

Jean-Luc Marion's Philosophy of Religion: Between Methodological Rigorousness and Hermeneutics

George Vamesul
Al.I. Cuza University of Iasi

Tamsin Jones, *A Genealogy of Marion's Philosophy of Religion: Apparent Darkness*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 2011

Keywords: Jean-Luc Marion, philosophy of religion, phenomenology, Gregory of Nyssa, Dionysius the Areopagite, hermeneutics

Jean-Luc Marion's writings range from revolutionary approaches on Descartes oeuvres, to apologetic debates in theology and groundbreaking inquiries into the realm of phenomenology. When dealing with such a vast amount of topics the reader finds himself rather puzzled concerning the cohesiveness of Marion's entire corpus, and the question of how one should engage such a variety of subjects. While the originality of his work on Descartes seems to be a common place among scholars, the problem rests with the relation between phenomenology and theology. Here, the readings waver from a theological or hermeneutical or "non-egological" understanding, to claims that he is not theological or hermeneutical enough, or that the ego still plays an important role in his work¹. Despite all these conflicting narratives, there are scholars² that have a more holistic understanding of Marion's enterprise.

In his recent book *A Genealogy of Marion's Philosophy of Religion: apparent Darkness*, Tamsin Jones takes up the holistic view claiming that a remote narrative tends to overlook a more

basic tension, namely that between the demands of methodological rigor and the anti-idolatrous claim (4). Drawing on two Greek patristic sources in Marion – Dionysius the Areopagite and Gregory of Nyssa – he unravels the entire schema of this tension and, in the end, points a way to balance it.

The first task of the book (chapter I) is to reveal the place, the reason and the purpose of the many citings of Dionysius and Gregory throughout Marion's work. This whole itinerary leads Jones from analyses of Marion's first articles, through some of the most famous books (*The Idol and Distance* and *God Without Being*) ending with his last publication *Au lieu de soi: L'approche de Saint Augustin*. Besides providing arguments in favor of the holistic view – since *givenness* or the conceptual dyad *visible-invisible* are major themes that can be trace back to Marion's first writings (pp.15-17) – the analyses also reveal two important aspects of the way the citings of the Gregory and Dionysius work. First of all, the quotations function as a source of authority in contemporary apologetic debates – and also in more philosophical accounts – especially because of the manner in which the Fathers appropriate certain theological problems: instead of starting from a rational point of view and advancing different hypotheses, they wait to “receive properly what is to be received from God” (18). Secondly, Marion recovers these two authors in a univocal manner that frequently takes the form of employing Gregory's ideas as proofs for Dionysius. This pattern of citings is exposed exemplarily by Jones' analyses of Marion's *In the Name: How to avoid speaking of it*. Here Marion engages himself in a debate with Derrida who claims that negative (apophatic) theology cannot avoid metaphysics and consequently, is subjected to deconstruction (32). Marion responds to this critique with the idea of a third way of speaking in Dionysius. He draws on his translation of the term *aitia* as *the Requisite* instead of *cause*, claiming that for Dionysius this term has no intention of naming God, that is, has no connection with the Aristotelian predicative language. Instead, *aitia* denominates, pointing to a somewhat non-predicative language: therefore language praises God as *aitia* in the act of praying. Here, Marion faces in a very precise way the Derridean critique, since prayer praises God as something and therefore by naming. To avoid it,

he brings in Gregory's theory of language from *Contra Eunomium*, which claims that language does not name the essence of things but only fulfills the pragmatic function of indication, without manifesting something (36). This shows precisely how Marion mixes up the two authors in a univocal retrieval that governs explicitly or implicitly his entire work. The only problem with this pattern is raised by Jones' analyses of Marion's last published book *Au lieu de soi: L'approche de Saint Augustin*. It is obvious that this last publication is a turning point for Marion, shifting from the Greek Fathers to a peculiar Latin one, from apophasis to confession and from invisibility to beatific vision (42). Nevertheless it continues a movement which began with *The Erotic Phenomenon* and analyzes the moral implications of the passive self in relation with unlimited givenness. From this perspective, the pattern that Jones unravels is confirmed again.

Having that figured out, Jones proceeds further in the analyses of the legitimacy of such a univocal retrieval of the Christian authors in Marion's corpus. Although Marion employs the Fathers in constructing his anti-idolatrous (apophatic) strategy – that is, a discourse proper to God – he ignores that their approaches on the topic comes with a bigger frame of reference, one that involves also cosmological, theological and anthropological presuppositions due to which, instead of one apophatic strategy, Marion ends up with two different projects.

First, for Gregory, language has its place in a world determined by two components: *diastema* and *kinesis* (57). While the former describes the absolute gap between God and creation, the later constitute all beings in an ongoing movement toward an infinite creator. Hence, despite the fact that language is conventional, thus reflecting the human speaker, it is in the same manner reliable and humble due to the fact that it constitutes a response to God's revelation, regardless of the imperfections that comes with this response.

Second, from Dionysius' perspective, language is a system of symbols that points toward a divine creator. Since creation is understood as a hierarchical givenness out of divine love (58-72), this pointing is twofold: on the one hand, it sets up in a "projection" that opens the possibility for an ontological and an

epistemological connection between creation and creator; one the other hand, it always needs to be kept in mind that the sign never reaches its ground since the latter is beyond every signification. Thus, Jones concludes that in the Dionysian understanding of language there is a perpetual play between disclosure and concealment that materializes on the one hand in an infinite number of names, on the other hand in an ascent into silence that opens up a hymnic worship.

Consequently, since Dionysius' apophaticism is concerned with assigning human beings their right place according with God, while Gregory's deals with a never ending movement toward the divine, Jones finds their univocal retrieval inadmissible. Since he stated in the beginning that this pattern of citing implicitly influences Marion's philosophical works, the next two chapters represent an extensive analysis to disentangle which of the two anti-idolatrous strategies fits better with his phenomenology of givenness.

In analyzing Marion's phenomenology, Jones finds that it is driven by two central motivations: the claim to free phenomena from all conditions and idolatrous restraints, and the urge to show the possibility of all phenomena (79). This means paradoxically, that his method requires a universal (certain, indubitable and unquestionable) determination without deciding a priori any specific epistemological corollary (metaphysical specificity). The *reduction to givenness* seems to fulfill these two exigencies since, on the one hand it secures the indubitability of apparition of things without the certainty of objects, and on the other hand it renders itself as a counter-method (without giving up its hegemony toward other sciences) inasmuch as it intervenes after the fact, that is, after the manifestation of appearing. The method remains phenomenological since it confines to the necessity of the describability of phenomena, and it approaches revelation only as a pure possibility (94). According to Jones, this search for universality, despite Janicaud's observation, places Marion in the same line with Husserl. Nevertheless, since the method intervenes only "after the fact", I wonder how could one describe a pure possibility without any link to the actual happening, and thus, how could the neutrality of phenomenology remain untouched?

Furthermore, Jones argues that the framework of givenness leads back to Marion's recovery of Dionysius. Thus, while providing him with an apophatic strategy which entails the notion of givenness Marion's recovery of Dionysius also accomplishes a hierarchical understanding of the world which means an ontological and epistemological leveling of things. This leads Jones to a double conclusion: first, Marion's motivations – especially the claim for a universal method – leads him to refashion some of Dionysius' ideas and concepts – like the term *αἴτια* (100) – to fit his intention, and second, when criticized³ for the strange imports that come along with this apophatic strategy, he resumes to Gregory without a specific note.

Since Dionysius' apophasis does not provide a way out given the claim for a universal methodology, Jones turns to Marion's relation to Gregory, emphasizing the second pole of the tension: anti-idolatry. This second pole requires to loosen up the methodological component in order to allow a place for more hermeneutical inquiry, especially when it comes to the saturated phenomena. The problem can be put like this: if pure givenness and saturation require a more passive subject which lacks any transcendental function, how can one reinstate hermeneutics without betraying the givenness or the saturation of phenomena? This breaks down into two additional challenges: a) the problem of the description of the excess and b) the difficulty of religious exclusivity when encountering revelation (111-119). Following the thread of the first difficulty along Marion's work, Jones finds that saturation necessitates rather than forbids interpretation, but the latter is somewhat a more subsequent act. Jones turns here to a distinction made by Shane Mackinlay between the ontological and derivative sense of hermeneutics: while the former is ruled out by the absoluteness of the given, the later still remains an open possibility. As far as the second difficulty, it is obvious that Marion favors the Christian examples when it comes to describing revelation, but he claims that the later is safeguarded against exclusivity through the multitude of hermeneutical possibilities that are requested by its excess. Nevertheless the problem stands since in both cases Marion never elaborates the relation between the purity of givenness and the multiplicity of hermeneutical possibilities.

Jones returns now to Gregory in an attempt to see if his apophatic strategy could point a way to resolve Marion's problematic. Gregory states that the relation between scriptural interpretation and divine incomprehensibility results in a necessary interpretative pluralism (129). Since language has only a pragmatic function, it is due to God's kenosis that humans have access to revelation, but this happens by filling and overwhelming our finite capacity to understand and interpret it. In this act of interpretation the subject is not only disrupted, but also transformed to be able to receive more, and more, in an infinite movement towards God. Jones claims that this could serve as better example in pointing out a way for Marion's aporia.

In his last chapter, Jones proceeds to an appraisal of Marion's apophatic phenomenology. In his genealogical movement to uncover the tension between methodology and the anti-idolatrous pretence he has linked the former with Marion's use of Dionysius, and the latter with analyses on Gregory. In order to obtain coherence, Jones claims that the methodological pole is the least sustainable out of the two, since the reduction excludes any productive or volitional role of the subject (132). Not even through the recourse to love does Marion's reduction become any more clear: while insisting on the universality of love its appearance can only be personal and thus "subjective". Jones thinks that the abandonment of the claim for universality would yield to a softer understanding of the method, along the lines of Pierre Hadot's spiritual exercises. This would allow Marion to maintain the purity of givenness along with the plurality of interpretation (135). However, I believe that this might lead to the revoking of the reduction's phenomenological status. It is my content that a more accurate elaboration of the reduction, so that a clear distinction can be drawn between lack and excess of intuition, might lead to a clarification of the role of hermeneutics. I believe that this conceptual indistinctness (lack/excess) posits so much weight on hermeneutics leading the entire problem to an unsolvable aporia.

Turning on the second pole of the tension, Jones claims that in the development of the relation between pure givenness and the role of hermeneutics a more obvious and careful

consideration of Gregory could prove useful for Marion's entire project. With his understanding of language as a pragmatic discourse and the assigning of the limits of knowledge, Gregory outruns Dionysius whose recovery tends to unbalance the entire tension from Marion's thought.

Although I wonder whether such a specific import of Gregory would resolve the tension from Marion's work, Jones' book remains one of the most challenging exegeses. The clarity and force of the arguments, as well as the novelty of the analyses opens new and interesting ways to approach Marion's work.

NOTES

¹ For example see Janicaud, Dominique. 2000. "The Theological Turn of French Phenomenology". In *Phenomenology and the "Theological Turn". The French Debate*. New York: Fordham University Press; Caputo, John D. 2007. "The Hyperbolization of Phenomenology: Two Possibilities for Religion in Recent Continental Philosophy". In *Counter-Experiences: Reading Jean-Luc Marion*, edited by Kevin Hart. Notre Dame: Notre Dame University Press; Kearney, Richard. 2011. *The God Who May Be: A Hermeneutics of Religion*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press; Mackinlay, Shane. 2005. "Phenomenality in the Middle: Marion, Romano and the Hermeneutics of the Event". In *Givenness and God: Questions of Jean-Luc Marion*, edited by Ian Leask and Eoin Cassidy. New York: Forham University Press; Leask, Ian. 2005. "The Dative Subject (and the 'Principle of Principles)". In *Givenness and God: Questions of Jean-Luc Marion*, edited by Ian Leask and Eoin Cassidy. New York: Forham University Press.

² One of them is Christina M. Gschwandtner. *Reading Jean-Luc Marion Exceeding Metaphysics*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 2007.

³ Derrida criticizes Marion with this precise intention in "How to avoid speaking: Denials" in *Derrida and Negative Theology*, ed. Harold Coward and Toby Foshay, Suny Press, Albany, 1992.

Address:
George VAMEȘUL
Al.I. Cuza University of Iasi
Department of Philosophy
Bd. Carol I, 11
700506 Iasi, Romania
E-mail: vamesugeorge@yahoo.com