

Excessive Hermeneutics

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Shane Mackinlay, *Interpreting Excess: Jean-Luc Marion, Saturated Phenomena and Hermeneutics*, New York: Fordham University Press, 2010, XIV + 283 pp.

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Any of our relationships with something – whether it is an object, a person or a specific situation – takes place in the horizon of understanding. By this I mean that any relationship with something has as background either the actual understanding of that something, or the attempt to understand it. Still, in both cases, the understanding of a certain thing is integrated in the net of meanings which configures our world. To reword, understanding always occurs in a pre-configured horizon, and never in a pure and absolute manner. Taking these data into account, the concern for the phenomenon of understanding, which is called *hermeneutics*, must not neglect this primary dimension of the human existence, acquiring by this an ontological character.

Though we are aware of and we agree with the fact that this hermeneutical dimension determines our whole relationship with the things we encounter in our everyday life,

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we do not approach it explicitly each time we relate to a certain situation. We do not refer to the fact that our understanding is not pure or absolute, but predetermined, each time we write about something. Behind such an option stands the fact that this feature of understanding is self-understood, inasmuch that both the author and the reader do not feel the need to make this feature explicit. Nonetheless, there are cases when this consensus between author and reader about the prior data of understanding does not occur. The reason for this disagreement can be more than the simple dissension related to the self-understood character of the data, namely the fact that these data seem to be overlooked by the author. Such a situation can be better understood by bringing into attention a book like *Interpreting Excess: Jean-Luc Marion, Saturated Phenomena and Hermeneutics*, printed in New York: Fordham University Press, 2010, in the collection *Perspectives in Continental Philosophy*. The author of this volume, Shane Mackinlay, is Associate Dean (Department of Philosophy) of *Catholic Theological College*, Melbourne, Australia.

The investigations from *Interpreting Excess* revolve around Marion's *theory of saturated phenomena*, present in books like *Étant donné* or *De surcroît*. Such phenomena resist any attempt of being subsumed to our understanding horizon. They owe their phenomenality to themselves only; to the fact they *give* themselves. What is more, for Marion these phenomena become the paradigm of the whole phenomenality, and this strips off the human being's status of *constitutive subject*, transforming it into *adonné*, a simple receiver of the givenness of phenomena. Thus and so the thesis Mackinlay states at the end of the *Introduction* of his book is that by the theory of saturated phenomena Marion attains only a "a simple inversion, with the subject who previously actively constituted phenomena as objects now being constituted by them as a passive witness on whom they impose themselves" (p. 12). By attributing this altogether passive role to the "subject", Marion is able to underline the *pure* and *absolute* character of the givenness of phenomena. Nevertheless, this total autonomy of phenomena represents, according to Mackinlay, a purely theoretical construct, unfaithful to the real and actual manner in which

phenomena are received. The way of our contact with the phenomena is a more complex one: “they are presented and understood in a hermeneutic space that is opened by a subject’s active reception” (pp. 12-13). In other words, though Mackinlay agrees that the phenomena should rather be understood as giving themselves, then as being constituted by the subject, he considers that their givenness is never pure or absolute, but it always happens on a background configured in advance by the activity of the “subject”.

The second chapter of *Interpreting Excess* deals with *Marion’s Claims*. The central pieces become the giving *itself* of the phenomenon, which implies the presence of a self of the phenomenon, and the function Marion assigns to the “subject” in this context. The fact that the phenomenon gives itself on the basis of itself, does not rule out, for Marion, an active function of the “subject”. His/her task is precisely that of converting the givenness into manifestation. The question raised at this point by Mackinlay is related to the mode in which the *pure* or *absolute* character of the givenness of phenomena is compatible with an adonné which is *not* entirely deprived of its active role in what concerns its relationship with phenomena. Such a problem unveils an inconsistency in the theory of saturated phenomena, for the simple reason that, according to Mackinlay, it is really impossible to pretend that the phenomena give themselves in a pure or absolute manner and at the same time, to claim more than just a passive function of the adonné. In fact the givenness of the phenomena is never pure or absolute, but always presupposes an interactive relationship between the “subject” and the phenomenon.

This “impure” character of the givenness of phenomena defies *The Hermeneutic Structure of Phenomenality*, problem discussed in the next chapter of Mackinlay’s book. The starting point of this discussion is represented by the critiques which were addressed to Marion by Richard Kearney, Jean Greisch or Jean Grondin. They consider that each phenomenon appears on a background which is already configured by a certain way of understanding the world, understanding which determines from the start the manner in which the phenomenon gives itself. In other words, any manifestation involves a

hermeneutical dimension, and any phenomenology should take it into account. Marion himself speaks explicitly about hermeneutics (Jean-Luc Marion, *De surcroît. Études sur les phénomènes saturés*, Paris: PUF, 2001, pp. 148-153), and its necessary role in phenomenology (p. 39n), but, according to Mackinlay, he only takes into consideration a secondary meaning of hermeneutics, namely the epistemological one. Due to this fact, Marion is not able to give account for the active role of the “subject” inside the phenomenology of givenness. Despite this situation and despite the theoretical specifications regarding the pure or absolute givenness of phenomena, Mackinlay observes that hermeneutics, in its ontological meaning, is to be found in an implicit manner in some of Marion’s descriptions about our concrete relationship with the phenomena. In order to prove the fact that the “subject” always plays an active role in the appearing of the phenomena, and, consequently, that our contact with them always has a hermeneutical character, Mackinlay will investigate Marion’s description of the saturated phenomena in relation with the Kantian table of categories, and emphasize the hermeneutical aspects overlooked by the French phenomenologist. Before doing so, the third chapter, *The Theory of Saturated Phenomena*, will consider the genetic formation of this theory, the legitimacy of its goals, and the relationship between Marion’s demarche and modern philosophy (Leibniz, Kant) or classical phenomenology, which is not always unproblematic.

The following four chapters of Mackinlay’s book analyse each type of saturated phenomena described by Marion in opposition with the Kantian table of categories, and the last chapter investigates the saturated phenomenon *par excellence* – the Revelation. The general problem raised by the chapter dedicated to the *event*, the saturated phenomenon according to quantity, is that the saturated phenomena can appear to us as simple objects. This is why, in order to perceive them as saturated, the “subject” needs to actively intervene, granting an adequate space for their plenary manifestation. This active intervention introduces a hermeneutical dimension within phenomenality, and, implicitly, excludes the pure or absolute character of the givenness of phenomenon. The next chapter is

centred on the saturated phenomenon according to quantity – the *idol*. The main argument advocates that the hermeneutical mark owes to the fact that the idol does not represent a manner of being for Marion, but is dependent upon the manner in which it is received by the “subject”. Consequently, although in Marion’s description of the idol an implicit hermeneutical mark is to be found, it is not taken into account. The case of the *body*, the saturated phenomenon according to relation, is a special one in the theory of saturated phenomena for the simple reason that it does not intuitively exceed an intention prior to givenness, but is anterior to any intention. Thereby, the body is defined as *absolute*, and consequently its appearing cannot bear the mark of hermeneutics. In order to counteract this description, Mackinlay resorts to alternative descriptions of the body, like the one offered by Bernet, where the body’s auto-affectation is always associated with the perception of the world, or like the one furnished by Romano, where the body appears just due to its ordinary relationship with the world. The obvious consequence of this chapter is that there is no reason for accepting the possibility of absolute phenomena in general. The saturated phenomenon according to modality is the *icon*. Such a phenomenon, though it gives itself from itself, cannot appear unless the “subject” restrains any of his/hers attempt of enclosing it. Due to the phenomenon’s dependence upon the activity of the “subject”, in this case too we can speak of a hermeneutical dimension. This same mark can be applied even to the saturated phenomenon *par excellence* – the Revelation –, which appears only inside a hermeneutical horizon, namely the horizon of *faith*.

Following up the investigation deployed in *Interpreting Excess* one can observe not only that Marion does not explicitly account for the contribution of the subject – whether we refer to his/her artistic sensibility, belief or his/her world – to the manifestation of phenomena, but that he does not even take them into account. In this way, the disagreement between Mackinlay and Marion on the hermeneutical dimension of our relationship with the phenomena perfectly exemplifies the disagreement between author and reader described at the beginning of this review. It seems that we can conclude,

together with Mackinlay, that Marion's description of saturated phenomena must be adjusted.

Following these investigations I have noticed that Mackinlay can make no concessions to Marion, despite his legitimate preoccupation with saturated phenomena. Any step taken by the French phenomenologist has to be explicitly grounded either on the immanency of the phenomenology's discourse – Husserl, Heidegger, Romano –, or on the direct contact with things themselves. Nonetheless, I had not once the impression that this intransigency is being taken too far. First of all, coming into contact with Marion's theory of saturated phenomena, I can easily observe the presence, at an implicit level, of what can be called *minimal hermeneutics*. This type of hermeneutics can be understood from the perspective of the adonné's *resistance* (Marion 2001, 58-63), which means that the phenomenalisation is always proportional with the adonné's capacity of receiving the givenness. Fundamentally, the same aspect is taken into account by Mackinlay in his critique on Marion. Still, from the perspective of the adonné's resistance, the hermeneutical character of the contact with the phenomena's givenness does not consist in the fact that the adonné receives the givenness in an "*impure*" manner, but only in an *incomplete* one. To blame the fact that the pure character of the givenness of phenomena might imply their completeness would mean to consider a scenario in which the adonné might receive the saturated phenomena entirely, situation which would annul the excessive character of the phenomenon. The second critique which I want to outline brings into attention an alternative perspective. Though the hermeneutical character presupposes the active role of the adonné, namely his/hers *resistance*, its main root is to be found in the purity of givenness, in the fact that givenness cannot be subsumed to the "subject's" understanding, and therefore compels the adonné to an incomplete reception, thus to a hermeneutical perspective.

Insofar as one of these two critiques can point towards a justification of the discourse about the pure character of the phenomena's givenness without excluding the hermeneutical character of our contact with them, Marion is in no way obliged to *explicitly* approach the issue raised by Mackinlay; this just

would not represent a problem for the theory of the saturated phenomena. Hence, the disagreement regarding the presence or the absence of the hermeneutical coordinate of the contact with the phenomena is in fact due to the reader, being hermeneutical in nature, where hermeneutics is to be understood in its secondary, epistemological meaning. In this case, the reader is not able to give up some of his expectations, like the *explicit* approach of the hermeneutical character of phenomenality, which becomes a criterion for the truth of the text and this way restrains an appropriate reception of its content.

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