

# Introducing Jean-Luc Marion

Graham Ward

The rue d'Ulm in the centre of Paris, a small almost insignificant street close to the Parthenon and the Jardin de Luxembourg, houses one of the most important and prestigious academic institutions in France: the *École Normale Supérieure*. Founded in the first decade of the 19th century with entrance by a nationwide competitive examination, it has educated many of the leading 20th century French intellectuals. Jean-Paul Sartre, Raymond Aron, Louis Althusser, Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida are just a few of those selected in a nation-wide competitive examination to be schooled here. In 1969, when considerable student unrest still remained in Paris following the May riots a year earlier, Jean-Luc Marion, then 21, took up his place there. At an institution which had played an enormous role in disseminating the work of Hegel, Nietzsche, Husserl and Heidegger in post-War France, Marion began to work for his *agrégation de philosophie*. It was a time of *les enfants terribles* in French philosophy: when structuralism was gaining ground through the work of Lévi-Strauss, Jacques Lacan and Roland Barthes; when Althusser was attempting to rewrite Marxism; when Foucault's *Les Mots et les choses* (translated as *The Order of Things*) could enter the French best-sellers list; and Derrida launched, in the three books published in the same year, his deconstructive assault. Lacan and Derrida both gave seminars at the *École Normale Supérieure* (as Marion does now). The influence of German Idealism and its critics, Nietzsche and Heidegger, have remained throughout Marion's philosophical work. In particular, they are the concern of two of his twelve published books to date: *L'Idole et la distance* (1977) and *Réduction et donation* (1989). It is an interest shot through with postmodern concerns for the other. Derrida and Althusser were Marion's teachers and the work of Emmanuel Levinas is pervasive. These thinkers have left their imprint— notably upon Marion's philosophical method (phenomenology) and vocabulary. Concerns with text, trace, difference, *Ereignis*, the other, the gift and iconoclasm are all their legacy to Marion. Derrida's infamous statement in *Of Grammatology* "There is nothing beyond the text [*Il n'y a pas de hors-texte*]" is in fact answered critically by Marion in the final part of *God Without Being*, entitled '*Hors-texte*'. But Marion's interest in and involvement with these thinkers has been, to some extent, in tension with his credal commitment. For in answering Derrida, what Marion conceives

beyond the text and donating the text (in the sense of providing the condition for the possibility of the text) is God. His postmodern philosophical concerns are then framed by the theological questions of ontology and analogy. These questions began to surface as he worked for his doctorate on Descartes's first exposition of his philosophy, known in English as *Rules for the Direction of the Mind* (1628). This became Marion's first book, *Sur l'ontologie grise de Descartes*, published in 1975. It was the first of Marion's six books on the philosophy of René Descartes. It is as a scholar of Cartesian method and metaphysics that Marion received, in 1992, the coveted *Grand Prix de Philosophie de l'Académie Française*.

From this, it might be inferred that it is in the wider context of an interest in ontology, analogy and philosophical method that Marion, the theologian, must be understood. That is, he is philosopher first and, through the development of his philosophy, subsequently a theologian. But it would be more true to say that Marion's philosophical interests, his angles for interpreting Descartes among others, developed out of a reflection upon a Catholic meditation on Being and Sign. For even before entering the portals of the *École Normale Supérieure*, Marion was already publishing articles in a journal entitled *Résurrection* on incarnation, revelation, the eucharist and St Augustine. He continued to write for the journal (which later became incorporated into the *Revue catholique internationale Communio*) while examining the indirect influence of Aristotelean categories on Descartes. These were important explorations some of which were developed and revised for his four strictly theological works to date: *L'Idole et la distance*, *Dieu sans l'être* (1982), *Prolégomènes à la charité* (1986) and *La croisée du visible* (1991). They are important too for revealing Marion's deep discussion with the Catholic theological tradition and his allegiance to a conservative reading of that tradition.

We must situate Marion's work, then, in the French "spiritual and cultural crisis," which, in his English introduction to *God Without Being*, he describes as "the nihilism which, in France, marked the years dominated by 1968."<sup>1</sup> But we need to situate him also in the context of 20th century French Catholicism with its revival in the 20s and 30s; with its return to the Church Fathers (in the work of de Lubac and Daniélou) and Aquinas (in the work of Maritain and Gilson).<sup>2</sup> The question which weaves these two contexts together, and which gives Marion's theological and philosophical work its distinctive approach, is what he termed in that first book "the permanence of the question of Being (and also its constant dissimulation)."<sup>3</sup> It is this question (there are echoes of Heidegger in its very expression) which draws together Marion's analyses of Aristotle,

Pseudo-Dionysius, Maximus the Confessor, Aquinas, Descartes, Husserl, Heidegger, von Balthasar, Levinas and Derrida. Issuing from the permanence of this question, and its investigation, is a second concern. Marion has called this the “deconstruction of the *eidos* and the construction of the object.”<sup>4</sup> It is this second concern which views the work of the early Descartes as rendering Aristotle’s accounts of order, *ousia*, idea and *eidos* more complex, and which links Cartesian philosophy of mind with the phenomenological projects of Husserl and Heidegger. It is this second concern which lies behind Marion’s theological interest in the constitution of the idol and the icon, the visible and the invisible.

### **L’ontologie grise et la théologie blanche**

We have been made familiar with Marion’s bi-polarity of the idol and the icon through the work which brought him to the attention of British and North American theologians, *God Without Being*. Translated in 1991, the book was composed in French ten years earlier. If, in his more recent work, Marion has moved from a phenomenological account of objects like the idol and the icon towards more of a Merleau-Ponty concern with the phenomenology of perception itself (and the bi-polarity of the visible and the invisible), what remains at stake is still the play between intentionality and revelation.<sup>5</sup> That is, a “conflict between two principles—the ego and God”<sup>6</sup> which Marion recognised as the central tension of Descartes’ work. In *God Without Being*, the idol and the icon constitute two conflicting phenomenologies. With the first, one’s gaze is frozen, dazzled, absorbed by the object. Because of this, the divinity of the idol is the measure of oneself. This is linked directly to the naming of ‘God’ in philosophical theology—God as *causa sui*, the God of onto-theology, the subject of what Heidegger terms *theiology* rather than theology whose subject is the God of faith. The second, the icon, “does not result from a vision but provokes one.”<sup>7</sup> It bestows, it gives to be seen, it opens an infinite depth to which one’s gaze surrenders, in veneration. It is important to understand that the object remains the same in both cases. What differs is one’s perception of the object—the play between the self’s constitution of the object and the self’s constitution by the object. As Marion writes, “the icon inverts, with a counterfounding phenomenological precision, the essential moments of the idol.”<sup>8</sup>

Other contributors in this collection discuss *God Without Being* and the coherence of its argument. In this Introduction I simply want to draw attention to the continuity and development of Marion’s work. For this inversion by the icon of the idol is a reformulation of an insight he had in his early research into Descartes “deconstruction of the *eidos* and construction of the object.”<sup>9</sup> This double movement of deconstruction as construction (Derrida always insists *déconstruction* is also *de construction*)

develops into investigating the space Descartes opens up between two principles—the ego and God. Scholars on Descartes have been divided between whether Descartes understood the ego as a reflection of the *causa sive ratio* of God (so that the cogito is the ego's own image of God) or whether Descartes understood there to be an irreducible dualism between the two. If the former then Descartes is a precursor of Hegel; if the latter he is a precursor of Kant. But Marion argues for an intentional ambivalence in Descartes—a refusal to reduce the ego to either the operation of the human cogito or the divine ratio. Descartes's greatness, for Marion, arises from the way he allows the *aporia* to open beneath each step he takes. In the *aporia* lies a certain theology. "The ambivalence of *eadem facultas* discovers, by its very anonymity, what declares itself as a blank theology [*théologie blanche*]."<sup>10</sup> This blank, pure or white theology issues from what Marion perceives as Descartes' grey or ambivalent ontology [*ontologie grise*].

In *God Without Being*, Marion formulates his ideas on the transgression of Being, the Scriptures as revealing a God beyond Being, the eucharistic gift, the priest/Bishop as theologian and the site of theology as a discipline and a discourse. But in the same year that *God Without Being* was published, Marion also published his *Sur la théologie blanche de Descartes* which examines Descartes' critique of the univocity of *ens* through an analysis of analogy (with particular reference to Aquinas, Cajetan, Suarez and Galileo). There were two aspects to this enquiry. First, to raise the question of "the position of theology in philosophy...the relation [*rapport*] between human knowledge and divine." Secondly, having unearthed Descartes' ambivalent ontology, to outline "a blank [*blanche*] theology determined (or undetermined) on the basis of [*à partir de*] analogy."<sup>11</sup>

Marion returns to his early thesis that, contrary to modern conceptions of Descartes' thinking, the ego is not the foundation for knowledge. The foundation for knowledge "shifts from the ego to God. Or more precisely, it oscillates between them both, since the completion of the foundation in God does not forbid the ego to exercise an *lieutenancy*."<sup>12</sup> This oscillation between the ego and God cannot be simply reduced to a conflict, but it does leave the foundation for knowledge ultimately undecidable. Placing Descartes' thought in a Heideggerian frame (Marion's wrestling with Heidegger's notion of ontological difference is evident throughout his work), Marion will suggest that "Descartes opens up the question of the foundation...because he opens up the foundation as a question—a question concerning infinity and the unknown."<sup>13</sup>

Marion's method and analysis here treats a dominant obsession in modern French thinking—that of *aporia*: the investigation into the site opened up by two antithetical positions—presence/representation (Jacques

Derrida), self/Other (Emmanuel Levinas, Paul Ricoeur), male imaginary/female imaginary (Luce Irigaray), semantic/semiotic (Julia Kristeva). This *aporia* is a site of an irreducibility, an excess of meaning, which several of these thinkers have described in a theological idiom. Levinas, who terms this irreducibility *illeity* also wishes to name this *illeity* God.<sup>14</sup> Irigaray wishes to understand this space as the site of the divine.<sup>15</sup> But Ricoeur, who earlier in his own work wished to relate this surplus of meaning to the revelation of God,<sup>16</sup> expresses what most of these philosophical thinkers understand by this irreducible *aporia* between two antithetical positions in the conclusion to his latest book *Oneself as Another*: “Perhaps the philosopher as philosopher has to admit that one does not know and cannot say whether this Other, the source of the injunction, is another person . . . or my ancestors for whom there is no representation...or God—living God, absent God—or an empty place. With this *aporia* of the Other, philosophical discourse comes to an end.”<sup>17</sup> Descartes too refrains from developing a theology.<sup>18</sup>

But for Marion, for whom Descartes’s work reveals the interplay of the philosophical and the theological, it is with this *aporia*, this *question* of the foundation that theology begins. In *Sur la théologie blanche de Descartes*, he traces a complex route in which, he argues, Descartes’s understanding of the *causa sui* announces an irreducible paradox. The paradox lies in Descartes’ acceptance of a formal univocity (which is epistemological) between causality as we know it and God as *causa sui* and an ontological equivocity between what God is in Himself (His aseity as infinite and incomprehensible power [*puissance*]) and His creation. One suspects that behind this line of thought stands Basil of Caesarea’s distinctions between primordial, operating and perfecting causation as they are manifested by the Trinity. Or Pseudo-Dionysius’ distinction between creation and the uncreated. What this distinction in the category of causation signifies for Descartes, is that his metaphysics therefore “remain open despite his modernity: open to transcendence.”<sup>19</sup> Furthermore, “the *aporia* itself indicates the interference of acquired knowledge [*des acquis*]. For...the unknown of an authentic question forms...the symptom not of a defeat, but of an achievement, more precisely the achievement...of a defeat of thinking in the face of the unthinkable.”<sup>20</sup> Derrida, in his own investigation of *aporia* states that his analysis of it (in terms of the economy of *différance*) will resemble a negative theology but not constitute one. But it is the constitution of a negative theology that Descartes’ *aporia* allows Marion to consider — a theology Descartes himself does not construct. The *aporia*, the “definitive space between the finite and comprehensible and the infinite and incomprehensible”<sup>21</sup> is the condition for the possible, the rational. Ultimately, we receive knowledge

[*acquis*]: “understanding gives itself to be known, not thought [*le connaissable s’offre à connaître, non à penser*].”<sup>22</sup> And it is from this understanding of the *aporia* that Marion can begin his analysis of the gift (in *God Without Being*) and the giving which constitutes the project of phenomenology (in *Réduction et donation*). Ontological ambivalence [*ontologie grise*] is the effect of that which founds and remains outside *analogia entis*, which establishes the efficient causality. The condition for the possibility of *ontologie grise* is *théologie blanche*. “*Blanche* because anonymous and indeterminate like the signature sealing a blank document [giving complete authority to whoever has prepared the document]...or a blank cheque.”<sup>23</sup> This theological blank destroys univocity, and disqualifies all analogy.<sup>24</sup> It invokes a power beyond any analogy of being; God *sans l’être*.<sup>25</sup>

### **Distance, the Gift and the Kenotic love of Christ**

The move through analytical investigation to the fundamental paradox or difference which makes possible such an investigation, an irreducible difference which is then read theologically, is evident in Marion’s earlier book, *L’Idole et la distance*.<sup>26</sup> Here Marion challenges Heidegger’s concept of ontological difference (the difference between beings and Being) by Levinas’s (and Maximus the Confessor’s) understanding of ‘distance’ and that which is other than [*au delà*] Being. Marion proposes a space surpassing ontological difference in which the giving of the gift beyond Being, the gift also of Being, can be thought. His concept of ‘distance’ is then developed philosophically (through Derrida’s notion of *différance*) and theologically (in terms of “distance du Père”—the Father’s distance or distance from the Father). From out of this distance, and embracing it, pours the love of God as Father into the love of God as Son. Employing Heidegger’s concept of *Ereignis*, he will speak of “creation correspond[ing] to the gift (*Gabe, étant*) and the Father acts (as *Ereignis*) to give it.”<sup>27</sup>

In his later work *Réduction et donation* (1989) there is an analysis of the phenomenological method of determining how an object is constituted. It is a phenomenological method he himself employs in his examination of the idol and the icon. He investigates Heidegger’s development of Husserl’s project attempting throughout to show how the heart of the phenomenological reduction is the givenness of the object. We move in his analysis of phenomenology, then, towards “a point of reference all the more original and unconditional.”<sup>28</sup> The point itself does not exist, rather it is summoned by that which “no longer issues from the horizon of Being (not objectivity).” And the summons “gives the gift itself.”<sup>29</sup> Here philosophical discourse ends, but he does not develop in this book the theology of the gift. In fact, after *God Without Being*, Marion seems to

have made his philosophical projects and his theological projects distinct.

The theology of the gift—its relation to Christology and the sacraments—is the burden of his most recent work: *Prologomènes à la charité* (1986) and *La Croisée du visible* (1991). Here the gift is understood as given in the Cross of Christ—in the erasure of the visible, which occurs through love as *caritas* embracing the distance between God and His creation, the “Christic distance”.<sup>30</sup> The historical crucifixion here becomes “*le type par excellence*”<sup>31</sup>, the watermark of reality. “The Cross offers nothing to see, no image of Christ...it maintains no relation either with similitude or dissimilitude.”<sup>32</sup> In Christ’s very effacement and abandonment of identity, in his ab-senting of himself, the invisibility of the Father is traced in the Son. In a theology which develops themes from von Balthasar’s understanding of creation at the centre of the ceaseless kenotic loving of the Trinity, Marion writes: “The icon therefore comes from the kenosis of the image. The first kenosis (that of the Word) allows the first ‘icon of the invisible God’.”<sup>32</sup> It is the Father’s giving of Himself in and as the Son which “alone renders the icon possible.”<sup>33</sup> The invisibility of the gift of love is only presented in the crucifixion of the visible.

Descartes’ *théologie blanche* now bears all the iconoclastic hallmarks of a negative theology. But it is a negative theology located in the postmodern aesthetics of the sign. Where the French sociologist Jean Baudrillard traces only the void, where Derrida traces only the undecidable, Marion traces divine plenitude: “the visible and the invisible will not circulate from one extreme of the icon to the other (and back again), if they did not circulate first in the very breast of the hypostatic union...on the basis of the perichoretic personhood of the Trinity: the ultimate icon is revealed here as ‘the living icon of charity’ according to the genial formulation of Maximus the Confessor.”<sup>34</sup> We have come a long way since Descartes, but in Marion’s rigorous and detailed evaluation of Descartes’ work, he was attempting to assess the project of modernity particularly in its relation to theological questions (analogy and therefore the names of God) at its inception. It is in grasping the roots of modernity that Marion’s postmodern thinking sees the possibility of returning to the premodern world which de Lubac, Daniélou and Gilson had reintroduced into early 20th century French Catholicism.

Today, at the age of 48, Jean-Luc Marion is a Professor at the University of Paris X—Nanterre, where he is the Director of the Department of Philosophy. It is a University which has fostered so much influential French thinking. Michel Foucault and Paul Ricoeur were both professors there. One awaits Marion’s future work, in theology, philosophy and their relationship, with considerable interest.

- 1 *God Without Being*, tr. Thomas A. Carlson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), p.xix.
- 2 It is by no means accidental that these scholars both wrote books on Descartes and the question of "the creation of eternal truths".
- 3 *Sur l'ontologie grise de Descartes* (Paris: Vrin, 1975), p.23.
- 4 *ibid.*, p.113.
- 5 This shift seems to me to be part of a greater interest in Merleau-Ponty's late work and the phenomenology of perception. See Derrida's *Memoirs of the Blind: the Self-Portrait and Other Ruins* (tr. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), which also wishes to examine "This heterogeneity of the invisible to the visible [which] can haunt the visible as its very possibility" (p.45).
- 6 *Sur l'ontologie grise*, p.206.
- 7 *God Without Being*, p.17.
- 8 *ibid.*, p.21.
- 9 *Sur l'ontologie grise*, p.113.
- 10 *ibid.*, p.207.
- 11 *Sur la théologie blanche de Descartes: Analogie, création des vérités éternelles, fondement* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1981), p.17.
- 12 *ibid.*, p.22.
- 13 *ibid.*, p.23.
- 14 *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, tr. A Lingis (The Hague, Martinus Nijhoff, 1981), pp.151-2.
- 15 See her essay 'Belief Itself' in *Sexes and Genealogies*, tr. Gillian C. Gill (New York: Columbia University, 1993), pp.23-54.
- 16 See his essay 'Towards a Hermeneutic of the Idea of Revelation' in *Essays on Biblical Interpretation*, ed. Lewis Mudge (London: S.P.C.K., 1981).
- 17 *Oneself as Another*, tr. Kathleen Blamey (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), p.355.
- 18 *Sur la théologie blanche*, p.446-7.
- 19 *ibid.*, p.443.
- 20 *ibid.*, p.444.
- 21 *ibid.*, p.445.
- 22 *ibid.*, p.444.
- 23 *ibid.*, p.450.
- 24 *ibid.*, p.454.
- 25 There is a play here on the French homophone *sans lettre*. It means that God is both beyond Being, but also beyond representation (which is related to Being, particularly as analogy). See here my essays 'Theology and the Crisis of Representation' in *Theology Towards 2000*, eds. Robert Detweiler and Greg Salyer (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1994) and 'Beyond Postmodernism: the Project of Jean-Luc Marion' in *Postmodernism and Theology*, ed. Philip Blond (London: Routledge, forthcoming).
- 26 This is also the method and movement of Paul Ricoeur's work on metaphor and analogy.
- 27 *L'Idole et la distance* (Paris: Grasset, 1977), p.304.
- 28 *Réduction et donation: Recherches sur Husserl, Heidegger et la phénoménologie* (Paris: Presses Universitaires France, 1989), p.303.
- 29 *ibid.*, p.315.
- 30 *Prolégomènes à la charité* (Paris: La Différence, 1986), p.37.
- 31 *La Croisée du visible* (Paris: La Différence, 1991), p.125.
- 32 *ibid.*, p.126.
- 33 *ibid.*, p.111.
- 34 *ibid.*, p.150.
- 35 *ibid.*, p.149.