly stresses this aspect of the experience of the divine, who is fundamentally unknowable and incomprehensible (evident in his pioneering work on the saturated phenomenon).⁴⁰ God appears in an incomprehensible fashion, for Marion, because God reveals a presence that is “too much,” a Revelation that overwhelms our capacity to signify or understand it.

Aquinas appears to imply the opposite of Marion. We apprehend God as Trinity, in Aquinas, according to our “own mode” insofar as we find the Trinity “in sensible objects, whence its knowledge is derived.”⁴¹ When God the Father, for example, is disclosed as a “Father” figure in the New Testament (Father of Jesus), then we know God is not feeble as human fathers are sometimes by old age (God is known here by dissimilitude with created things). God as Trinity appears as a phenomenon only in this mediated or analogous manner. God is given through the imagery and concepts provided by scripture and the liturgy, not least the tradition of commentary on Trinitarian theology.

The Trinity, in conclusion, does not saturate my horizons like a rainbow before me can, but is rather a phenomenon taken up in faith. It is, moreover, a doctrine acquired by a repertoire of skills and languages, which are learned in the Christian tradition. I employ those skills in that they permit me to recognize the Trinity as an article of faith that reveals the invisible mystery of the Father in the visible face of the Son, by the grace and power of the Spirit. Jean-Yves Lacoste says faith often has no fulfilling content, and is a phenomenon poor in or absent of fulfilling intuition. This seems to me to be a phenomenological way (as Aquinas would say, a way consistent with a creature’s reliance on sensible objects) to treat the manifestation of the Trinity. As an article of faith, the Trinity is phenomenalized in the liturgical context of the eucharist. The Son, Father and Spirit are memorialized together in the elements. Augustine, on whom Marion heavily (but sometimes hastily) draws, contends that the Trinity touches on a spirituality of seeking, one rooted in the “not yet” of eschatology. We see God now only in an enigma and in a puzzle, because of lack of presence, not overabundance.⁴² Trinitarian experience is not an experience that saturates me, but rather becomes one that can evoke in me a contemplative posture (if I let it), one that requires my focus, both my love and intellect, and results in a readiness that disposes me to receive God in the liturgical context of mediation. I am an engaged actor (Marion), which means I do more than simply “align my gaze” with the axis of the phenomenon. I learn about the phenomenon’s lifeworld by entering its lifeworld. In turn, I use that doctrinal framework as means of interpreting and apprehending God as Trinity in scripture, liturgy and prayer: entering the Christian lifeworld is born of the hermeneutic imperative.

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NOTES

1. René Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy: With Selections from the Objections and Replies*, trans. John Cottingham, rev. ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 52.
2. *Ibid.*, 55.
3. *Ibid.*, 46.
4. For more on this, see W.V. Quine, "Main Trends in Recent Philosophy: Two Dogmas of Empiricism" *The Philosophical Review* 60(1) (1961): 20–43. Husserl, decades before Quine, calls empiricism a dogma that grips us with a naïve attitude about the structure of sense impression experience. See his *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy: First Book*, trans. F. Kersten (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 1983), §62.
5. As Husserl says, phenomenology is interested in discovering "objects in their ways of appearing [*Gegenstände im Wie*]." See Husserl, *On the Phenomenology of the Consciousness of Internal Time (1893–1917)*, trans. John Barnett Brough (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1991), 121.
6. Edmund Husserl, *Logical Investigations*, vol. 1, trans. J. N. Finlay, ed. Dermot Moran (New York: Routledge, 2001), 168, xxiii (the latter contains the German).
7. Husserl writes, "If 'positivism' is tantamount to an absolutely unprejudiced grounding of all sciences on the 'positive,' that is to say, on what can be seized upon originally, then we are the genuine positivists. In fact, we [phenomenology] allow *no* authority to curtail our right to accept all kinds of intuition as equally valuable legitimating sources of cognition." See Husserl, *Ideas*, 39.
8. Michel Henry, *Essence of Manifestation*, trans. Girard Etzkorn (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1973), 53–54.
9. Husserl, *Crisis of European Sciences*, trans. David Carr (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1970), 251.
10. Husserl, *Cartesian Meditations*, trans. Dorion Cairns (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 1970), 84–85.
11. Husserl, *Logical Investigations*, vol. 1, 40ff.
12. For more on Heidegger's value for the pragmatist tradition, see the seminal article, Robert Brandom, "Heidegger's Categories in *Being and Time*," in *A Companion to Heidegger*, ed. Hubert L. Dreyfus and Mark A. Wrathall (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2005), 214–32; and Mark Okrent, *Heidegger's Pragmatism* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991).
13. Kant depicts empiricism as a kind of transcendental *realism*, in which reality unfolds wholly from the object or sense data. Time and space he says, in this paradigm, are assumed to be "something given in themselves (independent of our sensibility)." See Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 426, A369.
14. Wilfred Sellars, *Science, Perception and Reality* (Atascadero, CA: Ridgeview Publishing Company, 1963), 176.
15. Donald Davidson, *Subjective, Intersubjective, Objective* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 91.

16. For a brief commentary on the varieties of phenomenology, see Joseph Rivera, *The Contemplative Self after Michel Henry: A Phenomenological Theology* (Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame University Press, 2015), chap. 1.
17. Jean-Luc Marion, *Being Given: Toward a Phenomenology of Givenness*, trans. Jeffrey Kosky (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003), 7.
18. Michel Henry makes the case for Marion's fourth principle. See his "The Four Principles of Phenomenology," trans. Joseph Rivera and George Faithful, *Continental Philosophy Review* 48(1) (2015): 1–21.
19. I follow Marion's decision to borrow the "lectern" example from Heidegger, *Towards the Definition of Philosophy*, trans. Ted Sadler (London: Continuum Books, 2008), 55.
20. Marion, *Being Given*, 146–47.
21. *Ibid.*, 119.
22. *Ibid.*, 123.
23. *Ibid.*, 125.
24. *Ibid.*, 307.
25. Marion, in a later essay, draws on Heidegger's lucid lectures on the "enworlding" of phenomena as constitutive of how they give themselves. See Marion, *The Reason of the Gift*, trans. Stephen Lewis (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2011), 45ff.; for Heidegger's important analysis, see Heidegger, *Towards the Definition of Philosophy*, 56ff.
26. See, for example, *The Phenomenology of Prayer*, ed. Bruce Ellis Benson and Norman Wirzba (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005); Jean-Luc Marion, "The Phenomenality of the Sacrament," in *Believing In Order to See*, trans. Christina Gschwandtner (New York: Fordham University Press, 2017), 102–15; and Jean-Yves Lacoste, *L'intuition sacramentelle et autres essais* (Paris: Ad solem, 2015), 59–96.
27. For example, see Kevin Hart, *Kingdoms of God* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2015), 175ff.; Jean-Louis Chretien, *Under the Gaze of the Bible*, trans. John Marson Dunaway (New York: Fordham University Press, 2014), 66ff.; Emmanuel Falque, *The Metamorphosis of Finitude: An Essay on Birth and Resurrection*, trans. George Hughes (New York: Fordham University Press, 2012), 88ff.; Jean-Luc Marion, *Givenness and Revelation*, trans. Stephen Lewis (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), chap. 3; Michel Henry, *I Am the Truth: Toward a Philosophy of Christianity*, trans. Susan Emanuel (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003), 69ff.
28. Karl Rahner, *The Trinity*, trans. Joseph Donceel (London: Continuum Imprint, 1986), 10–11.
29. Karen Kilby, "Perichoresis and Projection: Problems with the Social Doctrines of the Trinity," *New Blackfriars* 81 (2000): 432–45.
30. Marion, *Givenness and Revelation*, 108.
31. *Ibid.*
32. *Ibid.*, 110, 111.
33. *Ibid.*, 117.
34. *Ibid.*, 49.
35. Marion gestures toward this point in his "Recognition of the Gift," in *Believing In Order to See*, 125–35. Marion is also clear that all divine Revelation appears not as a poor or common phenomenon but as a saturated phenomenon. See Marion, *In*

- Excess: Studies in Saturated Phenomena*, trans. Robyn Horner and Vincent Berraud (New York: Fordham University Press, 2002), 53.
36. See John Caputo, "Is Continental Philosophy of Religion Dead?," in *The Future of Continental Philosophy of Religion*, ed. Clayton Crockett, B. Keith Putt, and Jeffrey Robbins (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2014), 21–33.
 37. Heidegger writes, "Phenomenology' neither designates the object of its researches, nor characterizes the subject-matter thus comprised. The word merely informs us of the 'how' with which *what* is to be treated in this science gets exhibited and handled." Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (Oxford: Blackwell, 1962), 58–59.
 38. Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, trans. Fathers of the Dominican English Province (London: Burns, Oates, and Washbourne, 1913–1942), Part I, Q. 39, A.7.
 39. *Ibid.*, Part I, Q.32, A.1.
 40. As saturation applies to the Trinity, see Marion, *Givenness and Revelation*, 52–54, 99.
 41. Aquinas, *Summa*, Part I, Q.32, A.2, and Part I, Q.13, A.2.
 42. For more on this, see especially Augustine, *The Trinity*, trans. Edmund Hill (New York: New City Press, 1990), book XV as a whole, but also the prayer on the final page.

